

# Liturgies open faith's window to youngsters

By Rob Cullivan  
Staff writer

During his ministry in the Holy Land, Christ counseled his followers to "let the little children come to me ... for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs."

Currently, several parishes in the Diocese of Rochester are attempting to let the spirit of Jesus' actions animate their liturgical celebrations on a regular basis.

A number of Catholic churches in the diocese feature weekly, bi-weekly or monthly Masses geared entirely, or in part, to children between the ages of 5 and 10.

Children's liturgies grew out of the Second Vatican Council's desire that the church adapt its celebrations to its various members, according to the *Directory for Masses with Children*, issued in 1973 by the Vatican's Congregation for Divine Worship.

Although the church did not create a new rite for children's worship, it did instruct liturgists to change various aspects of the Mass to make it more easily understandable for children. The changes were also made to bolster children's participation in rituals.

Enlivening a child's sense of worship increases the possibility that he or she will attend church as an adult, according to Father Thomas P. Mull, priest consultant to the Diocesan Office of Liturgy.

"I think it's an attempt of the local community to identify young people as important," Father Mull said of children's liturgies. "If they feel alienated or turned away (from Mass) ... there's a chance that when they grow up, they will follow these instincts and go away from the church."

Generally, most parishes that offer children's liturgies concentrate on developing a Liturgy of the Word. Following the introductory rites of the Mass, children in the congregation are asked to adjourn to a separate room — usually a baptistry or sacristy — for



After the liturgy, children were asked to illustrate on an envelope what God had given them. They were then given pennies and encouraged to reflect on the act of giving.



Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer  
Youngsters at St. Ambrose Church in Rochester, framed by a symbol of the Trinity in the church's baptistry, listen to a children's liturgy Nov. 10.

the duration of the Scriptural readings and homily that precede the Liturgy of the Eucharist. After the conclusion of the Liturgy of the Word, the children then rejoin the congregation.

Two Sunday morning Masses per month at Irondequoit's St. Ambrose Parish feature a Liturgy of the Word for children, according to Michael Malerk, a member of the parish's liturgical committee. Conducted by three four-person liturgical teams that rotate their duties, the 9:45 a.m. liturgies take place at the same time the adult congregations celebrate the Liturgy of the Word, he said.

One Liturgy of the Word per month targets children between the ages of 5 and 7, he said, adding that the other bimonthly celebration is geared toward youngsters between 8 and 10.

As many as 40 children are invited to come and sit in the church baptistry where they hear shortened versions of the readings and sing the responsorial psalms, he said.

Usually, the children only hear two of the three slated readings, Malerk added, a standard practice at other parishes that offer a children's Liturgy of the Word, other diocesan observers confirmed.

For example, the Nov. 10 Sunday readings for adults were taken from the Old Testament's first book of Kings, the New Testament's letter to the Hebrews, and the 12th chapter of the Gospel of St. Mark. Yet, the St. Ambrose children heard only the Old Testament reading and the reading from the Gospel. Gospel readings are mandatory according to the *Directory for Masses with Children*.

Liturgists at various parishes pointed out that by omitting one of the readings, they can spend more time on explaining each selected reading in their homilies. The homilies themselves often consist of question/answer sessions during which the homilist teaches the youngsters to relate the Scriptural readings to their

everyday lives.

In addition, such children's lectionaries as Treehaus Communications' *Sunday — Book of Readings Adapted for Children*, are written in language that children can easily comprehend, observers commented.

To see the difference in language, one need only see how *Sunday* translates Jesus' reaction to the poor widow donating her money to the Temple in the following Scriptural passage from St. Mark's Gospel.

From the version published in *The New American Bible*:

"He called his disciples over and told them: 'I want you to observe that this poor widow contributed more than all the others who donated to the treasury. They gave from their surplus wealth, but she gave from her want, all that she had to live on.'"

The version from *Sunday* reads:

"When Jesus saw this, he said to his disciples, 'This poor widow has given more to the collection than all the others. The rich people gave money that they didn't really need. For them it was extra money. But this poor widow has very little money and she needs all of it to live on.'"

Such language "doesn't insult the children," noted Marie Venaglia, director of Christian Formation at St. Alphonsus Church in Auburn, which holds a weekly Liturgy of the Word for children during the 10 a.m. Sunday Mass. In addition, the children's translations are not too simple-minded for adults, she said.

"The kids sometimes get more than the adults do," she commented.

Ten-year-old Michael Helbling, a parishioner at St. Ambrose, echoed Venaglia's comments on the children's Liturgy of the Word.

"They kind of like explain it easier," Helbling said. "I guess they kind of, like, go through it easier than they would in church."

While most parishes that offer children's services concentrate on presenting a Liturgy of the Word, some parishes even go so far as to regularly celebrate entire Sunday Masses for children.

Once a month at the 10 a.m. Mass on Sunday, children from St. Mary's in Geneseo participate in all aspects of the Mass, from bringing the Eucharistic gifts up to the altar to creating banners that add color to the service.

Cathy Meyer, coordinator of religious education, noted that the children's Mass is the most widely attended of the regular liturgical celebrations at St. Mary's.

"I think it draws families because where you attract the children you draw the families also," she said.

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