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Children

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"The family left early, after Communion. Then I received a call on my recorder from the grandmother, saying I had embarrassed them."

Father Spilly added that he never saw the family again.

A no-win situation

That incident illustrates how sensitive families can be about having their children at Mass. Due to this reality, Father Spilly said he has never formally asked for a child to be removed from church — even though he has been tempted many times to do so.

"You don't win on this issue, I have found," Father Spilly remarked. "It's a rare family who's going to understand what you're trying to do as a presider."

Father David Faraone, pastor at Church of the Epiphany in Sodus and St. Rose of Lima Church in Sodus Point, said he and other priests have agreed they are often caught in the middle.

"When there's a screaming baby in church, everybody's on the priest's side — until he says something. Then everybody's on the baby's side," Father Faraone commented.

Father Spilly said that parents usually become defensive and "tell you their child has as much right to be there as anybody else."

Similarly, Father Faraone said he might be accused of "trying to tell them how to raise their kids. They'd say, 'You have kids, and then you try to tell us what to do.'"

"I can't think of anyplace where any pastor is going to call down thunder and fury by saying anything about kids crying," remarked Father William Graf, pastor at Rochester's Church of the Most Precious Blood. "We don't have those kinds of pastors anymore."

When silence was golden

Father Graf recalled less lenient times, when children were expected to sit still for the entire Mass.

"When I was growing up, I never knew we had a bathroom in the back of our church," Father Graf remarked.

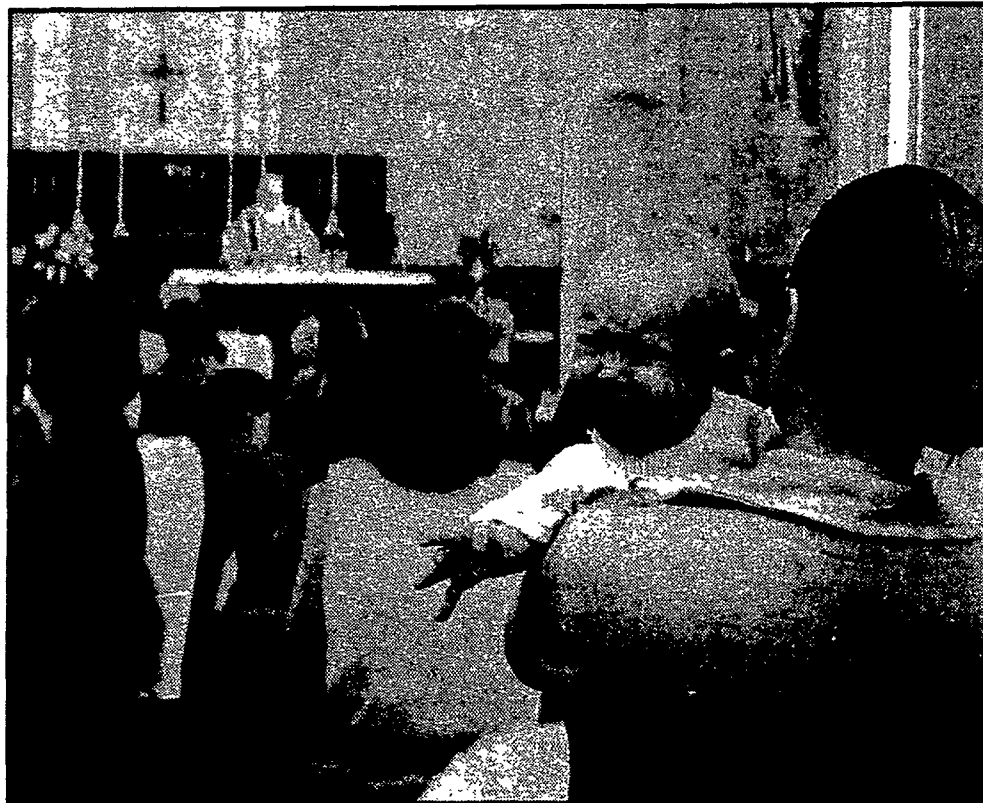
Parents in general maintained a strict attitude toward their children, added Karen Rinefierd, diocesan director of young adult, adult and family faith formation.

"Kids were expected to be silent. You knew what 'the look' meant," Rinefierd commented.

Father Faraone described the general environment as "so solemn, so austere. You didn't have anything break that atmosphere. You didn't talk in church, you didn't say hello, you didn't do anything."

A quite different mind-set existed in previous generations, agreed retired Auxiliary Bishop Dennis W. Hickey. He said parents either kept their children quiet during Mass, or were instructed by the priest to leave the liturgy — or leave the children home altogether.

"In the old days, most priests found a crying child very disturbing. There have been horror stories about priests excoriating a child and telling the parent to take it out of the church," Bishop Hickey said. He added that parents, in order to fulfill their Sunday obligation, would routinely attend separate Masses while one stayed home with the child.



Today, however, Joan Workmaster, diocesan director of liturgy, said that the Catholic Church fully advocates for children to be present at liturgies.

"The question is not whether we want children to be around or not. The fact is, they are baptized. And by virtue of their baptism they have a right to be there," Workmaster said. "We would want to encourage parishes to consider children as an integral part of the community, no matter what their age."

Attempt at sound barriers

Parishes have experimented with possible solutions to make everyone happy — or so they thought. About 40 years ago, Bishop Hickey said, several diocesan parishes began to create "crying rooms" or "cry rooms" — windowed rooms set off from the rest of the congregation but still within view of the altar.

Bishop Hickey estimated that about one-third of all diocesan churches are equipped with crying rooms, but the trend has tailed off in the last 25 years.

"The liturgists say you're breaking up the community," he said.

Sister Estelle Martin, RSM, chair of the diocesan Liturgical Commission's Environment and Art Committee, explained that children don't get a full sense of the liturgy in such settings.

"It raises the question that if children are raised in a crying room, at age 4 are they going to know how to magically participate?" Sister Martin said.

Eric Patchke, diocesan manager of buildings and properties, said that many parishes still include crying rooms while planning renovations and new church buildings. But he noted that such a practice "is discouraged" by the diocesan building commission because it promotes isolation.

In most cases, Patchke added, the parishes comply with the commission's wishes.

Sister Martin charged that crying rooms are frequently used for the wrong reasons. She cited children who are sleeping, not crying; and "adults who use it as a way to separate themselves from the community."

"Sometimes parents also use it as an excuse not to control their child," she added.

Exploring options

Workmaster recommended that entire families sit together during Mass, yet she pointed out that many parishes offer viable options to reduce the noise level.

Cynthia Luger devised one such alternative after becoming frustrated during liturgies at St. Jude's Parish in Alfred, in the Diocese of Buffalo.

"I'd sit there and say 'This is awful. I can't hear the singing or the Mass,'" recalled Luger, who now attends Henrietta's Church of the Good Shepherd.

So for five years at St. Jude's, she operated a nursery during Mass in which children ages 2 months to 9 years were welcome while their parents remained in church.

"It was good for them, and good for the parents," Luger said.

She said that the congregation, as a whole, can benefit from such an arrangement as well.

"Parents can get to a point where they tune out their kids, but everyone around you still has a hard time," Luger remarked.

Similar child-care services are available at many diocesan parishes, Rinefierd said, as are several additional options for adults who bring their young children to church.

She noted that some church foyers are equipped with speakers so parents may calm their children away from other parishioners yet still hear the Mass. Some parishes even offer rocking chairs in the back of the church.

Another growing trend is the children's Liturgy of the Word at designated Masses. The liturgy involves taking young worshipers into another room during the Scripture readings and homily. Adult leaders present the children with Scripture readings and activities geared to their vocabularies and attention spans.

For worshipers who prefer even less disruption, an obvious option is to avoid family-oriented liturgies.

Although Luger said she likes to take her young nieces and nephews to church, she said she also enjoyed a recent diocesan young adult Mass at which only one child was present.

"All these people were able to concentrate solely on what was going on. It was pretty serene," Luger said.

Setting boundaries

At what point does a distraction become a full-blown disruption? Bishop Hickey said every worshiper should be somewhat tolerant when children become jumpy or noisy.

"You get used to it after a while," Bishop Hickey said.

On the other hand, he said, if he were sitting in the congregation and could not hear the Mass clearly because of a noisy child, "I would feel cheated. I think that would be the feeling of many people."

"Everything should be done in as inclusive a way as possible," Father Spilly said, "but everything should also be done by parents and grandparents to try to maintain a sense of respect for what we are celebrating in the church."

"There is a lot of responsibility on the parents' part. They do need to be sensitive to those around them," Rinefierd added. "It's difficult, if not impossible, for adults to get the full feeling of participating at Mass if there are distractions. And kids, for being beautiful and holy and all that, are distractions."

Phil Lombardo, a Most Precious Blood parishioner, said he and his wife, Lynn, keep this concern in mind when they bring their sons Joey, 3, and Filippo, 1, to Sunday Mass.

"I try to keep my kids as quiet as possible, and if I feel they're causing a disruption I'll take them in the back," he said. "Sometimes, when I'm alone, I look forward to sitting and listening to the homily and it being so quiet. So I can understand people around me when my kids are being disruptive that they want to listen to the homily, too."

However, Lombardo said that leaving his sons home is not an option. "If you don't start bringing them as babies, how are they supposed to grow into the church?" Lombardo said.

Rinefierd termed the issue of children in church as "a balancing act for any community, or any individual in the community."

"On the one hand, we need to participate fully, and on the other hand, you need to introduce children to the Christian lifestyle — and basically, children learn by doing," Rinefierd said.

Wanted: public support

Lombardo said that he sometimes feels he's victim of a double standard when adults glare at his children during Mass.

"Sometimes the same people who give you the looks are the same people who carry on conversations during Mass," Lombardo commented.

However, Workmaster said, in the true spirit of community, adults should welcome children to Mass with open arms.

"This is not our private prayer time, it's public worship," Workmaster said.

An ongoing attitude that children should be seen and not heard, Workmaster asserted, is potentially damaging.

"When it comes to what we claim to be a central part of our lives, we don't take the time to incorporate them into our community. Then we sit back and wonder why they're not interested in coming to church," Workmaster remarked.

The parents often lose interest as well, Rinefierd pointed out.

"Those in the community need to realize it took tremendous effort for the parent or parents to be with them on Sunday," Rinefierd said. "They need to bend over backwards to make the family feel welcome, because it's very easy for them to slip away from regular church attendance — or any church attendance."

Father Faraone recalled such a vote of affirmation from an elderly woman after she had observed children running all over church during a baptism ceremony.

"I thought she was going to make a complaint about the kids being so rude," Father Faraone admitted.

Instead, "She said, 'Isn't it wonderful that they can be free in their Father's home?'"

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