

'THE CHART' MAY HELP CHILDREN FOCUS DURING MASS

One of the 2014 Archdiocesan Synod priorities is understanding the Mass. Catholic Herald Family, working with the synod implementation evangelization and Sunday Mass pastoral priority team, is publishing a six-part series designed to help parents teach their children about the Mass. This fifth part focuses upon the Eucharistic prayer and Communion.



Grace Mazza Urbanski
Whispers in The Pew

How long is your child's attention span?

Most research suggests that children's attention spans relate to their age: how many years old are they? That's the same number of minutes they can sustain interest in an activity.

Four-year-old children, for example, can pay attention for four minutes. Some studies claim attention spans extend up to two times the child's age. In that case, under the right circumstances, our 4-year-old children can accomplish eight minutes of acceptable church behavior.

Depending on your parish, the Eucharistic prayer occurs about 40 minutes into the celebration of Mass. Forty minutes of liturgy is FIVE TIMES those eight minutes we can expect from our little ones. And some of our children struggle with medical or behavioral challenges that make the eight-minute mark a miracle.

Even so, the Eucharistic prayer and Communion are essential to every liturgy, capturing the highest drama of human existence. Jesus literally commands us to participate: "Do this in memory of me" Lk 22:19. Let's fill those pews. Let's fill them together, short attention spans and wiggly children included.

Our own high-energy family struggled to be still throughout Mass, especially during the text-rich Eucharistic prayer. To encourage our children to focus between the Holy, Holy, Holy and Great Amen, we devised The Chart.

The Chart listed each child's name followed by three Velcro, detachable Xs. We had a family meeting to unveil the Velcro wonder. We all agreed that because Mass was really important for our family and our friends at God's house, we needed to try our best to be respectful.

At Mass, then, when a child's noise or behavior made it difficult for others to pray, we would make eye contact, silently and deliberately pull out the chart, and slowly peel off one of the Xs. Losing all three Xs meant losing the treasured post-Mass doughnut. We were surprised that only twice in The Chart's long career did we have to remove a child's third X.

Every family's strengths and challenges are unique, so you might discover a different strategy to encourage your young family members. We loved tying Mass to doughnuts because eating is central to the liturgy. Even before children can receive the Eucharist, they can make the connection between Mass and food. In the Eucharist, Jesus gives us his flesh as real food and his blood as real drink (Jn 6:55).

Mass is all about what Jesus does for us, and the Eucharist strengthens us to imitate Jesus in daily life. The entire ancient liturgy we celebrate represents our intimate relationship with God. Every Mass draws us closer to Christ – sometimes closer to his sorrows than his joys, perhaps. For a few moments toward the end of Communion, we can ask the Lord to show us what we have learned about him that day.

Action Steps

■ **Have mercy!** Every time a child at Mass distracts you by moving around or making noise, consider this: How many times have I ignored the Lord? How have I distracted others with behavior or conversation that offends or discourages them? Jesus, my words and deeds should always lead people closer to you. Forgive my weakness. In this way, restless children can trigger prayer and humility. On the other hand...

■ **Be Consistent!** If it happens to be your child who distracts others at some point in the liturgy, take heart! Learning to love the subtleties of Mass is a lifelong process. We help our children grow in love, obedience and patience when we share our expectations with them and encourage them with confidence.

■ **Pray!** God loves to draw close to your family in a special way at Mass. God will always help you. Ask for strength, patience, wisdom, and joy. If faith the size of a mustard seed can accomplish something as random as uprooting a tree and planting it in the sea (see Luke 17:6), just think what a tiny bit of faith could mean for your family, which is so much more important to God than a traveling tree. Ask the Lord to bless your family at Mass, and expect great things.

(Grace is director of children's ministry for the Apostleship of Prayer and author of "Pray with Me: Seven Simple Ways to Pray with Your Children" (Ave Maria Press). She and her husband, David, parents of five children, are members of St. Mary's Visitation Parish, Elm Grove. She can be contacted at gurbanski@apostleshipofprayer.org)