

## The Crisis Facing Young Families in the Pews

Jason Farry

Jesus said to His disciples, "Let the children come to Me, and do not hinder them, for the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to such as these" (Mt 19:14). Despite these beautiful words, it appears that our Church is still echoing the sentiments of the disciples, who barred the children from approaching Christ out of some false sense of reverence, piety, or propriety, rather than following the command of Our Lord.

Recently, we were humiliated and aghast to be asked to leave during the Liturgy because our ten month old baby was crying. The priest stopped at the end of the Epiclesis, pointed to us, pointed to the door, and refused to resume until we left. My wife in tears, we quickly grabbed the diaper bag and ran out the door. We did not stay for the rest of the Liturgy and instead went home as quickly as we could, stopping only to breathe and collect ourselves for several minutes in the parking lot of the Protestant church next door before our hour-plus long drive home. We were even more horrified when we confided in a friend and she told us that we were the **third** couple that she has known to experience this in parishes of different rites and regions of our state. Another friend at a Latin rite parish shared that she gets hostile looks and reactions every time she brings her toddler to Mass. Still another admitted that she has to pray for strength from the Holy Spirit before walking into church with her child and dealing with the glares of people around her. Notable to me was that these are not rambunctious schooled-aged children or toddlers who should be able to behave but do not, but rather, babies who squirm, cry, giggle, and act as babies do, without any concept of right or wrong or the expectations of how one should behave. These are not parents failing to take a melting down child out briefly before returning to the pew. These are innocent babies simply acting the way that God made babies to act; perhaps even the way that God Himself once behaved, long ago in Bethlehem, and their families are being persecuted by their fellow parishioners and even priests for their natural babyish behavior. In some cases, the babies are being quiet, but the congregation behaves with hostility in anticipation of the children making noise.

While we aren't opposed to taking a child or toddler who needs a time-out or a break out for a few minutes, we intentionally choose not to use the cry room for our baby, and instead sit in the front pew. Our choice is based on the following: that we as parents have been given a sacred duty to raise our children in the Catholic Faith (in fact, our infant's baptism was contingent on our promise to raise him in the Faith); sitting in the front allows him to watch and absorb what is going on (and even at ten months, he already is able to watch the priest intently for brief intervals and will smile, wave, and blow kisses to the Tabernacle); if we truly believe that the Liturgy is the meeting point of Heaven and Earth, that time and space are bent so that we are present at Calvary and at the empty tomb on Easter morning, then bringing our child to the front is most obedient to Christ's commandment to bring the children to Him and the best way to make these realities present to them. Hiding in a room, glassed off from the church, does not have the same impact on these smallest members of the Church.

It is interesting that, until the 1970s, Catholic churches never had cry rooms or nurseries. While some say that the architecture did not provide room for them, surely the architects of Notre Dame and St. Peter's could have arranged such spaces had they felt them important! Look through the ancient churches of the East and West, through the catacombs of the ancient days of persecution, and a common theme emerges: there was no cry room, no nursery, no designated space for children or families to go during the Liturgy. Acts 16:15; 16:33; and 18:8 and 1 Corinthians 1:16 speak of baptizing entire households. Never does Scripture mention excluding children from baptism or the Liturgy. The Apology of St. Justin does not speak of excluding children. The Catechism states, "The catechesis of children, young people, and adults aims at teaching them to meditate on The Word of God in personal prayer, practicing it in liturgical prayer, and internalizing it at all times in order to bear fruit in a new life. Catechesis is also a time for the discernment and education of popular piety. The memorization of basic prayers offers an essential support to the life of prayer, but it is important to help learners savor their meaning." (CCC 2688); parents are directly commanded to participate in the Liturgy with their children in order to teach them the Faith.

Despite the 2000 year tradition of families bringing their infants into church, in the past four decades, modernists have invented a new custom within the Church: the cry room, a room separated from the main church and far in the back into which, in the name of "not disturbing anyone," families with babies and little children are exiled. It is interesting that in 1955, Catholic Mass attendance in the US was 75%, yet by 1975, it had decreased 21% to only 54%, followed by a steady decline of about 5% every ten years until settling at 39% in 2017. Post-pandemic, the rate hovers at about 30% (Gallup). The numbers from the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate are even more dismal: only 17% of Catholics in the United States attend Mass at least once a week. While many societal factors influence Mass attendance, it is interesting that such a sharp decline occurred right as the cry rooms were introduced, and that the generations raised in the cry rooms rather than the pews have continued to dwindle in attendance. Could it be that, as a Church, we are making families feel unwelcome in the pews? Is our unwillingness to welcome the crying baby chasing away the entire family from the Faith?

I had to wonder, did the priest believe that anyone in the parish was more disrupted than we were disrupted? From being on both sides of the crying baby, that of the young single and of the parent, I can attest that never was I more disturbed by any baby's babyish behavior than I am by my own. The truth is that even the slightest noise or babble from a baby is enough to put the parents into a panic. While crying or even screaming may be an annoyance for others, merely a babble is a total concentration block for the parents, who are constantly worried about how others will look at them or talk to them because of their baby.

Decades of coldness within the Church has made parents scared of attending Mass with children. "Is the parish child-friendly?" is often the first question they will ask before visiting a new place. Reviews are left on Google and Yelp reflecting if children are welcome in the church, welcome but expected to sit in the cry room, or met with outright hostility. As a Church, we absolutely must reverse this trend; our Church is already in serious trouble, and this crisis will only grow worse. The modern culture does not help: parents meet outright belligerence from

contemporaries for “brainwashing” their children with religion, and their children grow up being mocked by their peers for their family’s faith. At ten months old, our baby has already been exposed to the popular view that the Catholic Church is “power-hungry,” “unjust,” “deceptive,” and “irrelevant.” We do our best to avoid these people and to teach him, but we can not hold out against the world if we do not have the support of the Church. The young families of today are alone, rejected by both the world and the Church for bringing their children to Mass. Next Mass, look around you: how many of the parishioners are elderly, and how many are young? How many babies are there? How do people act around the babies? When a baby cries and distracts you during the Mass, consider the example of St. Therese, who wrote in her autobiography:

“For a long time my place at meditation was near a Sister who fidgeted continually, either with her rosary, or something else; possibly, as I am very keen of hearing, I alone heard her, but I cannot tell you how much it tried me. I should have liked to turn round, and by looking at the offender, make her stop the noise; but in my heart I knew that I ought to bear it tranquilly, both for the love of God and to avoid giving pain. So I kept quiet, but the effort cost me so much that sometimes I was bathed in perspiration, and my meditation consisted merely in suffering with patience.

After a time I tried to endure it in peace and joy, at least deep down in my soul, and I strove to take actual pleasure in the disagreeable little noise. Instead of trying not to hear it, which was impossible, I set myself to listen, as though it had been some delightful music, and my meditation—which was not the ‘prayer of quiet’—was passed in offering this music to Our Lord.”

The sad truth is that as a Church, we are failing to love as Jesus loves. We are failing to accept all whom He calls. No other demographic would be exiled into a separate room for the Mass with a consoling reminder of, “we have speakers so you can hear.” Imagine the outcry if any other demographic were confined to a separate room. There would, rightfully, be outrage if the Church segregated by sex, race, or disability, confining certain members of the Church into a closed-off room out of a false sense of “consideration” for the majority of the membership. Yet we segregate by age as if it’s what God intended, shoving babies into these separate rooms where they can not see, absorb, or interact with the Liturgy. I have to wonder what Jesus would say if He came back and saw all the little children being pushed away from His Presence. I can only imagine the sorrow it brings Him to see the babies who should be smiling and blowing kisses to the Tabernacle being chased away because they act the way He made babies to act. These babies, as baptized Catholics, have a right to attend the Liturgy without being expelled for acting the way God made them to act.

Parishes must focus on actively reaching out to and welcoming families. Reserve a pew or two in the front for families with little children, and encourage them to sit in the front so that their children can be actively engaged. Offer a 20-minute children’s corner before or after (never during) the Liturgy, to read the Gospel and explain both the Gospel and the Liturgy to them. During this time of Eucharistic revival, teach these littlest ones to adore the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. One parish I know of dedicates an hour during Adoration to families

during which is a twenty-minute session in which children learn about the True Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. Of course, all are welcome, but it is made clear that it is a special time for children to learn about and sit in the presence of their Eucharistic Lord. Most importantly, be kind. When a baby melts down and cries, do not turn against the parent with hostility for being distracted from your prayer; rather, thank God for the gift of life and offer the cries as part of your prayers. Smile at the parents. Be grateful that in a world in which 17% of Catholics attend Mass, someone cared enough to brave the hostility of both the world and the Church by bringing their children to Mass and raising them in the Faith.