

A little girl dressed in white comes from the baptistry with a candle which she lights from the sanctuary lamp. And so it continues until they begin to consider the darkness around them. Those who never pray—the candles before the statue of our Lady are put out; those who will not have their children baptised—the little girl's candle goes out. And so gradually the Church is filled with darkness again. On the Tuesday there is a Service of Water.

Such services in detail may not be appropriate to an English congregation. But they provide a novel example of what can be done to encourage the devotion of the people in their assistance in the worship of the whole Church. They may remind us also that something of this nature must be done if the rulings of the Holy See are to be followed in that the people must be suitably prepared by instructions and services for a full and living share in the liturgy of the great week of the year. It is now the bidden responsibility of every member of the Mystical Body to see to it that the gulf between liturgy and popular devotions is bridged and that the two re-unite to foster a true, communal Christian piety and spiritual life in the Church.



CHILDREN AT MASS

ROSEMARY HAUGHTON

I ONCE had the good fortune to attend a small chapel for Mass where children were no problem. There were always lots of them, from babies upwards, and they loved to go because they were not restrained, scolded, or made to feel out of place. Toddlers staggered up and down the short aisle, babies climbed on the chairs and cooed, older children watched attentively, moving forward to see more easily what was happening. If a child came too near the priest he was gently moved out the way by a parent or the server, but they often sat on the altar steps, and no one bothered them. The result of all this was that they seldom gave trouble, and if a baby did cry its mother took it outside for a minute without being made to feel that she was a criminal for having brought it at all. Parents could come to Mass together, and the children learnt to love the House of God because they were made to feel at home there.

The usual situation is rather different. If there are two Masses on a Sunday, parents take turns and the children never go to church until they are old enough to 'behave'; if there is only one Mass, one parent must either miss Mass altogether, or endure the hostile glares of people who consider that a baby's chatter or a young child's outspoken questions are an insult to the dignity of the occasion and to themselves. The unfortunate mother of several children who values the Holy Sacrifice enough to bring them with her rather than stay away has little peace, for she must be for ever exhorting Johnny to stop wriggling and Mary to stop talking and at the same time dangle a rosary to keep the baby amused and quiet, for if any of them makes a noise she will not only have to endure impatient signs and whispered scoldings during Mass, but too often the censure of the parish priest afterwards. She will surely earn for herself a very brilliant crown in heaven—but what of the children? Made to feel guilty, frowned on, hushed and usually unable to see what is happening, it is not surprising that they associate Mass with acute mental and physical discomfort, and long to leave all that behind when they grow up.

Our Lord did not say, 'let the quiet, well-behaved, docile children come to me, but forbid the noisy, dirty, impertinent ones, and the babies'. He knew all about children, but he said, 'Let them come to me'. All of them. They came, and they still come, when they are allowed to.

One day, perhaps, children, with their parents, will be able to play their full part in the Liturgy, and boredom will be banished because there will be so many interesting things to do, watch, and think about. Meanwhile we are, most of us, faced with the problem of communicating to the children an understanding and love of the Mass, when all they see are the backs of the people in front and an occasional glimpse of a figure in strange garments making tiny, meaningless movements and muttering something unintelligible and usually quite inaudible.

This is a grim picture, and matters will often be better than this, but I have purposely chosen the most difficult circumstances so that I can show what can be done even with these. It is a frustrating and dispiriting struggle, but it must be undertaken for the sake of the children. Much can be done, both directly and indirectly.

In church, by far the best place for a child is the front row, or if these are all taken, at least as near the front as possible. From

there they can see what is going on, look at the candles, the flowers, the servers and so on. It takes some courage to march the length of the church with a small child, but it is well worth the effort. People often go to the back because they think the children will be less noticeable there (so cowed are they by the Pharisees), but in fact boredom will make them far more restless than they would be in front. The exception to this is a small baby who is too young to be beguiled by lights and movement; in this case it is best to sit near the door so that one can get outside if necessary with the minimum of disturbance. When there are older children as well the problem is more complicated, and it may be worth while to risk possible yells for the sake of the older ones, but a good feed just beforehand will usually ensure a peaceful half-hour. In country churches it is usually possible to leave the baby in its pram outside, or in a neighbour's garden. The most difficult age is from nine months to two years, when the child is old enough to be very active but too young to understand or concentrate for more than a few minutes at a time. He will usually be perfectly good if he is allowed to roam, but in most churches this is not possible, and he is also at the age when it is most difficult to persuade him to stay happily with anyone but his mother while she goes to church. For this age, small, plain biscuits are a blessing—not sweets, which are sticky, or (worse still!) chocolate or chocolate biscuits, or the crunchy kind that make a loud noise and a lot of crumbs! If they are cunningly kept in reserve until the wriggling or whining of acute boredom begin, one or two biscuits will take many a toddler happily through the rest of Mass. For this age, also, rag books or small coloured *soft* animals are very useful, and should be pinned to the child's coat on a short tape, otherwise the young tyrant will enjoy dropping them repeatedly so that his unfortunate mother, afraid of furious howls, may be forced to keep on picking them up. Rattly toys are a mistake.

For older children, picture-books are a great help, particularly during the sermon which is usually the worst time. The best I know for this are the *Blandford First Bible Stories*, which have a coloured picture on every page and are equally popular with readers and non-readers. As soon as reading age is reached, trouble is almost over, but it is not enough to thrust a prayer-book into a child's hands; he must be helped to use it. He must be shown when to turn over as he tries to follow the action of the

Mass, and it is surprising how soon a child can follow a sensible translation in the grown-up Missal, provided someone points to the place for him. This is especially important when Mass is said too fast for him to keep up—the grown-up must help him to ‘skip’ when necessary. All this means a lot of help and attention, and it may be necessary for a time to arrange for Father or Mother to take the child at this stage to Mass alone, or in a different part of the church, because the concentration needed is considerable, and younger brothers and sisters can easily make it impossible. It is very difficult to find a suitable Mass-book for younger children; most of them have either bad illustrations or unrealistic devotions, or both. A good solution is a home-made book, with, if possible, photographs of the priest at Mass stuck in (they can be got from various pamphlets), and short, simple extracts from the appropriate part of the Mass. During the sermon a reader can have a suitable book—lives of saints, Bible stories, etc.—as his equivalent to the grown-up sermon.

I would like to make one suggestion which may be rather controversial. Young children understand what they are told much more easily if it is related to something they can see—this fact is recognized in almost all schools nowadays. It follows that the best time to give instruction on the Mass is during Mass, and I believe this can be done without annoyance to other people, by speaking in a very low voice (not a whisper) close to the child’s ear. Instructions given in this way are a great help to the child of three and upwards; such short sentences as ‘Now the priest is bending-down to tell God how sorry he is for wrong things he has done—we must be sorry too’—‘Now he is reading a letter that a great friend of Jesus wrote for all Christians’—‘In a moment Jesus will come on the Altar—listen for the little bell’—and so on, are all that is needed to hold the child’s attention and give him some idea of what is happening. He will inevitably ask questions, and there should never be discouraged, but he will soon learn to speak low, and if he sometimes forgets it is no crime and he should not be made to feel guilty about it. Complicated questions can be referred to a later time, but they must not be ignored. ‘I’ll explain later—it would take too long now’, is an answer perfectly satisfactory to most children.

All this is about the children when they are actually at Mass, but of course a great deal can be done at other times to make

matters easier. Making scrap-books of pictures relating to the great Feasts of the year, arranging small shrines of a picture suitable to the Feast with flowers and candles, informal discussion, drawing pictures, reading aloud and explanation of the Mass for each Sunday or Feast, all these help to develop an understanding of the Liturgy. Most children 'play at Mass', and they should not be discouraged or too much laughed at—they learn a lot through it, and if a little girl wants to take a turn at 'being Father' there is no need to stop her—she will find out later why girls cannot become priests, and meanwhile she is learning more important things.

How much liberty should a child have in deciding whether or not to go to Mass? My own feeling is that it is not a good thing to take an unwilling child to church. He should be made to feel that it is a privilege, a very 'grown-up' thing to do, then he will want to go, but if for any reason he refuses it seems to me better to be a little indifferent, to say, 'Very well, as you are still rather a baby, perhaps you had better not go—another time I expect you will be more sensible.' This usually works like magic, but in any case there is no sin in the case of a child under the age of reason. An older child must make his own decision, assuming that by that time he has a fair idea of the importance of the Mass, of his own share in it, of his responsibility in the matter. If, with all this, he should choose deliberately to miss Mass, to take him against his will would not prevent the sin but probably increase it, and if a child gets into that state it is time that his parents also examined their consciences, for there must be something seriously wrong.

On the whole, the surprising thing is not that children are occasionally troublesome in church, or in a bad temper and unwilling to go, but that they are generally so eager to go and so good when they get there. In circumstances which to an outsider would seem to be incomparably dreary they sit quietly and watch, ask sensible questions or look at their books, and if a cold or some other mishap prevents them from going, what tears and pleadings there are, from little boys who at other times enjoy an enviable reputation for good all-round naughtiness. Long before their minds can grasp the significance of what they see and hear, their un-contaminated souls respond to the Grace that flows from the Altar of Sacrifice, and they recognize their friend even before they know his Name.