On one Sunday in Lent I was struck by a homily given by my parish priest on the power of the Mass. Among the many thought provoking ideas he presented, the following made me consider my reasons for encouraging and, to be honest, even expecting my children to attend Mass.

... The Mass is not just a community building exercise. It is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that reflects the pattern of all reality. It is an act of worship that is the high point of our Catholic faith.

The Mass cannot be separated from everyday life. It comes to us as a gift from God the Father in Jesus Christ. We should make weekend Mass part and parcel of our lives. ... Through frequent participation in the Sunday Eucharist, we become energised by its vision, and we then become motivated to do something that will make a better place for us all. At the same time we do not lose hope when good results do not happen as completely or as quickly as we would like. The Mass helps us to enjoy life with the happiness and security we see manifest in the life of Jesus himself...

Fr Jim Corcoran

As Catholic parents the celebration of the Mass is a vital component in the nurturing and maturing of our own faith and that of our children. It is a time when the family, the “domestic church”, joins the wider Church community in a celebration of thanksgiving in which, together with Jesus, we give thanks and praise to God. For Catholics, the celebration of the Eucharist (The Mass) is the “source and summit of the Christian life” (Catechism of the Catholic Church #1324). It is the greatest act of worship.

The aim of this article is to alleviate some of the anxieties which may be experienced by parents in relation to attending Mass. It seems that the concerns are as pertinent to parents of young children as they are for parents of teenagers, for different reasons. This article will concentrate on four different stages of development:

- Preschoolers to age six
- Age seven to twelve
- Early Teenagers
- Late Teenagers

When we presented our children for Baptism with the desire for them to be initiated into the Church, we promised that we would accept the responsibility of “training them [our children] in the practice of the faith.”

However, for many parents, attending Mass may not seem like a celebration. The reality for some is that it is the most frustrating hour of the week. For parents with preschoolers there is the frustration of how to keep a little one “entertained” for an hour. On the other hand, for parents with teenagers the battle of getting them to Mass can be equally as frustrating.
As parents, we ask: What can I do to encourage my children to participate more fully in the Sunday Eucharist, as it is so central to our faith, a time of celebration, one in which all members of the family can participate?

**Preschoolers to Age Six**

One of the most frequently asked questions by parents of preschoolers is: “Should I take my young child to Mass?” When you reflect on it you may ask yourself -Is it really worthwhile? The feeling of many parents is that children become bored and thus begin to behave in ways that may be considered inappropriate. As much as we believe that the Mass for many is a celebration, the reality of attending Mass is not a celebration but rather a burden for many. The Liturgy is usually planned for adults and, if there is no Children’s Liturgy of the Word, there is little for young ones in which they can participate and be absorbed.

Some parents have opted not to take their young ones to Mass and have agreed to attend Mass at separate times. One of the problems with this solution is that parents miss the opportunity of celebrating together.

Take heart! There is value in attending Mass as a family, no matter how distracting it may seem. Firstly, by worshipping together the bonds created within the family are strengthened.

Children learn also that Sunday Mass is a normal part of family life, one of the things that is done as a family. This lays the foundation for expecting our children, as they approach teenage years, to participate in family life, which includes Sunday Mass. Secondly, if you do not expose children to the part of the Tradition, which is central to our faith, they will never learn how to behave and respond appropriately, thus will not grow in understanding of the signs and symbols of our faith. If they are encouraged to attend, in time they will imitate what the worshipping community is modelling and eventually come to understand there significance in worship.

According to Chandler and Burney (1984), authors of the book, *Sharing The Faith With Your Child From Birth To Six*, the most important thing is that your child experiences Church as love rather than a series of threats. Remember that your child learns about God’s love through your love and thus this should be the tool used for meaningful experience of Church.

The following suggestions may be helpful in making the Mass a positive experience for both parents and children. These suggestions have adapted from Chandler and Burney (1984) and Pederson and Burney (1992).

**Before you leave home focus on the positives of celebrating Mass as a family**

Do not leave home thinking of the many distractions you and the community will have to incur.

- Prepare for Mass as you do an outing.
- Leave plenty of time to get the family ready for Mass so that there is not a sense of rush and anxiety.
- Have a bag of soft toys and books, which are been packed specially for Church. If children only play with these particular toys on Sunday they will associate something special about this particular day. Take the bag with you to Mass.

**Introduce A Family Ritual for Sundays**

These are simple suggestions but they emphasise the celebratory aspect of the day and thus Mass will not be seen as an extra but as integral to the day.

- Have a special treat for breakfast like pancakes or crumpets or a special type of breakfast cereal.
- Make Sunday a family day by visiting grandparents after Mass or going somewhere special for a family picnic.
She expressed how she felt guilty that her children had made this decision and even a sense of failure in the effort she and her husband had made over the years in trying to instill into their children the importance of the Mass.

She continues to maintain a wonderful relationship with her children and she still initiates discussion about issues, which may arise from the Sunday homily, as she used to do when they were younger.

She commented that this has made her re-examine her own reasons for attending Mass and the commitment that she is now called to within the worshipping community.

Deep down she knew that there would come a time when she had to accept their decision but at the same time she expected her children to respect her decision and that of her husband.

Remember personal witness is the best teacher. At this stage of many teenagers lives the Mass is not the faith enriching experience it is for the parents because they have not yet experienced the effect of the Mass in their own daily lives. It is a time when teenagers struggle to see the relevance of institutionalised religion in their lives. Keep at it. As parents all we can do is to continue to give witness to our children for what we feel is important. You may be surprised when your child asks if they can accompany you to Mass one Sunday.

Most of all don’t despair and do not get angry if they do not wish to attend Mass. Forcing teenagers into anything is the best way to turn them away. This is not to say that your child’s choice is final especially in the early teens. Make them aware of your desire for them to attend Mass, but finally accept that they make their own decision.

Teenagers who do not attend Mass regularly may be very spiritual and express their faith in other ways. As parents we need to realise that all is not lost. As parents we need to realise that they do not necessarily reject God or the Church. On the other hand, if a teenager’s motive for attending Mass is solely to please their parents then it is not a personal faith commitment. In time they will need to question their motives and make their own decision. Many parents feel guilty or experience a sense of failure when their teenagers choose not to attend Mass. There is value in speaking to other parents within your parish community. Discuss your feelings, your desires and your fears. You will find that you have done everything possible for your children and you have not failed. It is the time when your child needs to make its own decision.

In conclusion, if parents have set a good example, the seed has been planted, and it will grow in its own time. Remember, teach your children with love and not fear. Keep communication open and continue to lavish them with love as Jesus taught, especially when if it is hard to accept their decisions.

Written by Carmel Suart
Perth Archdiocesan Catechist Service

RESOURCES

Chandler, Phyllis & Burney, Joan (1984)
Sharing The Faith With Your Child From Birth To Age Six.

Pedersen, Mary Jo & Burney, Joan (1992)
Sharing the Faith With Your Child From Seven to age Fourteen.

Dues, Greg (1994)
Why Go To Mass. Reasons and Resources to Motivate Teenagers.

Photographs Courtesy of Willetton-Brentwood Parish
One Sunday on the way home from Mass, my oldest child, Amy, decided to have a theological discussion. She was becoming very aware of the whole celebration of the Mass as she was preparing for the celebration of the sacrament of the Eucharist. As we pulled up at the lights she raised the question, “Mum what do you actually receive when you go up to Holy Communion?” I thought, now how do I answer this? Do I give a dialogue on the Theology of the Eucharist?

Well I proceeded to her that what I actually received was the Body and Blood of Jesus. She looked at me with great doubt and confusion and by this time my husband’s face was saying “try and get out of this one.” She continued, “Mum when you receive it, it still looks like bread and wine.”

I said, “That’s right what still looks like bread and wine actually becomes the body and blood of Jesus. During the Mass as the priest repeats the words Jesus spoke at the Last Supper the bread and wine become the body and blood of Jesus.

More puzzled she asked, “Does everyone receive Jesus, every single person on the whole world.”

I thought I had everything under control by now and merely said, “Yes that’s right love everyone who receives Holy Communion.”

She gave me one of her looks and said, “Mum, I can’t believe that because I know that’s not true and even when I make my first Holy Communion I won’t believe it because I know that it can’t be true.

I then asked, “Why love?”

She simply replied, “Because Jesus wasn’t that FAT!!

Children aged between seven and twelve become much more involved in the celebration of the Mass. As children enter into this phase of development, parents become aware that they need to assess their own faith commitment and understandings because at this stage children are led by example. They model their level of participation on what they observe. If parents are enthused about attending Mass and participating fully in the celebration, then it is likely that so will the child.

The following are ways in which parents can make celebrating the Mass in these years an enriching experience that will encourage religious growth.

**Keep their enthusiasm going**

Make participating in the celebration easier for your child.

- A children’s missal may help the child respond to the parts of the Mass. Do not be overly concerned if they are on the wrong page of the Missal. When they refer back to the Missal gently turn to the correct page and point the appropriate place.

- Again sit up the front. They will now observe the different parts of the Mass with new insight. Sitting close to the front gives them the opportunity to understand what is happening at the different parts of the Mass.

- If your parish has a Children’s Liturgy of the Word, encourage your child to attend. When your child returns into the Church, take an interest in what they bring back with them. After Mass talk to your child about their liturgy of the Word.

- As your child become a more proficient reader, let them follow in the readings in your missal.

- Connect to what they have been learning in the religious education classes either at school or in the parish.

**Be honest**

At this stage of their development, children are very eager and full of enthusiasm, which leads them to ask many questions. Parents will notice that children become more aware of the words, gestures and symbols used during the celebration of the Mass. Your child will ask such questions as: “Why do we go to church?” They will notice such words as ‘This is my body. This is my blood.” They will question you on such things, waiting in earnest for an answer that
makes sense to them. In the education system today our children are encouraged to ask questions in order to become informed. A very simple explanation of the celebration of the Mass might be:

As a family we gather for many reasons so that we can share our lives with one another. The same is true of the Mass. As we gather with the members of our family and the other people within the parish community we share in a special meal of thanksgiving called the Mass or Eucharist. When we celebrate the Mass we come together in Jesus’ name to remember the story of Jesus’ life, that he died on the cross and that he rose again.

We come together because Jesus commanded us to at the Last Supper. When sharing his last meal with his friends, he took the bread, gave thanks to his Father, broke it and gave it to them saying, “This is my Body.” He then took the cup filled with wine and said, “This is my Blood.” Then he said, “Do this in memory of me.”

When we celebrate the Mass, we gather with Jesus to offer thanks and praise to God for all the blessings we have received. The priest who leads us in the celebration is a sign that it is really Jesus who gathers us together. Jesus is present as we listen to the story of God’s people and to the life and teachings of Jesus in the Word of God, and as we share in the sacred meal he gave us on the night before he died.

When the priest repeats the words Jesus spoke at the Last Supper, the bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Jesus.

When we receive Holy Communion, we receive the Body and Blood of Jesus, which nourishes us and strengthens us to live as Jesus taught. Jesus helps us to be more like him in our thoughts, words and actions. In this way, we take Jesus’ message of love to our family, friends and the people we meet.

If you are not sure how to explain an answer, ask your parish priest.

Select a familiar community

Celebrate the Mass in a community where children will meet their friends. This raises children’s awareness of the sense of Church as a community. If you keep on changing the community in which you worship, your child will find it hard to experience a sense of community.

Teen Years - Early and Late

“We do not expect them [teenagers] always to want to go [to Mass], or to value it in the same way as their parents. We simply ask them to come, to experience it, to be exposed to it. There’s no point in arguing with them about how much they should like it.”

(Bishop Kenneth Unter, Michigan)

As your child journeys towards the end of primary school and enters into secondary school, a new dilemma may begin. At this stage of development, teenagers begin to search for their own self-identity, which leads them to question authority figures such as parents, Church leaders and teachers. At this time, attending Mass may become an issue as they may lose the interest and the enthusiasm for what they don’t see as a celebration that appeals to them. The strongest influence at this stage comes from their peers. Peer pressure takes over as the authority, and they would rather be seen doing what their friends are doing than getting caught out going to Mass with their parents.

Parents observing the body language of some teenagers when they do attend Mass wonder if it is really worthwhile. They don’t seem to want to participate, they slouch, they seem more interested in cleaning under their finger nails than listening and responding to the parts of the Mass. In fact they seem anywhere but concentrating on what is happening around them. As disheartening as this may sound, it is a reality for many parents and teenagers.

When speaking with teenagers about the Mass, they will quickly tell you that Mass is boring, they don’t get anything out of it, and they don’t feel welcome. They tell you they can pray in the bedroom or on the beach. As parents we
may have answers to give them. A common one is: “You get out of the Mass what you put into the Mass.” However, these solutions make no sense to them as they struggle to make sense of their ideas about God and their faith.

**Early Teens - A Time of Search and Discovery**

This is probably the most fragile time for both parents and teenagers. At this stage they are not old enough to do their own thing and yet they want to be independent. The teenager believes that they have a right to make decisions about the things that affect them and they should be allowed to choose what they feel they want to do. However, what they feel that they want to do may not be an appropriate choice in their early teenage years.

There are no quick solutions, only suggestions, which may help both parents and teenagers through this time of searching and discovery. The obvious question at this stage is: What can I do as a parent to encourage my teenager to attend Mass? Again the following are suggestions which may assist parents.

**Keep communication open**

This is the greatest secret. Teenagers are usually very honest and are willing to express their point of view if they know that they will be listened to. Listen patiently to your child without criticising their point of view. Rather respect what they have to say and let them understand that you have a point of view as well. Communicate with gentleness and love, but at the same do not jeopardise your right as a parent. In family life the expectation is that all members participate in family activity, this includes attending Mass, since it is a part of normal family life. Express your desire for them to attend Mass giving your reasons. Associate your reasons with life situations. One example may be; the times they do not feel like visiting grandparents or aunts and uncles but once they do they see the joy it brings to them and they begin understand the importance of their presence to other family members. Explain that if they do not visit the relatives frequently they slowly move apart and over time they will become a stranger to the members of their own family. Try and let your child understand that it is the same with the celebration of the Eucharist. If they don’t attend and participate in the Mass frequently then they will slowly distance themselves from the community and from the spiritual power, which sustains our faith. Don’t give up; take up the challenge with your child.

**Maintain a positive atmosphere**

Do not argue before you leave home for Mass. Most teenagers will give up and not go. Accept what they have chosen to wear and the hairstyle of the day. We teach that God is a loving God and accepting of all, so we need to be conscious of practising what we preach.

**Offer your child some options**

Allow your child to choose the Mass they wish to attend. There may be a liturgy within your parish, which is more acceptable with teenagers. Encourage your child to attend this Mass. If your parish does not offer a liturgy suited to teenagers you may need to find a neighbouring parish that does.

- You may offer to pick up a friend on the way to Mass. Teenagers feel more comfortable with people of their own age.

- Teenagers do not like sitting in the front, if you have other smaller children you may have to be content for your teenager to sit towards the back with friends.

**Encourage your child to become involved in parish life**

Encourage your child to become involved in such groups as Luke 18, Antioch, Young Adult’s faith groups. These groups provide a good mixture of social and spiritual activities suited to teenagers. They are usually held after Saturday or Sunday evening Mass. Contact your parish for more information on the variety of groups opened to your child.

**Late teens - A time for making own decisions**

A mother of two children in their late teens was relating to me her anxieties of how she thought that her two children would not distance themselves from the Church. She shared that her children attended Mass with her until after they completed their secondary education, but then slowly other things such as a part time job started to get in the way of attending Mass. She honestly believed that her children would always value Mass and that they had always discussed things like the homily in their home for many years.
• Attend parish functions

• Allow time to socialise with people within the parish after Mass.

**Do not expect adult behaviour**

The days when children were seen and not heard are well and truly over. Children are not capable of listening for long periods of time. We must be honest, adults find this hard to do. Be reasonable, this does not mean that your child can do as your child pleases, but rather to accept behaviour that is acceptable for the age of your child.

• Sit up the front, this allows children to see what is happening.

• Allow your children to stand while the adults are kneeling as they may not be able to see over the pew.

• Let your children play quietly with the toys you have brought from home.

• Do not expect your child to stand, sit and kneel at the right times, this will come with time as your child grows in maturity and understanding. It is more important that your child is comfortable.

• When a child is becoming too distracting try not to remove them completely from the celebration. Take them to the back of the church with some toys and let them focus on the different things they can see at the back. Take them outside only if they are crying or screaming and only until they quieten down. One word of caution about taking children outside. If parents allow children to run around and have “fun” your children will be disruptive every week knowing that this will lead you to take them outside where they can have more “fun.”

**Use positive interaction**

If your child is restless, calm them by interacting with them in a loving way.

• Give them a hug or a smile.

• Sit them on your knee during the homily.

• Give them a cuddle and point out something that will keep their attention for a while eg: a statue, the stained glass windows or a banner.

• Let your child sit on the floor or the pew and quietly play with the toys you have brought from home.

• Share the sign of peace with them and encourage them to give the sign of peace to others.

Do not force your child into anything with which they do not feel comfortable. They will respond with the appropriate signs and gestures when they are ready.

**Affirm your child’s participation**

It is important to acknowledge the effort children make in participating in the singing and/or responses of the Mass. The more parents encourage children to participate (at their level), the more they will make the effort to do so.