

Welcoming Children to the Three Days

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Propose to a roomful of parents that they consider bringing their children to the liturgy on Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil and you will probably get some odd looks. Parents may not think their children will stay awake, pay attention, or understand what is occurring during the services. Parents also may imagine restless children fidgeting or otherwise disrupting the prayer of those around them. They might think how hard it can be to pray during a typical Sunday Mass with children and dismiss the idea instantly. As the mother of young children, I can attest to the difficulty of remaining prayerful when someone is playing with my earrings, asking to go to the drinking fountain, or crawling under the pew. I can understand why parents who participate in the Triduum might want to leave their children at home. Excellent reasons exist, however, for encouraging children to be part of the pinnacle of the liturgical year.

CHILDREN AND THE LANGUAGE OF SIGN

We are engaged by what touches our senses. Visible signs of invisible realities are essential for us. “Through signs we become accustomed not to stop at what our eyes can see and our hands can touch; we become accustomed to search the horizon for a different reality.”¹ The Triduum is dense with signs, both those that are seen at other times of the year and those that are specific to it. The Word, as it proclaims the most important moments in the history of salvation, the footwashing, the new fire, the veneration of the cross, the dark church that fills with light as candles are lighted throughout the community, all of these make us aware of realities that are beyond us.

Sofia Cavalletti states, “The language of the liturgy—signs or symbols—is one that speaks to the learned and to the unlearned, to adults and to children. It is a language that one both hears and sees; it invites us into an immediate and living contact with the reality presented.”² “Children grasp the meaning of this language with ease, with depth, with joy.”³ Elsewhere, she asserts that signs “help the child enter into the mystery” and that “the sign opens us to the transcendent.”⁴ Cavalletti became an expert on children’s spirituality while developing the Catechesis of the



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The many ways that the senses are engaged during the Triduum present a special moment of encounter between the child and God. Children will grasp the language of the signs and symbols of the liturgy.

Good Shepherd. Her decades of work with children demonstrated to her the potential that liturgical signs possess as a place of encounter between the child and God.

Cavalletti’s work emphasizes that God has a relationship with the child where he or she is at each moment in development. The relationship needs to be nurtured as it is in that moment. Because there are so many opportunities to engage the child’s senses during the Triduum, the Three Days present a special moment of encounter for the child and God. The liturgy does not exist for a future moment when the child will better understand. In coming years, the liturgy will be the same, but the child will be different. The Triduum, as a moment of encounter, is unique each year because the child will have changed.

In addition, providing children a chance to participate during the Triduum has a catechetical function. “Liturgy is a constitutive element of the holy and living Tradition.”⁵ Children need to be given the opportunity to participate in the prayer of the Three Days for us to hand on what we have received.



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Bringing children to the Triduum can help adults look at the signs and symbols anew. Children's reflections may help families delve deeper into the mysteries.

CHALLENGES FOR FAMILIES

Despite the opportunity for children to be formed liturgically through their participation in the Triduum, there are many practical challenges. My first experience of parenting through the Easter Vigil featured a toddler who was displeased when suddenly awoken by the singing of the Gloria. We had attended the Triduum at an out-of-town parish to be present as a friend was received into full communion. Through creative parenting we made it through the rest of the night. Several years later, my daughter felt compelled to spin wildly as all knelt after the procession to the altar of repose on Holy Thursday. Though I tried to calm her, she would not settle, and I ended up carrying the screaming child to the car. During the Easter Vigil, my friend's five- or six-year-old brother accidentally set fire to the heavily sprayed hair of the woman ahead of him. Children can be messy and challenging. Children, particularly very young children, do not usually like to be still and quiet for long periods, especially when those periods occur after they are normally in bed.

TIPS FOR PARENTS

It is important to be realistic and flexible regarding Triduum participation. Parents could commit to trying some of the Triduum liturgy with their children, but give themselves permission to stop doing what is not working. The Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper could be a great experience for a toddler when it begins at 5:30 PM but a challenge at 7:00 PM. This year my family processed to the car during the *Pange Lingua*,

once we felt our four-year-old was not ready to handle any more after an hour-and-a-half Mass that began at her bedtime. One family brought pillows and blankets with them to the Easter Vigil while their children were little. Even though they knew their youngsters would likely fall asleep, they recognized the value of praying there as a family and of giving their children the opportunity for encounter that the Vigil provides.

Listening to children is important while planning attendance at services. My nine-year-old loves the Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper and the Easter Vigil but this year expressed hesitation regarding Good Friday services. He told me he finds the veneration of the cross "creepy." As we talked about it, he explained that he had begun to get a sense of the cross as an instrument of torture. He did not want to venerate something that tortured someone he loved. Ultimately, we decided that, given where he was, it was better to let him sit that service out rather than to unintentionally anesthetize him to the horrible reality of the Crucifixion.

Parents can help their children to participate in an age-appropriate way that will vary by child. One year my then-six-year-old took a notebook to the service and wrote down what interested him. Currently, we spend time whispering in our daughter's ear, pointing out what is occurring. She also enjoys being held for portions of Mass, which helps her to settle her body and see. Going along with that, being mindful of seating choice can be advantageous. By sitting in the front pews, the children can see the action. Senses are unlikely to be engaged from the cry room.

Finally, parents should “always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope.”⁶ Be ready for your children’s questions. Some of the queries from my son are more intense than the comprehensive exams for my master’s degree. Because the Triduum is so rich in signs, it leads the child to ponder what we believe and why. Children wonder about who Jesus is and why he did the things he did. They wonder about what happens interiorly during the sacraments of initiation. They want to know more about the mysteries that none of us can fully understand.

SUPPORTING FAMILY PARTICIPATION

The parish’s hospitality is most important in encouraging children’s presence and participation during the Triduum. If restless children receive scowling looks, parents are unlikely to try to participate in the Triduum the following year. As more families come to church during these three days, the more families will feel that they are welcome. Sometimes it only takes one family mentioning participation in the liturgy for another family to feel comfortable. After several families on the soccer team requested the cancellation of practice so they could attend the Evening Mass of the Lord’s Supper, I saw the coach at the liturgy with his family. Once parents realize that they will not be the only ones attending with children, they will be more open to giving it a try.

SUCCESSSES

On Easter morning when my daughter had just turned two, we walked into church. Immediately, she pointed to the sanctuary lamp, “Jesus back!” she exclaimed. At that moment, the events we had been celebrating were real for her. Had we not brought her with us on Holy Thursday and Good Friday, that moment would not have been possible. A year later, awakening during the Baptisms at the Easter Vigil, opening her eyes, she sang along with the congregation.

Sometimes a family only needs to attend the Triduum once for it to become an annual practice. I have noticed that a group of families who attend the Easter Vigil at our parish, year after year, have had a family member journey through the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. Having been exposed to the beauty of this liturgy, they continue to participate as a family. In one of those families, two of the high schoolers served as sponsors for catechumens. When children are being initiated, it is a good opportunity to engage their peers and encourage their participation as well. Our parish has had crowds of young supporters at the Easter Vigil who often want to return in subsequent years.

Bringing children to the Triduum also enriches the lives of parents and can indeed evangelize the whole parish community.



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Cavalletti writes, “we must first learn to look at the signs, as the youngest children do naturally. We must spend time gazing at them and coming to know and enjoy them in their concrete, sensorial reality in order to slowly begin perceiving their theological richness. In so doing, we come to realize the great wisdom of the tradition of signs in the Church, which over the centuries has conserved only those signs that bear the most essential realities. Furthermore, before such wisdom, the search for innovative ways to expound on the meaning of the signs is rendered all but useless” (*The Religious Potential of the Child*, second edition, 77). One of the great gifts of parenthood is the chance to see things anew through the eyes of a child. Bringing children, in all their messy wonderfulness, to participate in the Triduum can make the season come to life and enrich our faith. Like the child, we can look at the signs and understand “with ease, with depth, with joy.”⁷ ♦

Notes

1. Sofia Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1992), 166–167.
2. Cavalletti, *Living Liturgy* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1998), 4.
3. *Ibid.*, 5.
4. Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child*, 165–166
5. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2011), 1124.
6. 1 Peter 3:15 (NAB).
7. Cavalletti, *Living Liturgy*, 5

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