

# Introduction

*“A fully Christian life cannot be conceived without participation in the liturgical services in which the faithful, gathered into a single assembly, celebrate the paschal mystery.”*

DIRECTORY FOR MASSES WITH CHILDREN, #8

The Mass is innately fascinating for children. How many of us played Mass when we were young, using candy wafers for communion? One young man I know even wore vestments his mother made for his “home” Masses. Even though my childhood Masses were in Latin, I knew that when I was there, I was giving glory to God. I remember how proud I was when I was able to chime in with “two-two-O” at certain times in the liturgy. I also recall my joy in swinging on a tire my father hung from a tree and singing away with gusto a majestic, “*Et in terra pax hominibus.*”

## **Understanding and Appreciation**

Young Catholics today are fortunate that our liturgies are in English and not a foreign language. However, children still need to be helped to understand and appreciate the Eucharist. It has to be translated for their lives. Why should we take pains to do this for them? Because the Eucharist is the heart and center of the Christian life. It is our most important prayer, our greatest act of worship, the highest point of contact with the incarnate Christ.

During the Eucharist we offer our almighty and loving God thanksgiving and praise. We remember and make present the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, which saved us. We participate in the paschal mystery of Jesus: his death and resurrection. We are

nourished by God’s word and then by God’s very self in communion. As a community, the body of Christ, we are united in faith and love as we celebrate the sacred meal that is a forerunner of the eternal banquet of love.

## **More Than Good Feelings**

Children can enjoy Mass because of its repetition, its various forms of human expression, and the experience of sharing an event in community. It is important, however, that they derive more than good feelings from the Eucharist. Granted, liturgy is basically an adult ritual and a mystery; yet, if adaptations are made and children are introduced to its riches on their own level, they will find it has meaning for them and their lives. Moreover, they will be better prepared to participate in the Eucharist when they are adult members of the community.

Teaching children about the liturgy does not mean catechizing them during Mass. Instruction about the significance, parts, and history of the Mass, its prayers, vestments, and vessels should take place outside of liturgy. This can be done in the classroom or during a class or family church tour. Likewise, individual Masses with their particular symbols and rituals should be prepared for prior to the actual celebration.

### **Liturgy Teaches**

The liturgy is its own teacher; it needs no other. Participating in it can teach children in the way they learn best: through their senses and actions. The experience of a good liturgy can have a powerful impact on children, just as it does for adults. A woman even told me that she began inquiring about the Catholic faith because of a Catholic funeral she attended. She said she was drawn to share the faith, hope, and love of the community that she witnessed worshipping at the Mass.

Of course, one of the most effective ways to teach children about liturgy is through example. I once saw a father at Mass with his daughter, who was about four years old. He stood her on the railing of the pew in front of him so that she leaned against him. When it was time to cross himself before the gospel, he crossed her forehead, lips, and heart. That child was learning worship rituals from her parent, who is her primary teacher in the eyes of the Church.

Recently I saw a young boy returning from communion behind his grandfather. Both had a rosary in their hands. They were even on the same decade. I'm not advocating praying the rosary during Mass, but the example illustrates the influence of adult models on children.

I highly recommend having adults participate in school Masses. Invite parents, grandparents, school staff members, and other significant adults to the children's liturgies, and encourage them to take active roles. Ask the school librarian to do the reading, a parent to read the Universal Prayer (Prayer of the Faithful), the custodian to take up the gifts, and the school secretary to be an extraordinary minister of the Eucharist.

Older children can serve as role models for the younger children. Pair the children in the lower grades with children in the upper grades, and have them sit together at Mass. This also motivates the older children to behave better.

### **Lively Celebrations**

Sadly, all too often children are subjected to dry, unfathomable liturgies. Not only is the celebration over their heads, but it doesn't resemble a celebration at all. No wonder they are bored. No wonder they don't care to go to Mass. With a little creativity and effort, Masses can be more appealing to children. We can involve them in the preparation and as active participants. We can use symbols, actions, and words that speak to their hearts.

What liturgies stand out in your mind? Probably those that were a little different. I recall a Mass where I was the only member of the congregation. Each time the priest prayed "you," he looked at me and nodded. Imagine the impact of the words, "This is my body which will be given up for you." Another Mass that is particularly memorable for me was a celebration at SS. Paul and Augustine Parish in Washington. The music and singing of this predominantly Black community sent my heart soaring.

At another parish Mass on the feast of the Holy Family, we each drew a Scripture verse from a basket. Mine was tailor-made for my family situation at that time. By providing weekday Masses for children that are just a little different, we can make the experience of liturgy more interesting. By exercising creativity and ingenuity and by allowing the children to exercise theirs, we can bring about liturgical experiences that make a lasting impression.

Our aim, of course, is not to make every Mass extraordinary. That will not prepare children for the liturgies they will experience as adults. Most of children's Masses should be recognizable as the rituals that are the tradition and heritage of our Church. For example, certain responses should stay the same. But something special every now and then in the children's liturgies will make them more meaningful.

### What's in This Book

The first part of this book gives general suggestions for how to vary liturgies. The second and major part contains ideas for weekday Masses based on the readings in the *Lectionary for Masses with Children*. This lectionary is no longer in print. If you do not have one available, you will still find this book helpful. The Scripture references are provided for the readings on which each plan is based. This enables you to use them and the suggestions related to them for a Mass. On the other hand, if you prefer to stay with the readings given in the adult lectionary, you will find all of the readings used in this book listed in the back. Planners and homilists can easily see if the day's readings given in the adult lectionary are included in this book.

It's helpful to know that the 1973 *Directory for Masses with Children* states: "If all the readings assigned to the day seem to be unsuited to the capacity of the children, it is permissible to choose readings or a reading either from the Lectionary of the Roman Missal or directly from the Bible, but taking into account the liturgical seasons" (43).

Plans for the Masses comprise an introduction, universal prayer, special features to appeal to the children, suggested songs, and ideas for homilies. Not every priest has the ability to speak to children. The presider may be unable to express thoughts in the simple language of children and be unfamiliar with stories and examples that are geared to them. As a result, he may be uncomfortable and ineffective in addressing children. In this case, the *Directory for Masses with Children* allows the presider to permit another adult participating in the Mass to speak to the children after the gospel reading (DMC, 24). The suggested stories, illustrations, and themes provided here will facilitate this ministry for the presider or the person he designates to speak to the children.

The ideas in this book can also be incorporated into paraliturgical celebrations in classrooms and homes. These celebrations usually include readings, prayers, rituals, and songs and are similar to

our eucharistic celebration. Thus they help foster children's understanding of liturgy.

Suggestions are also given for the proper of saints for the entire year, not only the school months, so that this book is a resource for teachers of vacation Bible schools and other summer religion programs.

### Who It's For

This book is for catechists, DREs, priests, ministers of the liturgy, and anyone else responsible for planning liturgies for children. Many of the ideas draw on the imagination and talents of the participants. Sometimes a minor change will color the whole liturgy for children, just as a small adjustment in a kaleidoscope changes the whole scene.

To those so in awe of the liturgy that they hesitate to make such adjustments, I quote what Aidan Kavanagh warned in his book *Elements of Rite: A Handbook of Liturgical Style*: "To be consumed with worry over making liturgical mistakes is the greatest mistake of all. Reverence is a virtue, not a neurosis, and God can take care of Himself."

By making Masses meaningful to young hearts and minds, we enable children to be more open to their power and lead them to love and prize the Eucharist. Most important, we comply with the request of Jesus, "Let the children come to me" (Luke 18:16).

### General Guidelines

Over the years many people have asked for a resource that they could use for children's liturgies, and this book is a response to that plea. The titles, numbers, and page numbers referred to in this book correlate with the readings in the Liturgical Press edition of the *Lectionary for Masses with Children* (Weekdays). If you do not have this lectionary, ignore these references.

The order of readings in the lectionary and also in this book is as follows:

WEEKDAY LITURGIES FOR CHILDREN

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***Proper of Seasons***

The Season of Advent  
The Season of Lent  
The Season of Easter  
Ordinary Time

***Proper of Saints***

Feasts, Memorials, Solemnities

***Commons***

Apostles  
Martyrs  
Doctors, etc.

***Sacraments***

Baptism  
Confirmation  
Holy Eucharist  
Reconciliation

***For Various Needs and Occasions***

Beginning of School Year  
End of School Year  
In Thanksgiving  
For Vocations, etc.

The Table of Contents lists all of these topics in detail.