



## **We Should Be Worried When We No Longer Hear the Noise of Children in Church!**

There are different practices and viewpoints regarding child attendance at the Divine Liturgy. During my childhood I was used to attending half of the service and spending half of it in Sunday School. Young kids spent the first half in church, and then went to Sunday school after the sermon. The older kids began Sunday school when the Liturgy began, and then came to church for the last half of the liturgy. This practice continues today in some Orthodox parishes. In other Orthodox parishes, children attend the entire liturgy and go to Sunday school either before or after the service. It does seem as if the trend is moving more towards children being in church for most of the liturgy and not half of it. For some this idea may be hard to accept because one might believe that children can't handle being in church for an hour and twenty minutes. Kids get antsy, bored, and restless. They complain that church is too long and might even cause a scene. This is not an easy issue for parents to deal with. It is not uncommon to see parents remove kids from church because they have become too disruptive. Parents may consciously come late to church so the kids don't have to be there as long. They may also bring toys with them to church for kids to play with to keep them quiet. The problem with these approaches is they do nothing to help the child connect with worship and to pay attention to what is going on. Some might conclude our worship is irrelevant and too abstract for children to embrace. I would like to speak some on this issue and talk about some things parents can do to help their children in this area.

To begin, I believe it is in our created being to worship. At all ages it is in our very being to give glory to the One who made us. I remember when I was at seminary in the early 1990's I would watch the young children of married students who were attending seminary. It was amazing to see two year old kids going up to icons, or to the crosses on the table vestments and kissing them with no prompting from their parents. I remember seeing a four year old swinging around a play censer (made for him by his parents) imitating the priest. When I was five or six years old, I would wrap a blanket around me and stand in front of our RCA Victor Black & White TV thinking that was the altar and act like I was serving the liturgy. I have also seen these same behaviors in parish life. So I do not accept the notion that young children are incapable of attending the Divine Liturgy or Vespers and to worship God. We don't need 20 minute kid services, or to turn the Liturgy into a Disney DVD to "get the kids to be interested." So, what can be done to connect our kids to worship in the Orthodox Church?

The first thing that can be done is once an infant is baptized in the Church, regular attendance at Liturgy needs to begin immediately. When I say regular, I mean weekly. One to four times a year is not regular or frequent. Some may think that since an infant can't rationally understand the liturgy, that it is best to wait until the child is older and until Sunday school begins before attending church services. In fact some might believe Sunday school is the key thing that needs to happen to teach the child about church. Sunday school is a good thing but for centuries the Orthodox Church went about its business without the idea of a "Sunday school." The shaping and forming of Christian habits and behaviors begins in the home. If it is not happening there, no Sunday school program will be able to make up for what needs to be happening in the family home which is to be a small icon of the Church. If these habits aren't being formed in a child's early upbringing it will negatively impact on their being able to connect with the Divine Liturgy.

When we anoint infants with Chrism at their Baptism, we anoint their eyes, ears, nostrils, mouth, chest, hands, and feet saying "The seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit." These are the senses that the Holy Spirit



empowers so that we learn about the world we live in and the One who made it. That learning process doesn't begin at the "age of reason." It begins at birth and it is an ongoing process. Young children take in what is around them. As we accommodate to them, they learn to adapt to the world they live in. I think there is a difference between a three year old child who has been to church regularly since Baptism, and one who has been there only once or twice. The latter is more likely to have difficulty because they are reacting to a new environment that they don't know and thus can't trust. They are not being bad or misbehaving they are reacting to a strange situation and their behavior is perfectly understandable.

Unfortunately regular attendance at services is still no guarantee. There is a qualitative issue also that needs to be addressed. What are we doing while we are in the liturgy and to what end? We are reminded of the Pharisee and Publican and how the Pharisee was a great temple person who did all the right things but for the wrong reasons. He was prideful, arrogant, and had no love for his brother. Being in the temple on a regular basis did him no good. If we are going to help young children to get in touch with that God-given desire to give glory to God, we adults need to be coming to Church with that same desire. Worship is the time to "lay aside all earthly cares that we may receive the King of All who comes invisibly up borne by the angelic hosts." Worship is the time where Martha needs to take a nap or needs to serve Mary so that Mary can be allowed to shine forth to ponder the things of God and "keep them in her heart." Worship is to be an encounter with our Lord Jesus Christ. But when we come to church after the sermon, bring toys, and spend a lot of time in the narthex, this serves only to pacify the child and make others happy because they don't hear the noise. These activities don't help connect a child to worship. I am not just speaking of our church in Rossford; this is something that I have observed in many churches so I am not trying to pick on any particular person. When I hear the "holy noise" of children in Church it makes me very happy because it tells me the parish has a future. We should be worried when we no longer hear that noise!

Neither should we expect young children to sit there quietly and act like adults; because they aren't adults. For a child, waiting for one minute is like ten minutes. Most children six years old and under have short attention spans and they do require more attention and support from their parents during the service to help them connect with what is going on. So what can a parent do as they come to church on a regular basis? Here are some suggestions.

**1. Sit up front when you come to Church:** When you sit up front, it enables a child to see more clearly what is going on in the service. For young kids between two and five we have books in the pew to describe what is going on during worship. Read that with your child as the service is going on and point out how what they see in the book is actually going on in church. For older children (eight to twelve) we have Divine Liturgy books for youth in the pews that they can follow which do an excellent job of explaining the liturgy with words and images.

**2. Feel free to move around in the Church:** Instead of removing a child from church because they are noisy, walk around with them in the nave and show them the church. This is a very good thing you can do with children between six to eighteen months old. I have no problem with parents roaming in the space of worship and showing their children the icons on the iconostasis and on the walls of the church. Young children will drink this up and love it. This is not avoidance; this is encounter. Let them see, let them touch the icon, kiss the icon yourself, and eventually your child will kiss it. Tell them these are holy people in our church who followed Jesus. Remind your young child who has been baptized that Jesus lives inside him or her.



**3. Appropriate items to bring with you to Church:** I am OK with parents bringing in a coloring book with biblical or liturgical themes in it. As a child is coloring it quiets his or her soul and it allows one to listen to what is happening on another level. Whatever items you bring they should be relevant to worship and have a Christian theme to it. However the coloring or other diversion should not go on the entire service. There are certain times that children need to stop and focus on the service. Have them pay attention to the Little Entrance, the Scripture readings, the Sermon, the Great Entrance, the reciting of the Creed, the consecration of the Bread and Wine, and the reciting of the Lord's Prayer. Encourage your child to sing along with the choir responses to the service. Be an example and sing along with the choir as well! Remind them when they should be making the sign of the Cross during the service. As your children get older, have them get involved in being a greeter and passing out the bulletin, passing the collection tray, or to go up to the choir loft and to sing with the choir. As the boys get older they may desire to serve in the altar. Finally as children do get older, the expectations for their attention to the service itself should be higher.

**4. Is it OK for young children to have food?** Our understanding of preparation to receive Communion on Sunday is that we fast from midnight on (except for health reasons). This rule applies to those who are developmentally capable of doing this. I see no reason why children seven and older cannot observe this rule. For children under 18 months old, I have no problem with parents having a small zip lock bag of cheerios to feed them during the course of the service and for them to still come to communion. But as they do get older they do need to be weaned from this.

**5. Is there a time when it is appropriate to remove a child from the service?** This should always be a last resort when all other attempts that I have suggested above don't seem to be helping. The noise and the disruption of the child need to be of such a magnitude that it is clearly rebellious in nature and mean spirited. Most parents will know when that point has come. When a child needs to be removed they need to know they are being disciplined for their behavior in church. I don't think they need to be spanked, but neither should their time in the narthex be a time for fun and amusement. If you want to put him or her on time out on the stairs (if they are developmentally able use this as a learning experience) and explain to your child they must sit there until they can tell mom or dad they will be good in church, this seems to be a good thing to do. You may need to tell them what being good means by describing how they need to behave. I would also encourage people in our church who don't have to deal with kids to be tolerant and merciful in their attitude when children become disruptive at times.

Please don't take the above as hard and fast rules. There are exceptions to the above. I would be glad to further discuss this topic with parents who have concerns in this area. I realize we are doing the best we can with what talents God has given us. I do ask forgiveness if any of my words have offended anyone. I hope my words will be received as helpful and informative.