



Time to Go to Church: A Time to Fear and Dread?

It's Sunday morning. The Church bulletin says that Church starts at 10:00am. It's now 10:30am. You're walking to the car to take yourself and the kids to Church. You're arriving at communion. You're embarrassed to come in that late, but you're less embarrassed (after all, half the parish comes to Church late) than you would be by your children's behavior if you stayed for the whole service.

You walk in during the Lord's Prayer. A few minutes later, thank God, communion. Now you can go. Lunchtime!

Whining, crying, screaming, playing, talking, jumping, falling, bumping heads, chattering, running (or trying to)... I don't know about you, but these are all things I'm afraid my two and a half year old son, John, is going to do in Church. But every week, multiple people in the Church tell me how well behaved he is. And with the exception of a cry here and a bump there, he is, by God's grace, really well behaved in Church. Not only is he well behaved, he pays attention and participates! And no, we don't arrive at communion. We arrive at or around the Doxology and we stay through coffee hour. Our Divine Liturgy begins at 9:30am and ends around 11:30am. He spends a solid two hours in Church without leaving.

To add a little more perspective to this great miracle, I'm a presbytera, so for all intents and purposes, I'm a single parent on Sundays. And John is extremely active, even for a two year old.

So how do I do it, you ask? No, there is no magic that comes upon a priest's child that makes them better behaved. In fact, I've known lots of PKs that are quite badly behaved...

Here's my take on bringing children to Church: How is a child ever going to learn to behave in Church if they aren't *in* Church? How can we expect our children to prioritize Church if we don't? What does it say to our children that we are on time for everything- school, work, movies, soccer practice, baseball games, concerts, luncheons- but we are NEVER on time for Church (except for Pascha- gotta get a good seat!)?

What message does this send? Children pick up on these things. It is this quiet, childlike observance and understanding that I rely on to help me keep him calm and engaged during Church services.

John and I talk about Church a lot. At most, we go to Church three times a week (that's during special seasons or occasions), but usually just on Sunday mornings like everyone else. Compare this with daycare or school every day, and kids can easily forget from one Sunday to the next. So that's tip number one.

Talk to your child about Church as often as you can. Liken things to Church. Make Church sound fun and exciting. For kids, it can be fun and exciting. John loves Church because there is SO MUCH to look at, listen to, and do. Keep Church in the forefront of their minds.

Don't just talk about Church outside of Church, however, talk about Church **INSIDE** Church (quietly, of course). Explain what's going on to your child as it happens. Give them the ol' play by play. If you don't know what's going on, educate yourself ahead of time. Most Divine Liturgy books have some sort of explanation in them about the service, borrow one from the parish and read it. Or look it up online ([Here's](#) a good place to start).

One of the biggest weapons I have in my arsenal of good-behavior-inducing techniques is where we sit in



Church. We sit up front. In the front row. For every service. This is for two reasons. Imagine being a child about three or four feet tall. How boring would Church be if all you could see was the rear end of the papou sitting in front of you? Granted, he's a nice papou who likes to make you laugh, but seriously. You may as well be listening to a cd! When we sit in the front row, John can see everything!

And the nice papous and yiayias are reason number two that we sit in the front row. Sitting up front minimizes the distractions. He's not distracted by people coming and going. He's not distracted by people to whom he'd like to go say hello. He's not distracted by 500 people trying to make him laugh. As long as he faces the front of the Church, all there is for him to see is what he should be paying attention to- the service.

The Divine Liturgy, in Greek, is known as "I Theia Litourgia", which means "the work of the people pertaining to God." Work of the people. Does that we should be doing something? Indeed, we should.

And so this is the primary way that I keep John behaving well- by engaging and involving him in the service. When the priest blesses us, censes us, or bows to us, we bow. When we hear the words "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," we do our cross. When we commemorate the Theotokos, we do our cross. When the small and great entrances happen, we do our cross as they walk by and name the chalice, patten, censor, cross, and fans (and even name the alter boys and priests if we can). When the priest tells us what to pray for in the litanies, we say, "Lord, have mercy," or "Grant this, O Lord." We say the Nicene Creed and the Lord's prayer together. We sing along with the choir. There is plenty to do! If worse comes to worse, we point out all the icons and go to the proskinitaria off to the side of the solea and venerate the icon.

Does this mean that John doesn't have bad days? Of course not! He's two! He has his moments, sometimes entire services, where he is not so easy to get along with and doesn't want to pay attention.

That's where mommy's bag comes in to play (kind of like Mary Poppins' carpet bag!). The most important thing in Mommy's bag- our look book. I bought a \$3 photo book, in which I put pictures of our family, the priests, the bishop, and little laminated icons (the saints are our family, too!). I change the icons and pictures out every once in a while so that he stays interested.

I also bring some snacks, like Cheerios. Now this may be controversial. Some people say that bringing snacks is not appropriate. But here's my feeling about it. If he were seven years old, then no, it wouldn't be appropriate. But toddler-hood is a critical time for children. They are learning about the world around them. Don't we want them to learn about the world through the Church? They are learning to speak.

Don't we want them to learn the language of the Church (and no, I don't mean Greek- though learning Greek is all well and good too)? They are learning appropriate behavior. Don't we want them to learn appropriate Church behavior? I desperately want the Church to be part of his learning experience during this most important time. In which case, I'm willing to compromise a little (like the Church does- *oikonomia*, right?) and bring a few Cheerios to avoid having to remove him from the service. I also have a few picture books or cars that he likes. And I'll let him play with them if I have to. But this does not mean that I stop engaging him. I'll give him a break to play for a few minutes, but then I attempt to get him to put it down and pay attention.

One more thing. Don't be self-conscious about your child making noise. I have friends who don't come to Church for more than twenty minutes at a time because they are so afraid of offending someone with their kids' little chirping and their noises. But those chirping and little noises are how the children talk to God. Those noises are *their* Divine Liturgy. Don't deny your child the experience of being in God's presence



because someone doesn't like that they are trying to sing along with the choir! Of course your child wants to sing! The priest is singing, the chanter is singing, the choir is singing... The children want to sing too!

If someone chastises me for allowing him to make noise and not taking him out, I respond by apologizing for the fact that they were paying attention to John instead of the service. I do it lovingly and tactfully, of course, and then I ask them how he's supposed to learn to behave in Church from the baby room. I also take a moment to educate them about the fact that in many churches (especially in Greece), there is a lot of movement. People walk all around the Church to venerate the icons, venerate the relics, etc. It is a foreign concept to Holy Orthodoxy which is unique to America that we stand in one place like bumps on a log and don't make a sound.

And before you say it, yes, I know that a lot of kids cry because they want to leave and when you take them back to the Church they start crying again. This is the other reason I don't take John out of Church. He doesn't even know that leaving is an option. If he knew that it were and cried because he wanted to leave Church, then taking him out would be rewarding bad behavior by giving him what he wants. Oh yes, he screams or cries out in Church every once in a while, to be sure. But I only take him out when it's clear that he won't stop and we're bordering on *really* distracting other people. He knows that if we have to leave because of bad behavior, it is not going to be a fun experience, and we're going to go right back in to the Church as soon as he's quiet.

I know, I make it sound easy. Believe me, it's not. It is really hard work. It takes constant vigilance during Church to keep him engaged. And I'm sure that for the first few weeks, even months, your child will hate it (though they'll hate it less if you sit in front where they can see!). But don't give up. They'll get used to it soon enough, and you will see them begin to love the Church and Her services. And then *you* will love every minute of worshipping with your child!