

Is the front of the church the right place for a family?

It all happened really quickly. The pacifier flew out, and the screaming started. In my haste to vacate the pew, I tripped over the kneeler and knocked the cane of the elderly woman sitting behind me onto the ground. It made a lot of noise.

The priest, thankfully, carried on with his homily as if the little dramedy hadn't just taken place only feet in front of him.

I then began my long retreat to the back of the church – long because I was trying to avoid the sets of eyes that were undoubtedly lingering on both myself and my small, vociferous counterpart, and long because, well, it's a long nave, and we sit at the very front.

We haven't always made our weekly home in the second pew (the first being reserved for the handicapped) during Sunday Mass. Before our son was born, we were pretty average “middlers.” As long as we had a good line of sight and weren't way in the back, my husband and I were able to engage in worship, and it worked for us.

Fifteen months ago, when the little bundle came along, we shifted tactics. I had the strong opinion that sitting up front, even from an early age, was very important. It stressed, I believed, the importance of the liturgy and also would help keep our little man engaged with what was going on. Instead of the backs of a bunch of heads, he would be looking at the main event: at the altar, at the priest, at Jesus.

For a while, this worked pretty well, and he would sit placidly on my lap for, if not all, at least the majority of the Mass. As we have entered more deeply into toddlerhood, though, things have gotten less placid. And then came the

scream-cane-trip combo heard and seen 'round the world, or so it seemed at the time. The embarrassing event led my husband and I to reconsider our strategy. Was our small family too intrusive and distracting for others during Mass? Would a shorter, quicker path to the exit be easier on us and more respectful of our fellow parishioners? Was the front of the church really the right place for our family to be?

After an extensive discussion of the pros and cons, we considered a final point, made by Jesus himself:

“Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked them, but Jesus said, ‘Let the children come to me, and do not prevent them; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these’” (Mt 19:13-14).

Our attention was refocused. If we want our son to fall in love with Jesus, we shouldn't take him farther away from Him. We should bring him as close to Him as possible.

Sitting at the front of the church isn't right for everyone. But for us, for right now, we think it's right. So we'll keep at it, and we hope and pray that those around us will be patient with and have mercy on an active toddler and his two sometimes frazzled but well-meaning parents.

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