Who should stay and who should go? Sunday Mass problems

Lumen Gentium, the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, famously calls the Eucharist – the Mass – "the source and summit" of Christian life. But what is a Catholic to do when Mass (indirectly) is also the source and summit of one's weekly frustration?

My wife and I have six children – ages 16, 14, 10, 4, 2 and 2 months – and though it's taken some work, five of them behave excellently at Mass. Our 16-year-old is a regular cantor, and her brothers, the next two in line, serve at the altar most weeks. When our 4-year-old is in the pew (and not in the bathroom or at the drinking fountain) he sits quietly enough. And while the baby is tremendously distracting to those around her, it is only because of her adorableness.

So that leads us to our 2-year-old, Gemma.

Every week, we know what's coming, so we try to plan ahead. We pack her diaper bag like it's a toddler survival kit: books, a sippy cup, a couple of quiet toys, a few different snacks, a coloring book and crayons. All of these are things she enjoys when she's not confined to the cry room or in a pew flanked by parents or siblings. But in church? She has no interest.

Things start off well, but five minutes into the homily, Gemma generally has plowed through the snacks – or crushed them into atomic-sized particles and ground them into the carpet. It's at this point that she starts getting a little squirrely about her imprisonment, but squirrely very quickly turns to irritated, then upset, then irate – and loud.

Because I'm the one most bothered by her behavior, it's

generally my job to remove her from the pew and flee to the narthex, where I spend the rest of Mass either trying to convince her to be held, or following after her whispering, “Don’t touch that,” “Don’t touch him,” “Don’t touch that baby,” “Yes, that is a statute of Jesus,” “Yes, he has a sheep,” “Yes, he does have feet like you do,” etc.

It’s exhausting, and, selfishly, I feel as though I get very little fulfillment out of Mass, as I’m too busy corralling or correcting Gemma to hear the readings or the homily or to participate in what feels like any meaningful way. While I fully understand the grace that comes with the reception of the Eucharist, it can be defeating when you feel the need to go to confession immediately after Mass.

Because I’ve been weakened by the weekend fights, the following question sparks a conversation that takes place each Saturday afternoon in our house – and, I’m assuming, in thousands of other homes across the country: “Are we splitting up for Mass?” (Translation: I’ll stay home with Gemma while you go and immerse yourself in worship; and tomorrow morning, we’ll switch.)

As a father trying to form his children in the Faith, I get why bringing my kids – all of them, even the 2-year-old – to Mass every weekend is important. But I also feel as though, for Gemma, the Mass experience right now might be counterproductive. We can remind her that it’s a place we go to praise God and meet him in the Eucharist, but she knows it more as a place where she gets yelled at – in a whisper – every week for an hour.

There is no right or wrong way to navigate these waters, as every parent and every child is different, but to those moms and dads and grandparents who are fighting the good fight every week, I salute you.

St. Gemma, I beg you, pray for us!

This article originally appeared in OSV Newsweekly.