

GOT MASS? NINE WAYS TO DEEPEN YOUR FAMILY'S SUNDAY EXPERIENCE

Eighth in a yearlong series

Why going to Mass is worth the effort

Getting to Mass on Sundays feels optional to many families. After all, if we don't show up for work, we may lose our job; if our children miss school, they'll have make-up work; skipping a practice means you don't play in a game. But missing Mass? Will anyone even notice? Is there a consequence?

Since the very early years of our church, Christians have gathered on the Lord's Day, Sunday (which early on was a workday), to praise God. Attending was never optional; members were expected to be there, but they also wanted to be there, to have the privilege of participating that Baptism gave them.

Today the church teaches that attending Mass is so important that we look upon it as an obligation for Catholics, barring a grave cause for absence (illness, for example).

But why? Shouldn't we go to church because we want to, not because we have to?

Our one constant: Weekly Mass grounds a family. We know that, in any given week, both wonderful and terrible things happen. Kim aces her biology test; Stephen's team loses in the quarter-finals; Mom gets a promotion; Dad gets a questionable report from his doctor. Going to Mass every Sunday, no matter what, reminds us that amid all of the uncertainty and changes, we gather to give our week to God, to praise and thank God for all the gifts we've been given. We return to the Eucharist because this is who we are and what we do.

Discipline: When we believe something is beneficial to us, we do it often. We eat three meals a day, brush our teeth, exercise (hopefully anyway), and we make sure our kids finish their homework. While it's true we may not always feel like doing any of the above, we discipline ourselves to do things we know are important.

Going to Mass each week requires discipline. We may not know exactly the problems we're preventing by spending time listening to God's Word and receiving the Eucharist each week. Studies show, however, that couples who attend church together each week are less likely to divorce. Regular churchgoers have a lower incidence of depression than other people.

"The few times that we've skipped church just because we're busy, we seem to have a bumpier week," says John, father of four. "My wife and I seem to bicker more. I think it's because during Mass, you're thinking about becoming a better version of yourself. A week without Mass means you didn't take any time to do that."

John's comment points to one more reason: Mass is not a self-centered consumer event. It's about praising God and taking part in the meal that reminds us who we are: the Body of Christ. That gives us new energy to help transform our world. The Mass nudges us toward "becoming a better version of yourself," which is really about others, not just ourselves.

Our gift to our community: The Catechism of the Catholic Church calls Sunday worship "outward, visible, public, and regular," and "a testimony of belonging and being faithful to Christ and his church." Every week we show up at Mass is a week that we say to our community, "We believe." Faith can be contagious.

"When I see parents with kids younger than mine at Mass, I think to myself-if they can do it, so can I," says Nancy, mother of two preschoolers. "A family doesn't even know I'm watching them, but I am. And for whatever reason, that inspires me to keep coming."

A great mission: Writing in U.S. CATHOLIC, Greg Pierce offers a reason that he uses with his older children: "I point out ... that what they are searching for is a guiding principle, what I call a 'mission worthy of their lives.' I tell them that the church has such a mission to send them on, the very mission on which Jesus of Nazareth sent forth the original disciples. That mission is to make this world a better place, a place more like the way God would have things." Pierce notes that we need a community to accompany us and send us forth, which is exactly what the Mass does each week.

-Annemarie Scobey

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