

## FAITH IN FOCUS

"Baby girl, no!" My 14-month-old daughter's hand briefly paused in the air, dripping water back into the dog's drinking bowl. Her hand went to her head, to her chest and completed a toddler's awkward sign of the cross. My husband and I were horrified by the slobbery dog-water blessing. But we were also awestruck: We had never seen her cross herself at church before, and we had not yet tried to teach her.

My now 18-month-old comes to Mass with my spouse and me about twice a week, on Sundays and on Thursdays with my school community at work. Mass has always been part of the rhythm of our life together, and her existence has shifted that rhythm in every way possible. Nothing about having a kid is easy, and navigating worship and prayer with our daughter has not only been a challenge but has required a real assessment of what our commitment to our faith and the church really means.

On Good Friday last year, my daughter struggled during the evening service, crying more than she ever had in Mass. I bounced and cooed at her, hoping to avoid any stares or grumbles. I looked up to see my spouse giving me the very stare I was trying to avoid. Stunned and angry to feel shamed by my own husband, I booked it to the back of the church to try to soothe her tears on my own. Pacing at the back of the church with her, livid with my husband, I could not help but keep thinking, "Why did I even bring her?" Caught up in my own shame and anger, I just wanted to go home.

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As I tried not to cry, another parishioner went out of their way to come up to me and simply thanked me for bringing her. That moment of encouragement reminded me that I knew why we brought her. My husband and I had a quiet moment of reconciliation that night and reaffirmed why our daughter was at Mass that evening and every week. This was the promise that we made at our wedding and again at her baptism: to bring her up in the faith. Bringing her every week risks crying or blowout diapers. But this is also where she will learn the sign of the cross and the creed and what it means to pray and serve in community.

Kids learn through repetition, and they imitate what they can see. My daughter insists on holding a hymnal and "singing" along with everyone else. The past few months she has even started raising her arm like the cantor. She insists on holding one hand out and one hand in mine as we pray the Our Father. She bows her head along with the congregation during the Eucharistic prayer. I would love to claim to have taught her these things, but I simply encourage her in what she has learned from sharing in worship with the community. Watching my daughter learn from others has shown me the multifaceted ways God works our lives and has taught me I should not underestimate my daughter, my church or my God.

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She does not yet fully understand the meaning of signing herself every time she dips in her hand in water, whether it is the baptismal font or the water table at the children's museum. She might not understand what we are doing when we pray, but she does recognize prayers as something different from reading a book or telling a story. She has even begun to ask for "more" after bedtime prayers, seemingly seeking the comfort and quiet they signal. She doesn't understand what it means when I tell her I love her, but I certainly won't stop.

The Mass is the source and summit of Christian life, not simply another Sunday program for mature adults. No one fully grasps the meaning of the Paschal mystery, and at every age, we can only hope to grow in our understanding of and love for God. St. Paul reminds us each Ash Wednesday that "now is a very acceptable time." Why would I hold back the opportunity for my daughter to begin to learn in her in way and in her own time?

I am not particularly proud when my kid practices her Godzilla growl during the Eucharistic prayer or displays her belly to the congregation, causing rows of shoulders to shake with suppressed giggles. This is not the time in my life where I will hear every word of the homily, but I do come to know the living God through the lens of my daughter's existence in the world. Every time I try to draw her attention toward what the priest is saying or doing I also refocus myself on what is happening in the Mass and remember why we are there.

I know that parenting doesn't get any easier from here, but I am choosing to remember the gift of the growth God has brought to me through her. I realize that not every person there with us thinks she is the cute little stinker I see. But this is her church, too.