

When I was growing up, on any given Saturday morning in the Fall my dad would burst into our bedroom, awaken my brother and I, and say, "Do you see those leaves outside? Well those leaves are going to get raked today with or without a beating. So what's it going to be?" We would groggily reply, "Without a beating." For the record, my dad never hit us growing up. He could scare us, though! In fairness, my poor saintly mother never really got any of us kids to do anything without either threatening or going berserk on us. That being said, as an adult, I love being a priest. I live a regimented life, I have fairly good habits and I'm not on a therapist's couch blaming my parents for how my life turned out. I totally get their personal shortcomings and why they needed to threaten us in order to get anything done.



I mention that because it is relevant to modern family life and parish life in general. Last weekend, St. Peter's celebrated First Communion for about forty-five children. Afterwards, many people told me it was a beautiful Mass. At the end of the Mass, in keeping with parish tradition, I invited the children and their families to come back the next day, wearing their First Communion outfits if they chose. I told them I would ask them to stand at the end of the Sunday Masses to be recognized.

A total of *six* children and their families showed up for their Sunday obligation the next day.

I must say that I wasn't the least bit surprised. This past Friday was Confirmation, and I'm guessing that the numbers would be equally as bad if I had invited the Confirmed to come to Church this Sunday and stand at the close of Mass. I understand that some school and religious education families go to neighboring parishes. Nonetheless, by any standard the numbers are still lousy.

I'll address how I think this can be fixed in a moment, but first, a digression. I'll take my fair share of the responsibility for the poor Mass attendance among the Religious Education children. For various reasons, I have been reluctant to force them to come to Mass on Sundays. That stated, no matter what you might think of me, you'd be hard pressed to find a priest more attentive to visiting the school and religious education classes. Throughout my priesthood I have been told by teachers, principals, brother priests, religious sisters, even parents, some of whom are the toughest and most uncharitable critics of them all, that I have a gift for going into a classroom, engaging the students and teaching our Faith. Up to this point, I've been content with being the "fun uncle."

I've actually become known for it. I coined the phrase for the priest who riles up the kids and then leaves the classroom. I basically got the idea from my mom who grew up in an era where Catholic schools were staffed by nuns as teachers. When I was newly ordained she told me, "Patrick, you have 800 kids in your Religious Education program, you have these kids once a week, just go into the classrooms for a few minutes and give them a good memory of a priest. Trust that God and someone else down the road will do the rest." It's not a bad strategy but it's not a perfect one either, especially when you are the pastor. I'm coming to learn that you have to be a "Father" to them too, and often a father has to make demands on the kids.

I just finished reading *To Light a Fire on the Earth: Proclaiming the Gospel in a Secular Age* by Bishop Robert Barron. He is one of the most famous priests in the world, and his book is awesome. I highly recommend that you read it. I'm a huge fan of his. I disagree with him on one point, however. Bishop Barron's re-evangelization strategy is built around the saying "propose, don't impose." I think that approach has its place. I also think it comes from the ivory tower of academia, and it simply does not work in a parish. Let me give you an idea why: The overwhelming majority of couples I marry live together before marriage. I'm routinely told stories about how they got engaged while on vacation at some exotic location or stories about their home life together; and they feel absolutely no sense of shame in telling such stories to a priest. The overwhelming majority of the parents of the children I baptize don't go to church, and I never see most of them before or after the Baptism. The majority of the children in Religious Ed don't go to Sunday Mass either. In my opinion, this has almost nothing to do with not having "Welcoming Committees" or "Children Masses." It has everything to do with having no standards. Priests and religious are partly to blame for this, but to understand the situation you would have to examine how the Church has generally handled these cases for the past fifty years. For better or for worse, the strategy has been not to *impose* but to *propose* the beauty of our Faith (Bishop Barron's method).* The idea is that if people feel welcomed and not judged they will eventually come to Church. Well, that strategy has been a massive failure. The numbers don't lie.

At Catholic School Identity meetings and local Priest Meetings, I have raised the idea of making Mass mandatory for Catholic school children. The sense I've gotten is that the majority of principals, administrators and priests don't want to go there. I also think there's some vague fear of legal action that the Church cannot win. Perhaps that is the case, but I seriously doubt it. However, we have to begin to re-examine our failed strategy. "Propose, don't impose" is a massive failure. A father doesn't say to his children, "I think you should consider raking the leaves today. It's a beautiful day outside and you will have a wonderful memory of doing it together for the rest of your life." Basically, he threatens your life, limb or these days, the use of technology, to get the job done. That's often how fatherhood works.

But lest you think I'm totally negative about this situation, I do see hope. Bishop Barron cites an example of when he was a young priest/professor at Mundelein Seminary in Chicago. He would wear a suit and tie in class. Eventually as more young men entered the seminary inspired by Pope Saint John Paul II, the students wouldn't stand for his casual approach. Because of their piety and respect for the clergy, the seminarians essentially "obliged" him and other priest/professors to wear clerics. I sense the same vibe with young priests. If you think I'm conservative, you haven't seen anything yet! The younger generation of priests, once they become pastors and/or bishops, aren't going to stand long for the current situation. Also, the young faithful Catholics are generally just as traditional.

The future leaders of the Church seem to want more rules, not less. They want tough challenging homilies and bulletin articles. They don't want to hear stories about sharing your ice cream cone with someone. The perceived laxity of Pope Francis isn't so much inspiring them but galvanizing them to be more traditional. Priests need support to implement needed changes. If I got tougher, it would cause a riot for the first year. So who has my back?

In the meantime, I think priests need to pray more and think deeply about their priestly identities. Does being a father require being a doormat, or is it being a bit tough and respected? Certainly fatherhood involves being warm and loving. However, a father also gives tough love. A father protects his children. He instills good habits into them. He tells us what's important and what's not. He tells us who and what to avoid. He gives us a code to live by. He is also not afraid to raise a little heck with his kids when needed. My yard would never have gotten raked if my dad didn't give my brother and me that extra incentive of a threat. In the words of St Thomas Aquinas, the worst reason to do something virtuous is out of fear of punishment, but it also tends to be the most effective reason for doing the right thing in a fallen world. Perhaps, I need to act on his wise observation.

* *In this article, I used Bishop Barron as a bit of a foil. I suspect he would agree with the substance of what I have written.*