

TODDLERS IN THE TEMPLE

By Psa. Stephanie Subu

Parenting in the pews is no doubt one of the most difficult struggles Christian parents have. What is even more challenging is how to balance prayer and worship with the natural tendencies young children have with squirming and vocalizing. Most young children are only aware of their own presence and have not developed the social graces to recognize that those around them are worshipping, praying and wanting stillness/quiet. It our job, as parents/caregivers, to develop these social graces within them and to act on their behalf when they are not yet able to do so on their own.

In my own experience, I struggled with my deep desire to be “present” in the sanctuary (especially as a priest’s wife), not wanting to succumb to the call of my children needing a few moments of “my time”, away from God. I was still a selfish being, not wanting to give up my worship experience or concerned I would miss out on a good sermon. I ignored God’s call that my role as a parent was to raise them in the church gradually and gently; not giving into my pride and stubbornness by making my behavior towards my children a battle of wills. I would get extremely defensive at the slightest criticism I received from someone who dared to speak ill of my children’s behavior. Deep inside, I was embarrassed because I felt like a failure in not understanding or knowing the right response to handling a meltdown or talkative child (especially being “the wife of the priest”— some parishioners presume God bestowed upon me on my husband’s ordination day the ability to know these things). I would sometimes resent my children and would blame them for taking me out of the church, rather than just be thankful they can have small “snippets” of Divine Liturgy, which they can gradually build upon.

It took a very gentle soul to minister to me, in understanding that there are many seasons in the life of being a Christian parent. Some are very joyful and others a struggle. She said, “God gave us children to have us learn to give up our own stubbornness and pride and transform it into forgiveness and humility (to ourselves, to our children, and even to those who give us the ‘the look’ when our children are acting out of sorts).” At the time, I didn’t know what she meant, but hoped that God would reveal it to me.

He did. It was about my willingness to accept that “season of my life” where I wouldn’t necessarily be able to be in the sanctuary 100% of the time, but knew that I was doing the best thing for His children by giving them church in small doses... vs. none at all (an option too many parents end up doing, which has a negative impact on the family as a whole). I had to remember I was “training up a child in the way he should go” and it was my responsibility to have them learn stillness of the heart and mind. This took discipline on my part and consistency (which takes lots of work!) Any time one of my children showed signs of talkativeness or a meltdown (I knew these cues all along, I just ignored them hoping it would go away), I immediately took them out of the church. No negotiations, no “shhhhing” (it just added more noise) and definitely not “waiting it out”. To my surprise, it didn’t take long for each child to understand that loud voices and talking were not acceptable behaviors during the service. Yes, children sometimes feel they **MUST** share something with you. I taught them to whisper very quietly in my ear (which made me smile because it tickled, which they responded positively towards) or quietly point to what made them so curious.

Yes, the “terrible two’s” and “troublesome 3’s” will pass... more quickly than you think. Some families are blessed to have helpers, friends or extended family willing to help share the burden. Most are

not so fortunate. The key is to let those who help you do that same as you would. Share with them cues when a child needs to take a break and step outside for fresh air or get some of their energy out downstairs. Even though a child walking around the church may be helpful, many still find it distracting, especially up towards the front where all can see. I used to stand in the back so I could quickly make a graceful exit and not feel the awkwardness of stumbling through the pew with a child about to explode. There are lots of things a parent can try. Talking with other parents you know that have children who can stay through a liturgy is good; ask how they managed. They might have wonderful tips to share, as well as understand your concerns.

Sometimes, as the priest's wife, I have to give a sign to a family to take their child out (having been "deputized" by my husband to this duty). Believe me—having been there, done that—I know exactly what runs through a parent's mind when asked to take a child out of the sanctuary. Parents like to be in control and not like others telling them what to do. However, please know that Father and I know what it is like and we will also try to do our best to help with parenting children in the pews.

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