

What is a Family Mass?

Do we mean a mass where small children are welcome? But this should be every mass.

Do we mean a mass where the liturgy is dumbed down to what we think will be understandable to a small child?

The problems with this are:

1. This may be suitable for a school mass or other group which comprises mainly of children. Families are not mainly children; they are a mixture of adults, teens, older children, and some small children. If we only consider the younger children as having needs, then it is not a family mass at all, it is a children's mass. (see permissions for use of children's mass in church documents)
2. Even if you succeed in engaging the younger children, they will quickly grow out of this Mass as it offers no further development for them. Thus we see the widespread problem of retaining the interest of children, (and because of that, their families) in coming to Mass.
3. A knock-on effect is that we then try to provide another age focussed mass for teens – as if teens were not part of their family, thus separating them from their parents (the primary educators in the faith) just as they are most vulnerable to being ensnared by the worldliness of the culture.

What should distinguish the family Mass from other Masses?

First we have to ask what is distinct about the family groups we are aiming at. A family could, for example, be a group of elderly, unmarried sisters living together. Is this the family we have in mind? No, our focus is generally on families with children, and with the new directives in the diocese regarding sacramental preparation, with an emphasis on families who are preparing children for reception of the Sacraments of Penance, Eucharist, and Confirmation. Nor can we ignore those families where all are preparing for baptism.

So what is the *task of this family* which we are trying to *assist*? The task is primarily evangelistic and catechetical. The parents are seeking to bring their children into a vibrant living relationship with Jesus and teaching-through-doing how to worship God,

wholeheartedly and reverently, through the liturgy. The task of the Family Mass then follows from the task of the family. The Family Mass exists *to assist parents* in evangelising and catechising their own children.

But wait – some parents (maybe many) are not actually equipped themselves to do this. They may be hoping that the parish and school will fulfil this task for them. But this cannot be. No parish or school, no matter how great, can replace the role of the parents. This is very obvious if you consider how many children will be making their *second* communion within a week of their first. Despite the prodigious efforts of school and parish, many children will not return even once after their first communion. Those who do, not surprisingly, will be the ones that are already regular attenders, who practise their faith at home in a living way. So a secondary task of the family Mass can be to evangelise the *parents*, in the contact facilitated by sacramental preparation. Unless the parents in these families are reached, it will be rare for the children to be effectively evangelised or catechised.

Principles

I would suggest the following principles guide the development of the family Mass.

1. Know how the Mass should be – aim to move towards it step by step. The primary focus of liturgy is worship, everything should be ordered to make the liturgy as beautiful, and as closely conformed to the norms established by the Church as possible.
2. We acknowledge that families are of all age groups, and that all of these people come to Mass to be fed. Without neglecting the needs of the younger, we also ensure that the full riches of the liturgy are available.
3. By humbly acknowledging that it is the parents who are the first educators of their children, we undertake to do and teach nothing which would make it difficult, or downright contradict the good teaching a parent is doing. For example, parents should teach their children to be quietly reverent in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament. Some parents do – and their efforts should not be frustrated by other adults who give a bad witness in this respect. Many parents do not, mostly because they have lost an understanding and the cultural awareness of the meaning of the

true presence, and of appropriate behaviour. The witness of faithful families, supported by the witness of the rest of the church can go a long way to assisting these parents first to learn and then to implement this reverent practice.

4. The family Mass, insofar as it is surrounded with, or contains, moments of explicit catechesis, should give priority to catechesis which leads towards understanding, assimilation and practise of the worship in the liturgy, according to a firm grasp and understanding of the truths of the faith, in particular the sacrificial nature of the Mass, the true presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the hearing of God's word in Scripture, and the grace received to live out our call in our families, among the local church community and in the world. Our orientation in liturgy is important – we are standing together focussed on God, not looking at ourselves and neglecting Him.
5. As far as is possible the family Mass should be a training ground for the whole family. Beginning with the very basics will suit both children and adults, given the woeful state of catechesis. We should not be afraid to direct some of the catechesis towards parents, confident that they are the ones best suited to passing it on to their children. Rather than seeking to replace the parents we should be strengthening them to take their proper place as educators of their children.
6. Due respect should be given to the child's capacity for wonder. This capacity opens into a natural, simple prayer which if fostered leads in a gentle way towards contemplation. The natural rhythm of the liturgy, with its proper music, its times of silence, the engagement of all the senses, contribute to the development in the child (as well as in the adult) of that gift of wonder and awe in God's presence. Tendencies to make the liturgy too 'busy' can run counter to this process; therefore additional catechetical or explanatory elements need to be judged wisely and carefully so as to point towards the central mysteries. It is a mistake to decide that the central mysteries of the Mass are beyond the comprehension of the child, and therefore other less relevant points should be picked out for emphasis.
7. Invest in the families and children who practise. This was a principle of St John Bosco – to look at the leaders among the children and to form them, knowing that they in turn will become the evangelisers of their peers.