Opinion

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by Mike Jordan Laskey

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On a recent Sunday morning, a fellow church-goer glowered at my wife and me on his way out because our toddler had been a bit rambunctious during Mass. "Well," I thought, "never coming back here again!" A single, unwelcoming, judgmental glare isn't usually a make-or-break thing when it comes to church membership, but our family has just moved to a new state and we are parish shopping. And you only get one chance to make a first impression.

I'm a little bashful to admit to church shopping. I like the idea that Catholics don't belong to congregations but to parishes, geographic areas as much as physical church plants. Historically, Catholics haven't picked where we go to Mass. We just show up where our home address dictates. But times are different now: Parishes are closing or merging throughout much of the country, making ties weaker. Folks like us are transient and relocate more often than in prior eras, and our culture's emphasis on individual choice means people travel to find communities they like best without so much as a second thought.

I remember hearing a debate about parish shopping at a Catholic conference I attended years ago. One panelist argued that we should just go to our local parish and offer our gifts to make it better. The other panelist, who had compiled a list of best parishes for young adults around the country, just said, "You've got to go where you're fed." At this stage of life, I find myself in the latter camp. I am leading my family's church-shopping endeavor. Here is my confession.

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Each place we walk into, I deeply hope to see at least one person I recognize, which I would interpret as a sign from God.

We barely know anyone in our new area, but as my wife and I both work for the institutional church, our Catholic rolodex is full. I instinctively scan each church we enter in search of someone we could say hi to. This must reflect my deep longing for community. In a new place, we are so anxious to meet people and make connections. Starting almost 100 percent from scratch is intimidating.

I am sizing everything up before Mass starts: How crowded is it? How diverse in age and background?

I wish I could say I go into each weekend experience with a totally open heart and mind, but I have developed multiple snap opinions before the opening hymn begins. If we're the only family with small kids within a five-pew radius, for instance, we probably haven't found our new parish.

When our toddler starts squirming and shouting, what's the reaction in the surrounding pews?

Maybe it was unfair to dismiss a whole parish because of one angry look from a parishioner. But I want a place that has formed its community to welcome kids with smiles and warmth. I want the pro-family message reiterated so consistently and so forcefully by the parish leadership that no regulars would ever dream of throwing glares around. (Maybe the parish in question has done that and our displeased friend was a visitor. Maybe.)

We just can't make it through 20-minute homilies.

Usually, when the kids squirm and make noise (are you noticing a theme yet?), I try to shush them right away and, if all else fails, my wife or I scoop them up and head for the gathering space. But I admit that if the preacher has gone on too long, stacking tangents on tangents like a Russian nesting doll, I will be less vigilant with my shushing. I feel like the kiddo's audible objections are just voicing what the rest of us are feeling inside and the preacher should just go ahead and take the hint. Seriously, though, while I don't like 38-minute Sunday Masses that feel transactional, we just can't make it through 75-minute affairs.

The single most appealing thing about a parish is if everyone is singing.

I'll forgive a lot of shortcomings if you've got a parish that sings. Have you ever encountered a parish that sings that's not active in a host of additional ways? On the flipside, have you ever seen a parish where nobody sings that's dynamic otherwise? I didn't think so. Plus, if singing really is praying twice, as St. Augustine might have said, my wife and I need to cram as much prayer into as short a period as possible these hectic days.

I am way too judgy.

I hope people we have over to our new house aren't judging our family and our decor the way I judge the parishes we've visited. So mean! No place is "perfect," and "perfect" isn't even the right word to apply to something like a parish. Faith communities, like all families, are messy and flawed. Truth is, we won't really feel at home until we commit somewhere and put ourselves out there. And we won't commit somewhere until I stop complaining so much. As I drive the van to Mass this Sunday, I really should repeat as a mantra the first line of a prayer misattributed to St. Ignatius Loyola: "Lord, teach me to be generous."

[Mike Jordan Laskey is senior communications manager for the Jesuit Conference in Washington, D.C. He is the author of *The Ministry of Peace and Justice* (Liturgical Press) and lives with his family in New Jersey.]

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