Spirituality



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"Where are those kids going?" my 5-year-old daughter whispered. She was studying the backs of the gaggle of children scampering toward the sanctuary of the church.

"Children's Liturgy of the Word," I began. "Uh — they go to learn about Jesus and Mary and the saints." A beat, and then I added: "Do you want to go? You can."

My daughter shook her head, but her eyes didn't stop absorbing the scene. She's shy by nature, likes to study a situation before jumping in, understand it thoroughly, know the players. I'm much the same way — which is probably why I never went to Children's Liturgy of the Word as a kid.

But she surprised us after Mass. "I think I'd like to go and learn about Jesus with the other kids."

My wife and I frantically nodded in agreement. The church we'd attended was not our own, but we'd be darn sure to be in attendance the following week if it meant our otherwise timid daughter would eagerly volunteer to go learn about God.

All that week we prepped her, told her one of us would make that long walk to the front of the church with her, hand-in-hand. When the moment came, she didn't back down; she swallowed hard, took my wife's hand and up she marched.

How wonderful, I thought, to see kids — and my kid, no less — excited to wander up and meet God in community!

But here's where our story takes a turn.

The priest presiding that day gestures toward the 12 or so children gathered, a wide sweep of his arm, and says, "Now children, what do we do first? Genuflect, your right knee, please, turn this way." He goes on for a few more seconds to this gathered group of youngsters about which knee to lower to the ground, which direction to face, and then sends them off with their teacher with barely a blessing.

And I sigh.

On one hand, that priest was absolutely right. I was an altar server long enough to appreciate the kind of reverence that is appropriate for moving about the sanctuary. I myself taught other altar servers. That's Jesus there, after all, truly present. Genuflecting, kneeling, bowing, making the sign of the cross — all the *activity* of the Mass — is important. It forms our religious imagination, reminds us that our bodies

are integral to our prayer; that God meets us there in the fleshiness of our human selves and leaves no part of our humanity out.

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I want my daughter to know that, to learn how to bring her full self to the prayer of the Mass.

But here's the thing: That priest had 15 seconds to say something meaningful to a bunch of kids about God. To make an impact. To stir in them something that would call them back again and again each week — not out of obligation but out of desire. To remind them that, yes, we recognize Jesus truly present in the Eucharist. But also Jesus is *so darn excited to see us* he's practically busting through the tabernacle to hug us — and that act of genuflecting could just as well be a way to brace our very selves from the wild, reckless love of God barreling toward us.

I'm not sure that instructions on which knee should hit the floor quite got the point across. It felt like a missed opportunity.

Few of us are in the position to give 15 seconds of inspiration to 5-year-olds on a weekly basis. But we all have been given the challenge — the privilege — to share the Gospel. And too often, we lead not with the love of God, the mystery of God's creation, the utterly mind-boggling fact that the Spirit pulses through every single thing seen and unseen and that we're invited to participate in this world dripping with grace.

Too often, we lead with rules and regulations and proscriptions and the kinds of facts you might find on the Wikipedia page for the Catholic Church.

Simon Sinek, in his much-acclaimed TED Talk "How great leaders inspire action," says, "People don't buy what you do; they buy why you do it and what you do simply proves what you believe." He's talking about brands, about how to sell *stuff*, but his advice is relevant for those of us interested in spreading the Gospel.

It's easier to whittle away our time telling people *what* they should do if they want to find God, if they want to live as God desires. It's easy to remind people which knee to genuflect with. It's a whole lot harder to tell people *why*.

But we have to rise to the challenge. The proverbial 15 seconds in front of a bunch of 5-year-olds is not long: What can we say about *why* this God of the universe is worth knowing? Do we even have an answer ourselves?

Because if we have that answer, if we share it in a meaningful way, then what we do next — the genuflecting, the sign of the cross, the rosary, the visits to the homeless shelter, the donation of our time and talent and treasure to works of charity and justice — will point to what we believe. To *who* we believe in. And people might just become curious enough to ask how a simple gesture like touching the floor with your knee can engage our full selves in the ongoing activity of God in our world.

Unfortunately, my daughter did not return to the pew wondering why she was told to genuflect — and I'm not sure she's remembered to do so since.