Opinion
Guest Voices



Contributor Nicole M. Perone and her baby Rosie are pictured at church. Perone describes her parish as "committed to being truly and holistically pro-life and pro-family." But the reality, she writes, is that "this experience is all too rare." (Courtesy of Nicole M. Perone)



by Nicole M. Perone

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When I was pregnant, I lost count of the number of times I would lumber through a parking lot or out of a store, only to be cut off by someone rushing to pass me or whizz by me in their car, pregnant belly be damned. (The Venn diagram of "cars who almost hit a pregnant lady" and "cars with an overly political pro-life bumper sticker" was almost a circle.) It even happened at Mass at various parishes, where I almost got bowled over in the post-Mass rush out.

It's true to say that there is a lack of pro-life culture in our society, but not in the polarized way you might think: I have simply found that few people think about what it means to be pro-life beyond the issue of abortion, and what it looks like to welcome life in all of its forms.

What do we do to ensure that pregnant women and families are celebrated and accommodated for? How do we avoid the deification of procreation, knowing that other women might be suffering in silence, and honor the woman herself not just as a vessel for childbearing? These questions resonated in my heart throughout my pregnancy and thereafter, but I know it is not as simple as a list of action items: It is a choice of culture.

I worried that our daughter's experiences of Mass would be a horror story in the same vein. Too many times in my personal and professional life, I had heard or experienced the ways the church — which we had both served for our entire careers — turns people away in the most significant gateway moments.

All of our fears were put to rest by a parish committed to being truly and holistically pro-life and pro-family. When we reached out to our pastor, a good friend of ours, to say we would be bringing Rosie to Mass on Palm Sunday (one of the craziest days of the liturgical year!), he offered the use of his residence to arrive early and feed the baby in a comfortable and quiet setting away from prying eyes and distractions. He encouraged us to make ourselves comfortable and take our time acclimating her. The four clergy who reside there welcomed us with open arms and cries of delight to

meet the baby, taking turns holding her so we could get settled.

All around our pew during Mass, people waved at Rosie or approached us to compliment her. I admit that I often found myself bracing for a conflict, because of how common it is to have (perhaps well-meaning, perhaps not) parishioners, often much older than me, make snide comments about noisy children or about young people showing up to Mass. Thanks be to God, we were spared this!

This is not just a love letter to my parish or a celebration of our friend who is a priest, tempting though that is. What is the most disconcerting part of what should be a happy testimony is the reality that this experience is all too rare.

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It made me reflect about how many parishes trot out their "pro-life" materials in October, and around the March for Life, but do not truly express a celebration for life in its daily, messy, lived-in form? How many anecdotes have we heard of priests making comments about children's sounds, or relegating families to a cry room, where ancient dirty toys and flimsy folding chairs hardly create a prayerful atmosphere for a family with children to worship? I fully believe parents should not abdicate responsibility for their children at Mass, but even the best soothing and discipline can fail in the face of a child still learning to moderate their feelings and volume.

How often are young adults who slide into a pew greeted with tone-deaf comments about the lack of young people in church, but no space is made for them at the proverbial table to engage and lead? Can't be surprised, then, when they don't come back for Mass, let alone to be married or to baptize their children.

I would challenge a pastor or parish staff claiming hospitality as their parish's cardinal virtue to invite someone they trust to attend Mass anonymously at the parish as a case study: What is the lived experience, and is it truly hospitable?

A few weeks after Rosie's attendance at Mass for Palm Sunday and Easter, my husband and I returned to our parish (sans baby, who spent a fun night with her grandparents) to celebrate our pastor's elevation to monsignor. Settling into the pew without a diaper bag, car seat, and dozens of burp cloths, I was able to look closely at the readings, music and paraphernalia in the pew advertising the happenings of

the parish. In every pew, a card from Loyola Press had been added, entitled "All Are Welcome: How to Be A Church of Open Doors." It identified that newcomers and people with various needs and abilities might join your parish, with some suggestions of how to be more inclusive and accommodating so that all could participate in worship together.

I found myself choking up, thinking about the value of feeling welcome. Whether your child has special needs and you wish to bring them to worship, or whether you have fallen on hard times and need to feel the closeness of community, your parish should be the first place that opens its arms to you. This is what it means to be truly pro-life and pro-family, not some billboard hawking a political stance, but a way of being that transcends the polarized.

While our good experience is due in no small part to our professional and personal relationships, and discerning spirits in choosing the "right" parish for the job, all Catholic families of every makeup deserve the same. We need, and deserve, a church where there are fewer horror stories of the experiences of pregnant women and young families, and more celebrations of moments that express that all are truly welcome.