

## ONE

# ON PAYING ATTENTION

### HOW MANY TIMES HAVE I TOLD YOU THIS?

When you are three and five years old, there are certain things that hold greater value for you than the directions your mother is giving. In my sons' experience, these things have mainly to do with rocket ships, fishing, and catching one's imaginary train. On a given weekday morning, there are things I am bound to repeat ad nauseam—make your bed, get dressed, finish your juice, and brush your teeth. Who wants to put on shoes when there's a fire to fight? Why get dressed when the other guy in the room is clearly yearning to be pounced upon and tackled to the ground?

After I say the same thing three or four times, rather than say it again, I'm equally as likely to ask my kids how many times I've repeated myself. My older son, the pragmatist, will offer an accurate account. My younger son is less attached to reality, and I can expect the same answer from him every time: "a hundred and a half." It sure can feel like it.

If you are of as little patience as I am, being ignored is aggravating. Most of the time when I get worked up, the boys remain

unfazed. I wonder why I bother. But I want the best for them. I want them to be safe and happy. I want them to learn to love in all things.

Considering the same situation in the context of my relationship with God is humbling, to say the least. I started going to daily Mass in college and have been a faithful participant, barring illness and short postpartum recovery periods, for a dozen years. I hear the Word of God a lot. I serve as a lector and spend the week leading up to my slot reading and rereading the text, trying to understand it from the inside out so I can proclaim it in a way that will, through the wisdom of the Holy Spirit, move hearts.

Apart from the readings, so much of the Mass itself—the prayers, the responses, and the hymns—is taken right from scripture. Daily Mass is a beautiful way to be enveloped in the Word of God. When I am fully engaged, I delight in the different voices proclaiming, praying, and responding; in the Hosanna, when our voices join with those of the angels and saints; and in the sign of peace, when we offer an act of charity to our neighbors. I think of the places in the world where this isn't possible on a daily basis, where it's risky to participate in worship at all. It is an incredible opportunity to have the Mass celebrated just up the street from my house every single day, without any fear of danger for going.

And yet how often do I hear the word of my Father during Mass and ignore it? I hear that I cannot “serve God and mammon” (see Matthew 6:24), but my mind wanders to a work project, and I let it. I hear that I should not worry about what I will eat or wear—simply look at how the birds or the lilies are cared for—but I make a mental grocery list anyway. I hear that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, but I spend the time in his

presence overly concerned with the details of my own life. I think through emails I need to send. I reconsider my schedule after Mass and wonder how it's all going to fit in. I hear that I must love my enemies and forgive more times than I can count, but instead I rehash that conversation that upset me and imagine what I should have said. I hear Jesus beg the disciples not to hinder the children from coming to him—no exceptions—and then lose my peacefulness with one of my own children, who is loudly picking the kneeler up and down for what might actually be the seventy-seventh time.

My humanity, my concupiscence, and my self-centeredness get in the way. Most days, I have the spiritual attention span of a goldfish. I am easily distracted from the tremendous supernatural mystery I have the gift of being a part of every day. Given, taking little ones to Mass is rarely a peaceful experience. Someone has to go to the bathroom; someone else drops a hymnal; there is poking and giggling and shouting over who's sitting in whose seat. It would be easy to say these are the reasons I miss what God's trying to tell me. To some extent, it is, and that's okay. But there's more. If I'm honest with myself, it's because I'm not really trying hard enough.

The thing about my boys is that more often than not, they hear what I say. They simply choose not to listen. Hearing is inactive. Listening requires a response. And that response often requires a sacrifice they're not inclined to make. Young children—and let's be honest, many of us adults too—are ruled by their own desires. They change activities on a whim, always excited for something new and novel to entertain them. They haven't yet internalized the paradoxical rewards of putting someone else before yourself. Sometimes I wonder if I really get it yet.

On the rare occasion that I am at Mass alone, I still have trouble paying attention. The length of my nails becomes fascinating as the prayer of consecration I have heard hundreds of times begins yet again. That text I've been meaning to send is suddenly of utmost importance and must be mentally drafted, stat. I can think of a million different things, but I struggle to focus on the mystery, the miracle happening before my very eyes.

When I do manage a glimpse of this, I am consistently awe-struck at everything the Mass includes. It is the ultimate prayer. We plead forgiveness, we pray for our neighbors, and we consume the Word of God in the readings and in the Eucharist. As a community, we praise our Lord, recognizing all he is and all he wants for us. This is medicine for the troubles in my life outside the church's walls. This is strength to live my vocation as he intended. This is sustenance for the journey of life. This is everything I'm looking for everywhere else. It is a necessary time away from the things that have a tendency to consume me and divert my attention from my reality as a daughter of God, from the relationship my Father wants to have with me. I was made to love and be loved.

I'm not always excited about going to Mass. It seems too much effort some days, and it feels as if I have too many other things to do. I go through the motions out of habit and with only a vague understanding of what it is I'm doing. I don't make the effort to give my full attention because I'm not totally convinced of what I'm going to get out of it. I still doubt. I still question.

If this is all I'm putting into Mass, it shouldn't be too surprising that I'm not getting much out of it. I cannot earn graces. God pours them out at his will, but I need to be receptive to them if they're going to make a difference.

Mass is not supposed to be a passive endeavor; it is an opportunity to give thanks for the gift of Christ's life on the Cross. It's the spiritual battery power I need to live my life with God as the center. It is time to engage with my community, to profess shared belief, and to encourage each other on the journey to holiness. It means admitting I mess up, which can hurt. It means being honest about not being able to do it all alone and being okay with that, even being joyful because of it. It means sacrificing something of myself to experience the goodness my Father wants for me.

Much of what my boys ignore from my mouth are admonitions to be careful, to not hurt anyone, to take care of each other, and to choose a loving response. My Father wants the same for me. He gives me everything I need to do it. But you can't force someone else to listen to you. Trust me; I've tried.

The repetition of the Mass is not permission to zone out. Rather, it's a reiteration of a message I desperately need to hear. I am a sinner, but I am loved just as I am. Despite what the world tells me, I am enough. The love of Christ is not something I need to earn. I couldn't, even if I tried. But I can choose to respond to it. I can hear, listen, and act. It means I have to give up something of my own, be it pride, time, energy, or the control I think I have over how my life is going to look. It means putting God first.

This is so much easier said than done, both inside and outside of Mass. I hit the snooze button instead of starting the day with purpose and direction. I choose to flip on the television in the evening rather than spend that time in prayer. I worry about the shape of my body or the clothes on my back rather than how to give generously of my blessings to those in need. I lose my cool when the toddler refuses to sleep during a carefully

planned nap. I get upset about something related to work and let it manifest as a short fuse with the kids.

Even when my children don't seem to listen to me, even when I run out of patience, I never run out of mercy and love. They can always, always come back to me, no matter what. This is even more powerful when it comes from God. He is infinitely patient; he is patience itself. I can never mess up so much that he won't take me back.

They say misery loves company. When I turn to the scriptures, I see how many people over the centuries have heard God's Word and ignored it for one poor reason or another. Beginning with Adam and Eve, then with the Israelites, and on into today, we find that the things of this world consistently fail to satisfy the basic yearning of the human soul. And yet we continue to look to them for solace from the challenges and heartaches of life.

The good news is that in every situation, God returns to his people with mercy. He knows we're going to mess up. He knows it's going to be a bumpy road, but he never stops offering us opportunities to renew our connection with him.

Modern life can pull me in a thousand different directions, often before I've managed to eat breakfast. The times I am most aware of this is when I am preparing for Confession. I go through the commandments one by one and consider how I have disobeyed them. Oh, let me count the ways! There is always a theme running through my transgressions—I have chosen myself before the other, be it God, my family, or a stranger. I have failed to trust my Father. He gave me the answer, but I didn't really listen. I either thought I knew better or blatantly ignored him and thus put myself and others in danger of one kind or another. God's answer? "I forgive you. Come back to me. Let me show you again what love truly is."

I do the same for my children. After a time-out and a hug, I am often compelled to look my children in the eye and say, “Listen, I love you. This, whatever happened, is going to be fine. We’ll try better next time, okay?”

I want them to make good choices, but I also want them to know that their worth does not hinge on what they do or don’t do. They are priceless and precious simply because they are children of God. How do I get that through to them? I’m still struggling to understand it myself.

The Mass reminds me. The Confiteor lets me say I’m sorry. The readings give me instruction. The Eucharist gives me the energy to pursue holiness. By listening, by taking it all in, I become more receptive to God’s Word and his will for me. When I pay attention, when I give my heart, mind, and will to my Father, I can hear what he’s trying to tell me, even if it’s for the millionth time.

When I get off track, I don’t need to wait for a big moment of revelation to draw closer to our Lord again. It can be tough amid all the responsibilities I have as an adult and as a parent to remember that I am first and foremost a child of God. He wants to spend time with me, converse with me, celebrate with me, and grieve with me. All of this happens in the course of the Mass. His work in me did not end when I became a parent; indeed, parenting is the holy work to which I was called before I drew a single breath.

My kids are prone to blame their distractions on something else, sometimes even each other: “I was reading this.” “He was pushing me.” “He took that toy.” “I wanted to see how this worked.” In every situation, I tell them, they have a choice. No one else decides to what they give their attention. There may be

temptations, and I may need to help remove them, but the choice of where to look and what to respond to is always, always theirs.

This is advice I need to heed on a deeper level, both to better engage with the Lord and to be a better example to my kids. I can stop reading through news on my phone to spend time in the morning in prayer. I can reject worldly thoughts while I contemplate our Lord and his Blessed Mother in eucharistic adoration and the recitation of the Rosary. I can look through the Mass readings the night before so that I am better prepared to engage with the liturgy and draw on the graces of the Holy Eucharist to sustain me in the day ahead.

I know I will slip up. I will still get distracted. I see my faults, my disobedience, and my refusal of God's love and believe that these things diminish my worth as his daughter. But God doesn't see things that way. He loves me more perfectly than I am able to love my children or myself. His forgiveness is greater than mine; his mercy, more complete. He offers his love anew every day, in every circumstance. This is what I am striving to emulate.

Time and again, God has proven to me that he is trustworthy, love-worthy, every-moment-of-my-day-worthy. And yet just as many times I have chosen to be consumed with something that seems more entertaining, more gratifying, and less costly. I have chosen to fight an imaginary fire rather than respond to the call of the parent who loves me with his whole being.

If I am to live my vocation well, I will dispose myself to hear the voice of my Father. God has seen it all before. And he loves me still. If only I am willing to listen, he is teaching me at Mass and in the ordinary moments of the day how to love my kids in the way that he loves me.

The good news is that even after he's said it a thousand times, he'll say it again and again to draw me back to him: "You are mine. I love you. Follow me."



## REFLECT

- What do you choose to hear rather than opening yourself up to God's Word? What activities take the place of daily prayer time?
- How can you reorder a moment of your day—morning, afternoon, or evening—to focus on hearing God's Word? What difference do you hope it will make?
- How does contemplating God's patience with you change your perspective on another relationship in your life, be it with a child, your spouse, or another family member or friend?



## PRAY

God, help me to truly listen to the words you have already spoken so many times to me. Help them to settle into my heart and soul. Give me the grace to love your Word and to put it into action today.



## CALL ON THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

The Bible does not record a single word spoken by St. Joseph, adoptive father of our Lord Jesus Christ. When the angel came to him and asked him to stay with Mary and to care for her and the child Jesus, his silent affirmation helped God's will come to fruition. St. Joseph's parenting depended on listening carefully to his own Father. That faithfulness translated into the courage to respond, for the glory of God.

St. Joseph, pray for us.