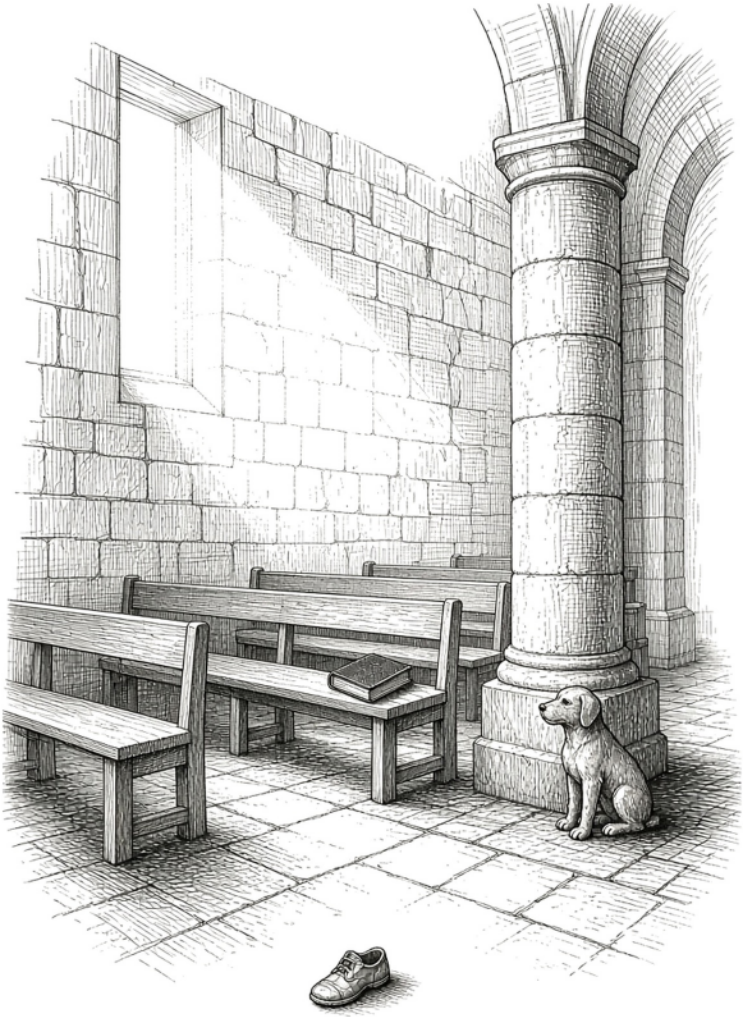
SILENT HOMILIES

# The Parish That Wanted Them Anyway

*An invitation to parents whose children will not sit still in church*



*Silent Homilies*

# Little Treasures

# The Parish That Wanted Them Anyway

*An invitation to parents whose children will not sit still in church*

# Before You Begin

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If you have a child who will not sit still, you already know the sound of a shoe hitting the floor at the wrong moment. You know the biscuit that appears just as the church goes quiet. You know the look you give your husband when the child slides under the pew and will not come out.

This little book is for that morning. It is not a programme for producing silent children. It is an invitation to bring them anyway, and a reminder that the Church wanted them before they knew how to behave.

Read it as a letter you can put down. If you are tired, begin with the chapter on walking out and coming back. If you are preparing a child for Confession, begin with the chapter that says it is not an exam. Each chapter ends with a reflection, one small practice, and a short prayer. The practice is an invitation, not homework.

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# *Part One · Come in*

*Chapter 1*

# The invitation

†

If you have a child who will not sit still, you are not the first parent to wonder whether church should wait until they are older. The wondering is understandable. Mass asks for attention. A small body is made for movement. Those two facts meet in a wooden pew, and the noise can feel, in the moment, like failure.

The Church's older language does not begin with failure. It begins with a sentence the disciples found inconvenient. Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them. The disciples had their reasons. Children interrupt, and they do not follow the programme. Jesus heard those reasons and still told them to let the children come.

A parish that wants children anyway has not given up on reverence. It has remembered who the Guest is. He was carried into the Temple as a baby, and at twelve He gave Mary and Joseph three anxious days before they found Him there. You are invited, then, not to win the morning, but to bring the child. The bringing is already something, even when the child is facing the wrong way.

## A Reflection

†

Belonging comes before good behaviour in the Gospel, and that order is easy to quote and hard to live at ten past ten. A child does not earn a place in the church by sitting still. Baptism has already given the place. The wriggling is what a body does while it is learning a room.

Mary kept things in her heart before she could have explained them. A child can receive a mystery long before he can give an account of it. That does not make noise a virtue. It means the Church is not waiting for a finished person before she lets him in.

*A practice for today*

Bring the child this Sunday, even if last Sunday ended in the porch.

*A short prayer*

*Lord Jesus, who was once a child in arms, receive the child I am struggling to bring. Amen.*

*Chapter 2*

## When the nave was not a concert hall

†

Pews are younger than most people think. For a long time the nave of a parish church was an open floor. People stood, knelt on the stone, leaned on a pillar, and stepped out to deal with a baby. Fixed seating arrived slowly, and in England it often arrived as a paid privilege. Once everyone had a seat, movement began to look like bad manners.

The older building also had to live with the village. Parish business pressed close to the door. Churchwardens complained about disorder. That is not an argument for turning Sunday into a fair. It is a reminder that holiness, in Catholic memory, has often shared a room with ordinary life instead of waiting for the room to be empty of it.

When a wriggle feels like an insult to the building, it can help to know that the building has survived worse, and was for a long time made for bodies that were not yet trained. Reverence grew inside that roughness. It did not always wait for silence before it began.

## A Reflection

†

A seat can teach us to treat the church as a place we hire for an hour. The older floor was harder on the knees and kinder to a child who needed to move. Neither arrangement is the Mass. The Mass is what happens at the altar.

If the pew makes you feel that your family is spoiling a performance, remember what the room is for. It is not a concert hall that happens to contain a sacrament. It is a place where a people stands around a sacrifice, some of them still learning how to stand.

*A practice for today*

Notice one old thing in the church, a stone or a font, and tell the child it is older than the pews.

*A short prayer*

*God of old stone and new noise, make this building large enough for us. Amen.*

*Chapter 3*

# Dogs, benches, and other creatures

†

Dogs in church sound like a joke until you meet the records. In late medieval and early modern parishes, working dogs came in with the people who owned them, because Sunday did not include a kennel. The animals barked. Sessions and synods complained.

In some English parishes a man was paid, out of the churchwardens' accounts, to put dogs out of church. Scottish kirk sessions did the same, and the session at Aberdeen fined people for bringing dogs to the sermon because the barking took the people away from the service. The complaint is useful. It proves the dogs were there. It also proves the Church did not think the barking was the liturgy.

You do not need a dog to recognise the problem. A child with a biscuit at the consecration is in the same family of interruptions. The old answer was not to close the door on the village. It was to keep the Mass, and to deal with the creature.

## A Reflection

†

A parish that has seen dogs and still believed can survive a dropped shoe. Humour helps, and so does a limit. The point of the old dog-whipper was not that animals were welcome at the altar. It was that the people who owned them were.

Your child is not a dog, and the comparison should stop there. The child is baptised, and the noise is still noise. You do not have to pretend one of those things away.

*A practice for today*

If a small noise escapes this Sunday, let it pass before you apologise for the whole family.

*A short prayer*

*Creator of every creature, give us the humour of people who have seen worse and still believed. Amen.*

*Chapter 4*

# Do not hinder them

†

Jesus' welcome of children is not a decoration for a baptismal card. In the Gospels the disciples rebuke the people who bring them. They have a theory of importance. Jesus is tired, or Jesus is teaching, or Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem. The child can wait. The Lord answers by placing a child in the middle and saying that the kingdom looks like this.

The sentence is easy to quote and hard to obey when the homily has just begun. Obedience here does not mean pretending that the child understands the homily. It means refusing to treat the child as an obstacle between the adult and God. The child is not in the way of the mystery. The child is one of the people the mystery is for.

A parish that wanted them anyway would arrange its nerves around that fact. Not by turning the Mass into entertainment, which children see through faster than we do, but by keeping a chair, a look, and a greeting that say: you may be here while you learn how to be here.

## A Reflection

†

The disciples were not cruel. They were protecting what they thought was serious. Parents do a version of the same thing when they stay away so that nobody's morning is spoiled. Jesus' answer is not that seriousness does not matter. It is that the child belongs inside it.

If you have ever been tempted to wait until he can sit through a homily, you are standing where the disciples stood. The correction is the same one. Do not hinder them.

*A practice for today*

Read aloud, once, the sentence: Let the little children come to me.

*A short prayer*

*Jesus, rebuke in us whatever still hinders the little ones. Amen.*

# *Part Two · Sacraments for the small*

*Chapter 5*

## First Confession is not an exam

†

First Confession is not an exam, though many of us were prepared as if it were. In 1910 the decree Quam singulari, issued under Saint Pius X, corrected a habit of delaying Communion until twelve or fourteen, and of asking more knowledge for Communion than for Confession. The decree called that delay a mistake. The Eucharist, following the Council of Trent, is a remedy, not a prize for children who have finished the syllabus.

The age named is the age of discretion, about the seventh year, when a child begins to reason. From that time the Church's older law already expected yearly Confession and Communion. A full knowledge of doctrine is not required. What is required is that the child can tell the eucharistic Bread from ordinary bread, and right from wrong, enough to come with devotion.

If you are preparing a son or a daughter, you are not asked to produce a small theologian. You are asked to walk with a person who already knows, in the way children know, when they have been unkind, and who can be told that Jesus forgives. The priest on the other side of the screen is not marking a paper.

## A Reflection

†

A child who comes to Confession with three small sins and a wobbling voice has already understood something some adults spend years avoiding. The sacrament is a meeting. The examination of conscience can be simple. When were we unkind? What shall we say to Jesus?

Grace does not wait until a child can explain grace. That is as true of Confession as it is of Baptism. The priest receives a soul that is still short. That is not a reduced version of the sacrament. It is the sacrament.

*A practice for today*

Before first Confession, practise one kind question: when were we unkind, and what shall we say to Jesus?

*A short prayer*

*Holy Spirit, make Confession a meeting, not a test. Amen.*

*Chapter 6*

## The Bread that was given to infants

†

There is an older surprise behind Pius X. For many centuries, in the East and in the early West, baptised infants received Holy Communion. The Latin Church later changed that custom. She did not condemn it. Eastern Catholic Churches still give Communion to infants at Baptism and Chrismation. Quam singulari mentions the older practice on purpose, so that nobody would think closeness to the altar was a modern softness.

Infant Communion is not the subject of this book. It is named so that a parent in the Latin rite can hear the direction of the Church's heart. She is not trying to keep children away until they can behave like small adults. She has, in more than one century, put the Body of Christ into a mouth that could not yet say Amen without help.

Your restless seven-year-old, standing on one foot in the queue, is not an interruption of that history. He is standing in it.

## A Reflection

†

The Latin Church asks a child to wait until he can tell the Host from ordinary bread. That is a real discipline, and it is not a suspicion of children. The older custom, still alive in the East, says something else that we should not forget: the Eucharist is food for the baptised, not a certificate for the articulate.

When your child finally receives, he is not graduating. He is being fed. The queue, the foot, the whisper about when it will be over, are the ordinary outside of a very old gift.

*A practice for today*

On the way to Mass, tell the child one true thing: this Bread is Jesus, and it is food.

*A short prayer*

*Lord, feed the small, and do not let us keep them hungry until they impress us. Amen.*

*Chapter 7*

## The look from the other pew

†

Somebody will look. A tired parishioner, a grandmother who remembers a quieter church, a person who came hoping for twenty minutes without a demand. The look is real. It is not always unkind. It is also not the teaching of the Church.

You do not have to turn the other pew into an enemy. The person there may have buried a husband last month. They may be in pain. They may simply want to hear the Gospel. None of that makes them the Magisterium. A hard look does not decide whether your child may be there.

What you can do is small. Sit where a quick exit is possible. Bring the quiet toy and the biscuit before the crisis, not as a bribe against God but as ordinary care. And if the look still comes, you do not have to answer it in the car park.

## A Reflection

†

Baptism means this noisy child belongs not only to you but to the whole Church. The parishioner who finds that difficult is still part of the same body. So are you. A look like that can hurt, especially when you are already wondering whether bringing the children was a mistake. But another parishioner's expression does not decide whether your family belongs in church.

A parish learns to want children by practising, not by a notice in the newsletter. Your staying, and their learning not to stare, are both part of that practice. Neither of you has finished it.

*A practice for today*

If you receive a hard look, answer it later with a prayer, not with a speech in the car park.

*A short prayer*

*Give us kind eyes, and heal the eyes that have hurt us. Amen.*

*Chapter 8*

## Walking out and coming back

†

There are mornings when the kindest thing you can do for the child, for the people around you, and for your own temper is to take the noise into the porch, the hall, or the rain. That is not a failure of faith. It is a parent doing what parents have done since the first crying baby was carried out of a synagogue.

The mistake is to treat the porch as the new parish, and to decide, somewhere between the noticeboard and the car, that next week will be easier if you do not come. Come back for the blessing if you can. Come back for the last hymn. Come back even if you have missed the homily and half of the Eucharistic Prayer.

The Mass is not a film you have spoiled. It is a sacrifice that was complete before you arrived, and remains complete if you spend ten minutes calming a storm. If you need a rule of thumb, try this one. Leave when leaving will help the child learn that the room matters. Return before the child learns that the room is optional.

## A Reflection

†

Walking out is allowed. Coming back is the vocation. A child who only ever sees the porch will think the Church is a corridor. A child who is brought back, even red-faced, learns that the door works in both directions.

Christ is not keeping an attendance register of still bodies. He is keeping a people. You are still that people when you are standing by the noticeboard with a child on your hip.

*A practice for today*

If you walk out, walk back in before the end if you possibly can.

*A short prayer*

*Christ, be in the porch and in the pew, and in the walking between them. Amen.*

# *Part Three · How a family stays*

*Chapter 9*

## Cry rooms and the one prayer

†

A cry room can be a mercy. It can also become a place where families are stored so that the church can feel successful. If your parish has one, use it when you need it. Do not let it become the only part of the building your child knows.

You do not need a method. You need one prayer you can actually say while you are looking for the dummy. It can be the first line of the Hail Mary. It can be the name of Jesus. It can be the honest sentence, Lord, I am not doing this well. God is not waiting for a composed parent before He hears the parent who came.

A family that arrives five minutes late, after forty minutes of trying to leave the house, has not failed the morning. They have arrived. That is more than the empty pew manages.

## A Reflection

†

An empty pew is sadder than a noisy one. A parish can survive a cry. What it does not survive is a generation that decided the cry was a reason to stay away. The one prayer in the cry room is already a way of taking part. It is not the whole Mass, but it is not a waste either.

If you only manage the porch this week, you have still put your child where the Church can see him. Next week you may manage more. You may not. Come anyway.

*A practice for today*

Choose one short prayer you can say when the morning comes apart, and use it once.

*A short prayer*

*Mary, who kept things in a noisy house, stay with us in ours. Amen.*

*Chapter 10*

## Saints who were still children

†

The Church has canonised people who did not grow up. Saint Tarcisius, remembered as a boy carrying the Eucharist, was killed on the way. Saint Dominic Savio died at fourteen, after a short life of ordinary school and a very serious Confession. Saint Maria Goretti was eleven when she was killed. They are a reminder that holiness does not suddenly begin when somebody becomes an adult. God can already be doing something very deep in a child.

That sentence needs care. It does not mean your child is a saint because he is small, or that suffering is a gift you should want for him. It means the Church has already refused the idea that holiness begins when a person can sit on a committee.

You do not have to tell a five-year-old these stories this Sunday. It is enough that you know them, so that when someone says children can wait, you remember that the calendar does not agree.

## A Reflection

†

A child saint is not an argument against patience. Dominic Savio still had to be taught. Maria Goretti still had a mother. The surprise is not that they were impressive. It is that the Church looked at short lives and did not call them unfinished.

Your child may never be named on a feast day. He is already named in Baptism. That is the fact the saints illustrate, not a standard he has to reach before he may come to Mass.

*A practice for today*

Tell one true thing about one young saint, without turning it into a lesson about behaviour.

*A short prayer*

*All you holy children, pray for the children who cannot yet sit still. Amen.*

*Chapter 11*

## What they notice

†

Children notice whether adults are glad they are there. They notice the sigh. They notice the apology you make to a stranger before you have greeted your own child. They also notice the hand on the shoulder, the biscuit offered without a speech, and the fact that you came back in.

They do not need a commentary on the Mass every Sunday. A loud theological question during the consecration can wait until the car. What they cannot wait for is the sense that this room is a place their parents wanted to be, and wanted them to be.

Mary kept things in her heart. A child can do a smaller version of that without being able to explain it. The candle, the bell, the priest's hands, the neighbour who smiled: these stay, long after the homily has gone.

## A Reflection

†

What a child receives is often not the sentence we prepared. It is the atmosphere around the sentence. If the adults are enduring the child, the child learns that church is something adults endure. If the adults are glad, even tired-glad, the child learns something closer to the truth.

You will not get this right every week. One Sunday in which you are glad they came is already a catechism.

*A practice for today*

On the way home, name one thing the child did that was not a problem.

*A short prayer*

*Lord, let them notice that we were glad they came. Amen.*

*Chapter 12*

# A word to fathers

†

A father who takes the noisy one to the porch, without making a speech, is not doing something small. He is living his vocation, and he is helping his family take part in the liturgy. The carrying is not itself the Mass. The Mass is what he is trying to stay near.

Saint Joseph does not give us a speech from the Gospels. He stays. He takes the child to the Temple. He gets up in the night and leaves. A father in the back pew, with a child on his shoulder and one eye on his wife, is closer to that than to a talk about fatherhood.

The child will remember the weight of being carried more clearly than he will remember the homily. That is not a failure of the homily. It is how a small body learns that a man stayed.

## A Reflection

†

Joseph's quiet is not an absence. It is a way of being near without taking the centre. A father does not have to invent a devotion for the car park. He has to be there when the shoe comes off and when it is time to go back in.

Helping your wife is not a favour to the liturgy. It is how this particular family is able to be at the liturgy at all. The Church has room for that kind of work.

*A practice for today*

This Sunday, decide before you leave the house who will take the child out if he needs to go, and do it without a discussion in the pew.

*A short prayer*

*Saint Joseph, stay near the fathers who are trying to stay near. Amen.*

*Chapter 13*

## When you cannot manage Sunday

†

There are Sundays a family cannot manage. Illness, a child who is seriously unwell, a parent who is the only carer and cannot leave, a disability that makes the building impossible that week: the Church has always known that some people are genuinely excused. If that is you, you are not failing a test. Speak to the priest. He can help you judge it, and he can bring Communion if that is what is needed.

Ordinary difficulty is different. A child who will not sit still, a morning that took forty minutes to leave the house, a look from another pew: these are hard, and they are not automatically the same thing as being unable to come. The Sunday obligation is real. So is the help the parish owes you while you are trying to keep it.

If you are unsure which kind of Sunday you are having, that is a reason to ask, not a reason to disappear. You can tell the truth about the obligation without loading guilt onto a family that is already tired. And you can be kind without pretending Sunday Mass does not matter.

## A Reflection

†

A parish that wants children does not prove it by telling exhausted parents they are excused from everything. It proves it by making the trying possible: a porch, a word, a priest who will talk it through. The obligation remains. The loneliness of keeping it does not have to.

If this week you genuinely cannot come, you are still part of the parish. If this week you can only come badly, come badly. The Church can hold both of those Sundays.

*A practice for today*

If you are unsure whether you are excused, ask the priest rather than deciding alone in the car.

*A short prayer*

*Lord of the Sabbath, hold the families who cannot come, and steady the families who can only come badly. Amen.*

*Chapter 14*

# Reverence learned slowly

†

Reverence is learned the way walking is learned. A child kneels for seven seconds and then forgets. He asks a question at the elevation. He copies the Sign of the Cross with the wrong hand. Most of this is not irreverence. It is a child learning what reverence looks like.

God Himself accepted years of ordinary human growth. The hidden life at Nazareth is not a gap in the Gospel. It is the Gospel agreeing to time. A parish that wants children has to agree to time as well. We do not lower the Mass so that a three-year-old can follow every word. We let him be three while the Mass remains itself.

You can teach one small thing a month. How we genuflect. Why we are quiet after the bell. Where the toilet is, so that the question does not have to arrive during the consecration. Slow teaching lasts longer than a lecture in the car.

## A Reflection

†

Nazareth is the Church's permission to take years. Jesus did not arrive in the Temple as a finished teacher. He was presented there as an infant, and lost there as a boy, and found again. Growth is not an interruption of holiness. It is one of the ways holiness arrives.

Your child's seven seconds of kneeling are already a start. They are the beginning of a habit his body does not yet own. Leave the habit time.

*A practice for today*

Teach one gesture this month, and do not add a second until the first has had a chance.

*A short prayer*

*Lord, who grew up in a house, be patient with the houses that are trying. Amen.*

*Chapter 15*

# A word to the rest of the parish

†

If you are the person in the other pew, this chapter is for you. You may be tired. You may be grieving. You may have come for a quiet you did not get. None of that is nothing. It also does not make the family in front of you a problem to be solved by a look.

A baptised child is a member of the same Church you are. The parents are trying to do what the Gospel asked. You can help with very little: not turning round, offering to hold a baby for two minutes, or simply deciding that the noise is not a verdict on the Mass.

The parish that wanted them anyway is not only a notice on the door. It is the temperature of the room. You are part of that temperature, whether you mean to be or not.

## A Reflection

†

Hospitality at Mass is not a programme. It is the decision, repeated, not to treat another person's child as an interruption of your prayer. Your prayer matters. So does the fact that the child is not yours to dismiss.

If you have been the hard look, you can become the other thing next Sunday. A nod at the door is enough to begin.

*A practice for today*

If a child is noisy near you, pray for the parents before you decide what they should have done.

*A short prayer*

*Lord, make us a parish that can bear the people You have already called. Amen.*

*Chapter 16*

# Come

†

Come this Sunday. Come with the shoe that will come off, and the question about when it will finish, and the parent who is already tired in the car park. Come if last week ended in the porch. Come if you are not sure you are welcome. You are.

The Church is not asking you to produce a quiet child before she will have you. She is asking you to bring the child she has already claimed in Baptism. The rest is learned slowly, in public, with help.

If these pages have done their work, the next time somebody suggests you wait until he is older, you will have an answer that is older than the suggestion. Let the little children come. Do not hinder them. Then put the coat on, and go.

## A Reflection

†

An invitation is not a guarantee that the morning will be easy. It is a refusal to let difficulty have the last word. The last word, in this booklet and in the Gospel, is come.

We will try again next Sunday. That sentence, said in a tired kitchen, is already a parish being rebuilt.

*A practice for today*

Put this booklet where you will see it on Saturday night.

*A short prayer*

*Lord Jesus, let the little children come, and let us be among the people who do not hinder them. Amen.*

# A letter to the reader

†

If you have read this far, you have already done something many tired parents do not have the evening for. Thank you for staying with it.

Nothing in these pages asks you to become a different kind of family by next Sunday. It asks you not to decide, in the car, that the Church would rather wait. She would not.

Give the booklet to another parent if it helped. Leave it in the porch if your priest is willing. And come, even if the shoe comes off again.

# Sources and Further Reading

†

Scripture: Mark 10:13–16; Matthew 18:1–5 and 19:13–15; Luke 2:22–52 and 18:15–17; Matthew 21:15–16; 1 Samuel 2:26 and 3; John 6:9; 2 Timothy 3:15. Paraphrases are not presented as quotations.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1250–1252, 1261, 1322, 1384–1390, 1427–1428, 2042, 2180–2183. Code of Canon Law, canons 914, 1247 and 1248.

Saint Pius X, Quam singulari, 8 August 1910, on the age of discretion, the delay of Communion, and the older practice of infant Communion. Council of Trent, session 13, on the Eucharist as a remedy.

Eastern Catholic practice of infant Communion at Christian initiation is described in the Catechism, 1233 and 1244, and in the rites of the Eastern Churches.

Pews and the open nave: the late arrival of fixed seating, and the older standing congregation, are standard in histories of the English parish; rented pews are well attested in churchwardens' records. Claims about games inside churches vary by place and have been kept general here.

Dogs: payments to dog-whippers appear in English churchwardens' accounts; Scottish kirk sessions, including Aberdeen, record fines and complaints about dogs at sermons. Monasteries sometimes complained about small dogs kept in religious houses; that detail is a complaint, not a permission.

Saint Tarcisius is remembered in the Roman Martyrology as a young martyr associated with the Eucharist. Saint Dominic Savio died in 1857 at fourteen; Saint Maria Goretti was killed in 1902 at eleven. Their lives are not used here as models of sitting still.

# Making Room

†

A parish makes room. It does not wait until a child can sit still before it finds him a place. A Little Treasure tries to do a smaller version of the same thing. It makes room for a question a tired parent may not have had answered: are we allowed to come like this?

These pages are free to read. They are not a bill for the Sunday you just survived. What they cost is the ordinary work of making them: checking the Gospel, Quam singulari, the canons on Sunday, the old notes about pews and dogs, then writing the thing again until it sounds like a priest talking to a parent rather than a notice on a board.

If this booklet helped you, and if you are able to help Little Treasures stay free, a gift through the Silent Homilies website would be a real kindness. It is not payment for these pages. They are already yours. Nothing is owed.

If you cannot give, give the booklet to another tired parent. That would already be a good use of it. www.silenthomilies.com

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