

ON WELCOMING YOUNG FAMILIES WITH RADICAL HOSPITALITY

One of the most uplifting changes I've witnessed in my 18 months as your Parish Priest is the growing presence of young families at our 11.00 am Sunday Mass. Their presence brings a vibrant energy and a promising future to our parish.

If you are parents with young children, I want to express my deep gratitude for your commitment to bringing your children to Mass. I understand the challenges you face in getting them here, and I want to commend you for making Sunday worship a significant part of your week. Your efforts are not in vain, and they contribute greatly to the spiritual growth of your children and the strengthening of our community.

Getting your children to Mass might be a challenging experience, but it saddens me that sometimes what parents with young children experience at Mass can also be a challenge – so challenging perhaps that it actually puts them off wanting to make an effort.

Since the autumn, I've been advocating for a crucial aspect of our parish's renewal – the practice of radical hospitality. Radical hospitality means going beyond the norm to make **everyone** feel welcome, especially families with young children. How might radical hospitality relate to our young families? It's perhaps easiest explained by saying what it's not.

Radical hospitality doesn't involve showing our annoyance, displeasure, or disapproval verbally, by looks, or by gestures to families with young children when their children are a bit "noisy" or restless.

Radical hospitality doesn't involve indicating to parents verbally, by looks, or by gestures that they and their "noisy" or restless children should take themselves off to the side chapel because "that's the place for crying, noisy, or restless children."

Now, to be clear, parents have a responsibility, too. Parents, when one of your children is having a screaming tantrum, it's probably a good idea for everyone concerned for you to take them to the Welcoming Area or, if the weather is fine, even outside for a brief while until they're more settled. But, having said that, there's a greater responsibility on the rest of us to make young families feel genuinely welcomed.

Radical hospitality implies more than simply being tolerant. It's about **embracing** and **welcoming** our young families. Young children are not a disturbance but a vital part of our church. A church without their laughter and energy is a church that's losing its vibrancy, a church literally losing its future.

And to those parents who choose to go to the side chapel or feel that you ought to go there or that someone has told you that's where you ought to go, I want you to know that I don't want you to be there. I want you to be in the main body of the church with us!

It's really hard to be engaged fully with the Mass if you're isolating yourself in the side chapel. It literally becomes a "Crying Room" or "Play Room". If you want to be in there, I'm not going to stop you, obviously, but I do need you to know that **I do not expect or want you to be in there**. I want you to be worshipping with us in the main body of the Church.

And for anyone sitting here in the main body of the church who's thinking, "*Hang on a minute, Fr Shaun, that's going to mean the church is really noisy.*" Well, yes, it may mean that

sometimes, but rather than moaning about it, let's rejoice that we're a vibrant church full of young families.

Welcoming families with young children into our church with open arms isn't just a matter of good manners; it's something deeply rooted in Jesus's teachings and example. When Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me and do not try to stop them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these," he emphasised the importance of welcoming and embracing children within the community of faith.

Establishing a genuinely welcoming atmosphere for young families involves acknowledging that children are not disturbances to be controlled or silenced but are integral members of our congregation. It means recognising that their vitality, inquisitiveness, and, yes, occasional interruptions are natural signs of their youthful enthusiasm and thirst for knowledge.

By welcoming families with young children into our church with radical hospitality, we not only honour Jesus's command to welcome the little ones but also strengthen the fabric of our community of faith. We create spaces where all are valued, all are included, and all are loved—just as Jesus intended. In doing so, we bear witness to the transformative power of God's love, which knows no boundaries and embraces **all** who seek him.

Fr Shaun