

various ways. In one parish, the commentator invites the children to follow the candle bearers (two youngsters who are standing at the front of the middle aisle) before the priest processes into the church. In another parish, the children remain present through the opening song. Then the presider for children's liturgy is called forward, given the children's lectionary and charged with responsibility for breaking open the word. The presider calls the children to the front and leads them out, carrying the Holy Book held high.

One of my favorite experiences of gathering youngsters for the Liturgy of the Word took place at a parish I worked in several years ago, where religious education classes were held on Sunday mornings between Masses. At the later Mass, the children in church were led out to the Liturgy of the Word by one candle bearer, while another candle bearer walked down the halls of the classrooms. He or she knocked on each classroom door and then opened it. The candle bearers always said, "It is time to hear the word of God. Come and follow me." At that, the children were told to stop whatever they were doing. They were to leave books open and pencils out, and follow the candle bearer silently out of the room. I loved to watch that quiet procession of youngsters going from room to room. It was a great way to impress on them the importance of liturgy and God's Word. And I know that the children enjoyed the drama of dropping everything, and sometimes leaving their teacher in mid-sentence. After the Liturgy of the Word, those children who were not attending the eucharistic celebration, returned to class and were later dismissed from there. The others joined the adults in the larger church and gathered their belongings after Mass.

Introductory Rites

If the children are going directly to the assembly space, an opening song is certainly appropriate. Music is such a natural way for children to celebrate that, even if the youngsters have already sung an opening song with the general assembly, you may still want to lead them in another song as they begin their

own liturgy. The presider then greets the children. You might plan a short penitential rite (in the presider's own words or the more traditional Lord, Have Mercy) and possibly the Gloria. The presider then says a short opening prayer and invites the children to listen to God's word. A few comments before the reading are appropriate to set tone, place and background.

Proclaiming the Word

A child or teenager may proclaim the first reading. Make sure the reader is chosen carefully and has had time to prepare. The reading needs to be loud enough, slow enough and clear enough to capture the attention of even the youngest child. A responsorial psalm or an alleluia may be sung between readings. Some parishes, rather than reading the Scripture of the day, dramatize it or show a video or slide presentation of it instead. While these may be excellent ways of helping the children focus on the readings, I suggest first proclaiming the word from the lectionary and then following it with the dramatization or videotape.

Breaking Open the Word

Following the Scripture, the presider may offer a few brief comments (emphasis on brief). If the gathering of children is large, you may divide them by age or by number. Or the gathering may simply remain large. In any case, it is important to engage the young people in dialogue by asking relevant questions and listening well. Ask the children what they heard. What was the Scripture about? What was their favorite part? What do they think Jesus is asking them to do? The idea is to help them make the reading relevant to their own lives. This is not the time for instruction or teaching or for head learning. Rather this ought to be a life-giving "experience."

While Liturgy of the Word should never be confused with arts-and-crafts time, it is true that the best way to engage young children in dialogue is through the act of cutting and pasting things together. Just make sure that the focus of the activity is

on hearing and celebrating the Scripture and not on creating busy work. The *Directory* suggests using pictures prepared by the children to illustrate the homily or to give a visual dimension to the prayers of the faithful (DMC #36).

Profession of Faith and Prayers of Intercession

The Liturgy of the Word ends with the children reciting the Creed and offering the Prayers of Intercession. While some parishes prefer to have their youngsters remain in small groups for these prayers, I like reassembling them so they can say the prayers all together. In this way the move back to a larger assembly is more gradual, and the children are given the opportunity to hear more voices in petition and response. If the Creed is going to be recited, you may want to have the words written on poster board in large print so that children have no trouble reading them. The presider can lead the Prayers of the Faithful, asking the youngsters to offer their own prayers.

Timing at this point is important. Ask one of the ushers to keep the presider informed of the progress of the adult assembly. When the usher judges that the priest is nearing the end of his homily, it is time for the presider to go to each group and call them back. It is always a good idea to have a song, prayer or story ready in case the homily goes longer than usual. The children process back into church during the Offertory.

Training Presiders and Facilitators

One of the most difficult concepts I have found in training presiders and facilitators is to convince them they are leading prayer, not teaching. Their job is to help facilitate the child's encounter with community and with God. Presiders need to remain peripheral to the experience, not central. Their words and voices should lead and not impose. Another difficult concept to convey is that liturgy is a celebration. As a children's celebration, there should, at times, be an atmosphere of respectful playfulness. Just as there is time for silence and time for solemn processions, there should also be time for smiles and happy