

Young Family Ministry

Joyful fellowship with our youngest members

BY ZOE KOURAJIAN



What does it mean to be a “family parish?” I was faced with this question when a friend skeptically questioned whether The Basilica fits this description. His comment made me wonder: What does it mean to be a family-friendly church? Does it mean that the parish has an attached grade school? A robust Sunday school? Just a smattering of raucous toddlers crying during Mass?

My husband, Adam, and I grappled with this question, because although The Basilica may not be a typical suburban parish, it certainly felt family-centered to us. We joined The Basilica as newlyweds in 2017, and at the time of the family parish conversation, our 18-month-old Louie was looping around the side altar during Mass. Looking around at the 9:30 Mass, there seemed to be plenty of young families present. So instead of leaving The Basilica and heading to the suburbs, we decided to try to foster the community we were seeking.



Zoe and Adam Kourajian family

We met with Basilica staff members with ideas for a Young Family Ministry. Working with Melissa Streit, The Basilica's Director of Engagement, a format evolved for monthly Young Family gatherings in the Teresa of Calcutta Hall after Mass. We thought it was important for young families to gather in the same space as everyone else so Basilica parishioners could see our children as an integral part of the church family. Children are the future! Doug Wayman, who manages Sunday hospitality, hears positive comments from parishioners of all ages. "They love the community developing week after week," he says. "It warms their hearts to recognize familiar faces and see the kids growing up."

With a blanket and toys for the littlest ones, parents talk and connect while their babies and toddlers play. Melissa provides creative religious-themed activities to engage slightly older children. Kids made sticker nativities and Our Lady of Guadalupe votive candles in December, for example. It is a joy to look around and see babies, toddlers, and elementary-aged children all engaging in fellowship and faith.

We have made some dear friends through the Sunday morning Young Family gatherings and we now gather downstairs after the 9:30 Mass every Sunday. Our

kids eat donuts and run around the room, building friendships and burning energy before the inevitable car naps that follow. Attending Mass on Sundays has gone from a lonelier once-a-week endeavor (and it truly is an endeavor with two toddlers!) to a joyous, community-filled ritual.

Leah and Devin Hanson's 3-year-old son, Russel, met Louie for donuts and playing one Sunday morning. Since then, the Hansons have joined The Basilica and become active in the Young Family Ministry. Leah mentioned they previously visited a suburban parish and found more young families attending Mass at The Basilica. In their registration form, she noted that they were "looking for a young families community and a parish that focuses on social justice." Russel is now enrolled in Faith Formation class and the Cherub Choir.

Sarah Garton Hage also came to Mass with her young son, Angel, on a Young Family Sunday. Feeling our welcoming pull, they quickly joined The Basilica and signed up for Angel's baptism class. As their family expanded, she and her husband, Alex, have remained connected to the parish. "Our family was interested in The Basilica because of its large and vibrant community," she says. "We were excited when we realized we could also get

to know other people and see familiar faces through the Young Family Ministry. When we were seeking a parish to join, I didn't realize how important this would be and how different it feels from place to place. The warmth and care of the Young Family Ministry creates a truly welcoming space."

Since we helped start the Young Family Ministry in 2023, Adam and I have welcomed a little girl, Phoebe, to our family. She and Louie will grow up in a parish that welcomes and celebrates them, even when they are a little squirrely and have to move around in the church to make it through Mass. My childhood priest used to say that the pews are "either crying or dying," and we certainly add some raucous cries each Sunday.

Community is what you make of it, and I am incredibly grateful to the parish and staff for fostering such a beautiful Young Family community at The Basilica. We'd love to have you join us for a Young Family Hospitality gathering downstairs after the 9:30 Mass. You'll find us chasing after the donut-covered, joy-filled little images of God running around in their Church. ✚

Zoe and her husband, Adam, joined the parish in 2017. Now with a family of four, she is a public middle school history teacher and a proud Notre Dame alumna.