

# Special Needs Mass gives families a chance to deepen their faith together

“Father, can I tell you a question?”

Nervous giggles whisper about the church. It is always a tad risky for a Catholic priest to invite children to sit quietly near the altar during a homily. This particular moment seems more fraught than usual.

Rain pounds the roof at St. Patrick’s church in southwest Calgary. The lights in the nave are dimmer than one might expect. The pews are a bit more restless. This is the regular 5 p.m. Mass at St. Patrick’s Church. However, truth told, this Mass is different.

This is a Special Needs Mass. Lest there be any confusion over what that means, this Mass is for people whose special needs require medical, mental or psychological support.

The pews are mostly populated by families with children whose normal behaviour would raise the eyebrows (and sometimes the ire), of other churchgoers.

An adult man in the front pew talks, out loud, through the service. When he needs a washroom, a fellow parishioner helps him find his way.



Tony Makowski and Brenda-Lee Kearney share some time with Father Matthew Schneider at St. Patrick's Church in Calgary. Karla Subero, Special to Grandin Media

For parents like Brenda-Lee Kearney, the Mass is delightfully chaotic, yet peaceful. She and her husband Mike have an 11-year-old son with FASD, Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder.

They love Jacob and they love their church. But bringing Jacob to Mass is difficult and after Kearney approached her parish priest with an idea, the Special Needs Mass began.

The Special Needs Mass became a regular celebration after Rev. Jerome Lavigne, the pastor, moved to St. Pat's in 2018. And the Kearneys are grateful.

With a mission to create a loving, supportive and compassionate community that renews and restores faith and hope to families and children with special needs, the Mass shows "God is really at work here in our parish," says Brenda-Lee Kearney.

In addition to the dimmer lights, the Special Needs Mass features visual "cue cards" that tell parishioners when to sit, kneel or stand. The pictures show the appropriate action along with simple messages, such as kneeling for the communion rite.

"Typically, we have the same songs at these services. It's all part of dialing back on the sensory experience. Many of these children benefit from a very calm environment," explains Kearney.

Parents with special needs children often stay after Mass for fellowship. While most participants are from the parish, others attend as word of the Mass spreads.

"I believe most of us are parenting our kids in a community that doesn't understand our reality," Kearney said. "We are understanding of each other because we are living it."

That message resonates with Rev. Matthew Schneider.

"There is a natural sense of community when we come together to worship. Where possible, it's nice to be able to add elements that make worship more meaningful to certain groups of people," says Schneider, who celebrated the Special Needs Mass on June 22.

Father Schneider was born and raised in Calgary but has since joined the Legionaries of Christ, an international religious community in the U.S. He now lives in Washington, D.C. where he's working on a doctorate degree in theology.

In his adopted city, there is a regular Mass for the deaf and others for ethnic groups in their native languages.

In his home city of Calgary, Father Schneider likes what St. Pat's has done to

accommodate believers who are often marginalized.



Rev. Matthew Schneider went public with his autism this past April. Karla Subero, Special to Grandin Media

Father Schneider's appreciation for the Special Needs Mass is more than professional. Diagnosed as autistic three years ago, Schneider went public on World Autism Day this past April.

The diagnosis came after Father Schneider, then in his mid-30s, reached out to medical professionals for help understanding why one of his first priest assignments was terminated one year into a three-year post.

What he learned helped Schneider make sense of how autism impacts his social interactions. For Schneider, autism manifests as an inability to decipher the social cues most people use to ease interpersonal interaction.

"Let me give you an example. When you see someone smile, how do you know if that smile is real? Most people understand that subconsciously. I don't. I have to really think about it. I have to make decisions about what I think I am seeing."

Less than three months after going public with his diagnosis, Schneider has more than 50,000 followers on Twitter and Instagram. He writes about the intersection of autism and spirituality and argues for inclusion of what some define as the neurologically diverse.

At St. Pat's, that same approach to inclusion is present in the weekly Special Needs Mass, says Kearney.

"This is good for us as parents. It is also good for people like our Jacob. The

Mass has given families a place to worship together, a place their children can deepen their personal encounter with Jesus, a place to claim their own faith.”

*-Joy Gregory is a writer in Calgary. This story was originally published by the Diocese of Calgary. The Special Needs Mass is held at St. Patrick's church every Sunday at 5 pm. Follow Father Matthew Schneider, LC, @Autistic Priest*