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Since formation for the Eucharist is a lifelong process, parents should be included in the period of preparation for the sacrament.

First Communion Preparation: Forming Children and Families

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As the school year begins, parishes already are focused on preparing children to receive First Communion. Though Easter Time, when First Communion Masses usually take place in parishes, is months away, formation for this sacrament of initiation already has begun. In the months ahead, all involved in the catechesis of children for this sacrament will help the children increase their love for Jesus and understand the importance of receiving the Body and Blood of Christ.

This article will explore the catechetical, spiritual, and liturgical formation of children for First Communion. Formation for the Sacrament of the Eucharist is a lifelong process. It begins with Baptism and continues through childhood, teen, and adult years as individuals deepen their understanding and love for the sacrament. Since Catholics can always grow in appreciation of the Eucharist, the time when children are being formed for First Communion also is an opportunity for formation of families and nurturing the parish's Eucharistic spirituality.

CATECHETICAL AND SPIRITUAL FORMATION

At a child's Baptism, parents accept responsibility for forming the child in faith and also are making the first step toward preparing the child for the Eucharist. Preparation for Eucharist is continued as parents show what it means to love as Jesus loves, to pray, to make sacrifices for others, to participate at Mass, to ask forgiveness, and to be in relationship with Jesus Christ.

From the time a child is baptized, parents should be encouraged to pray with him or her, to read Bible stories, to answer questions about God, and to familiarize the child with the Catholic faith. Children have a great capacity to connect with God, and those who grow up in a household where faith is evident and practiced develop a fundamental orientation toward God that will be evident as they grow and mature. This relationship affects the way children perceive and respond to formal religious education.¹ As children begin formal religious education classes in their parishes, parents should be supported in their role in handing down the faith.

Many adults were not adequately formed and catechized as youth, so formation sessions for parents of first communicants help them understand the Eucharist and partner with the parish in catechizing and forming their children. Parent meetings or special catechetical sessions, prayer services, and opportunities to come before the Eucharist may develop parents' love for Christ present in the Eucharist. At these sessions, parents should be taught that the Eucharist is "the source and summit of the Christian life"² and that all can continually grow in understand-

ing of the Eucharist, how it relates to our lives, and what it calls us to become. Since many adults do not attend the liturgy regularly, a parish's work with parents includes helping them understand the importance of participating in the liturgy to foster a love for the Eucharist in their children. A personal invitation from other parents and our welcoming attitude and posture can make a difference. Just as hospitality at the church door may encourage parishioners to attend Mass, your hospitality toward parents can bring them to make the liturgy a priority in their lives.

The *National Directory for Catechesis* (NDC), 36.3a, lists the following nine points as basic prerequisites in the preparation of children for the sacrament. (These points also are part of an adequate catechesis for parents on the Eucharist.)

- The Eucharist is the living memorial of Christ's sacrifice for the salvation of all and the commemoration of his last meal with his disciples.
- Teach not only "the truths of faith regarding the Eucharist but also how from First Communion on . . . they can as full members of Christ's Body take part actively with the People of God in the Eucharist, sharing in the Lord's table and the community of their brothers and sisters."
- Ensure that the baptized have been prepared, according to their capacity, for the Sacrament of Penance prior to their First Communion.
- Develop in children an understanding of the Father's love, of their participation in the sacrifice of Christ, and of the gift of the Holy Spirit.
- Teach "the Holy Eucharist is the real body and blood of Christ" and that "what appear to be bread and wine are actually His living body."
- Teach the difference between the Eucharist and ordinary bread.
- Teach the meaning of reception of the Holy Eucharist under both species of bread and wine.
- Help children to participate actively and consciously in the Mass.
- Help children to receive Christ's Body and Blood in an informed and reverent manner.

At the center of these points is that the reception of Communion has to do with a relationship with Christ. Each time the Body and Blood of Christ is received, that relationship is heightened. Catechesis and formation for the Eucharist, then, need to emphasize and foster this relationship as it assists children and their parents in their roles as disciples of Christ.

CATECHIZING FOR THE EUCHARIST

Remembering the Mystery

Teaching children about the sacraments has its difficulties because the way God transmits his life to us is a mystery. But children are drawn to mystery and story, so both of those elements can be used to tell children the story of how God brings his love to us through the Eucharist. You might want to ask the children to think of the stories the family tells at Thanksgiving or at other times when generations gather. Are some stories told over and over? Why are these stories especially important to the family? While connecting the stories of families to the Eucharist, explain that when we celebrate the Eucharist, we remember what Jesus did for us in securing our salvation. Catechists can relate that the story of Jesus is an almost unbelievable story of a virgin birth and of a child who would grow into a man who would save souls and open the gates of heaven. It is the story of miracles, healings, and forgiveness. It is the story of welcoming the outcasts and the poor, of spreading love where there is none, of challenging the status quo and calling all people to be in relationship with each other. It is the story of an innocent man who died to set us free from death. It is the story of a man who was raised from the dead and will come again to call all God's people to everlasting life. Finally, explain that the story of Jesus Christ is our story.

By relating the story of the Eucharist to family stories, catechists let the children know that participation in the Eucharist is a participation in the story. It's the same with family dinners. Participation at Thanksgiving is a participation in the story of the family. In a way, it is a participation in the story of when Grandma and Grandpa met. When we receive the Eucharist at Mass, we share in the mystery of Christ's Passion, Death, and Resurrection, and we look forward to his coming again.

Some of the concepts of the Paschal Mystery are easier for children to understand than others. Most children have difficulty with the idea that Jesus died for our salvation. Many children ask, "Why did he have to die?" From early on, children can be taught the notion of sacrifice, of giving up something good for the sake of another. They learn about this as they begin to comprehend the concept of sharing, doing something they don't want to do, or refraining from something they like so another may benefit. Discussions can move to talking about persons such as firefighters, police, and members of the military who give up their lives so others may live. It can be explained to children that Jesus' Death is not an end, just as our death is not an end. Just as Jesus rose from the dead, so shall we at the end of time. With this understanding, comes hope in the resurrection of our bodies at the end of time.

When introducing the word *salvation* to the children, show a crucifix as you explain that we were saved from sin and that



Beginning and ending catechesis with prayer models a life of prayer.

eternal life was offered to us because Jesus died on the Cross and rose from the dead. Explain that when we celebrate Mass and receive the Eucharist, we remember Jesus' Death and the sacrifice he made for us. Tell the children that when the priest accepts our gifts of bread and wine and offers them to the Father, he unites our sacrifices with Jesus'.

To discuss the last meal that Jesus shared with the Apostles, return with the children to their family's Thanksgiving meal. Explain that at the Last Supper, Jesus gathered with his disciples for a special meal, just as we gather for special meals with our families. Tell the children that during that meal, Jesus gave the disciples his Body and Blood under the appearance of bread and wine. Explain that he told the disciples the same words we hear at Mass: "Do this in memory of me." Let the children know that Jesus' last meal with his friends occurred while they were remembering how the Lord spared their people from slavery in Egypt and

that Jesus' Death spared us from slavery to sin. It is because Jesus offered his disciples his Body and Blood at this meal that we celebrate and receive the Eucharist.

The children should be aware that the word *Eucharist* means thanksgiving, and that when we participate in the Mass, we are giving thanks to God the Father for the gift of his Son, Jesus. Let them know that our prayers and responses, our singing, our careful attention to God's Word, and our reception of Communion, all give thanks to the Father. Explain, too, that we participate in Jesus' prayer of thanksgiving and his offering of himself to God the Father. We, too, offer ourselves to God. All that we are and all that we hope to be is offered to God as we join in this great meal of thanksgiving, this sacrifice of praise.

We Become What We Receive

In describing the Eucharist, St. Augustine said, "Behold what you are, become what you receive."³ As we teach children, we should help them comprehend that receiving Communion brings responsibilities. Let them know that members of the Body of Christ strive to live in imitation of Jesus. They can begin to see that we bring Christ to others by the way we act and how we demonstrate the love of Christ to friends, family, and even to strangers.

Knowing the Difference

Probably one of the most important concepts that the children need to understand is the difference between ordinary bread and wine and the Eucharist as truly the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. Before some young children are of age to receive Communion, they might ask "when will I receive the cookie" or "why can't I have the bread?" They do not yet understand what it means to receive Communion. Parents and catechists should refer to the Eucharist as the Body of Christ, the Blessed Sacrament, the sacred host, the Eucharist, or simply as Jesus. This helps the children to understand that, once consecrated, the bread becomes Christ.



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Many adults are unaware of the Church’s teaching on the Real Presence in the Eucharist. Parents, then, need to be catechized on this teaching.

The concept of transubstantiation will not only be foreign to the children but to many of the parents. Those catechizing adults may find, as surveys have indicated, that a large number are unaware of the Church’s teaching of Christ’s Real Presence in the Eucharist. It is important, then, that a parent meeting focus on the meaning of the Real Presence. These meetings are a good time, too, to discuss the liturgy. Leaders of these meetings may want to explain that Christ is present in the minister, the assembly, and the Word. When parents understand these concepts, they can help their children comprehend the sacrament and the liturgy and how they should behave before, during, and after Mass. Parents can be encouraged to attend exposition and adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, to arrive at church early to pray before Mass, and to spend time after Mass in prayer. These times of quiet prayer can bring them closer to the Eucharist.

Preparing for Communion with Scripture

During sessions with parents, you will want to develop or increase their love for Scripture. As the parents relate more to the Scriptures, they may see the need for discussing the Sunday readings with their children. The parish may want to budget funds to provide a copy of *Celebrating Sunday for Catholic Families* or *At Home with the Word*® (both published by Liturgy Training Publications) for the first communicants’ parents. *Celebrating Sunday* provides an excerpt of a passage from the day’s Gospel, a reflection on that passage, and questions for a family discussion on the Scripture. *At Home with the Word*® contains the three Scripture readings for the day and reflections that integrate the readings. Both resources can encourage parents to prepare for Mass through reading the Scriptures.

To help instill a love for the Scriptures, you may want to make available Bibles for both children and adults at the parent sessions. (Perhaps a local religious bookstore will provide Bibles to be sold on consignment.) Encourage the parents to read to the children a chapter from the Bible before bedtime and to set aside

time for reading the Scripture themselves. You may find that many of your parents are unfamiliar with the Bible and are unable to find a book of the Bible on their own. Even spending a short time explaining the difference between the Old and New Testaments will make a difference to these parents. Consider asking a member of the parish Bible study group to talk to the parents about their experiences with studying the Scripture. The individual may be able to share how their family discusses the readings after Mass and inspire the parents to discuss the readings with their children.

Catechists can use a variety of teaching methods to help children relate to the Scriptures. By incorporating the Sunday Scripture into the classroom work, catechists can assist students in making a connection to what they hear at Mass. Catechists may want to read the Gospel during each class and ask the children to retell the story, memorize a line from the account, draw a picture, or relate what the priest or deacon said in his homily.

PRAYERS, AND BLESSINGS

Beginning and ending catechesis sessions with prayer both teaches and models prayer for children and parents. If we expect children to pray during the Mass, we need to pray with them. In the classroom, children need to be taught the Hail Mary, Our Father, and other traditional prayers as well as ways of praying on their own. Children can learn intercessory prayer by bringing to the classroom prayer time the needs of the family, community, and world. Teach the children how to compose their prayers so they are comfortable praying on their own. Children who learn to pray during class can impact their family’s spiritual life. Parents sometimes say that a child’s prompting brought them to pray with their children regularly.

The family should be the first place where prayer is learned and experienced. “For young children in particular, daily family prayer is the first witness of the Church’s living memory as awakened patiently by the Holy Spirit” (*Catechism of the Catholic*

Church [CCC], 2685). But prayer may not be part of family life for all in the parish. Parent sessions can show how to introduce the practice of prayer in the morning, at meals, and at bedtime. Encourage parents to say traditional prayers with their families and to ask the children to voice petitions for family members but also for those in the community and world.

Blessings

At sessions with parents, explain the practice of blessing. The parents should understand that blessings can be a divine action of God, a free gift from the Lord, or an offering of praise and adoration to God. When a blessing is given to someone, God is asked to look kindly upon a person, to pour his grace upon them, and they in turn are called to thank the Lord for the blessing. Blessings are important because they help us to recognize and acknowledge that God is acting in our lives. “*Blessing* expresses the basic movement of Christian prayer: it is an encounter between God and man” (CCC, 2626). In the literal sense from the Latin word *benedicere*, to “bless,” means “to speak well of.”

Let the parents know that anyone can bless another and encourage them to bless their children before they go to school and at bedtime. Explain that the blessing can be as simple as asking God to bless the children or making the Sign of the Cross on their heads. Perhaps small containers of holy water can be given to the parents for blessing their children.

Familiarize the parents with the *Catholic Household Book of Blessings and Prayers*, pointing out the many types of blessings provided for families to use throughout the year. Read through one of the rituals with the parents so that they can see how the blessings can be part of their family life. Blessings for the Christmas tree, for holidays, and other occasions are within the book and many of the blessings include readings from Scripture. Show that children can be given a part of the ritual to read, and draw the connection to the love children possess for ritual.

Parishes should avail themselves of opportunities to bless children. Just as the period of the catechumenate contains formal blessings for those preparing for their initiation into the Church, blessings can be given to children during their time of preparation for First Communion. Catechists can bless the children as they enter or leave the class, or a blessing can be part of a classroom prayer service. Blessings also can occur within a Word service, similar to the Liturgy of the Word at Mass. *The Book of Blessings* provides both the form of blessing for clergy and the form for the laity to bestow.

FORMATION THROUGH THE LITURGY

No better preparation for First Communion is available than participation in the celebration of the Eucharist at Sunday Mass. “In the Church’s mission of evangelization, catechesis and Liturgy are intimately connected” (NDC, 33). The Church’s liturgy catechizes the faithful through words and music, through sight and smells, through touch and taste. The symbols of the liturgy speak when words cannot express what is being experienced. Through rituals that have developed and evolved over millennia, Catholics have come to grow in their relationship with the Lord, with the Church, and with each other. Unfortunately, symbols often don’t speak to people as they once did. Children need to be

introduced to the symbols in the liturgy. This can be done in the classroom and at home. Catechists and parents can make use of holy water and candles (with great caution). Gestures that are used in the liturgy can be used during prayer time. While it might be impractical to have children kneel in class, they can be encouraged to stand with an erect posture and their hands folded to gain a sense of reverence in their prayer. At times, open and close class with prayers from the day’s liturgy in the Missal. (Many monthly publications provide the daily prayer texts.) Read Scripture in class in the context of a prayer service, as part of a modified Liturgy of the Word ritual. During intercessory prayer, follow the format for the Universal Prayer at Mass and ask the children to respond as they would at Mass.

Pay attention to the liturgical year, the seasons, and feasts that we celebrate as Catholics. If the class uses the *Year of Grace* calendar, published by LTP, the children will be able to determine the season of the liturgical year and the color of that season. As the seasons change, ask the children what they noticed different in the church.

It is always good to bring the children to the church during class times or at special sessions with parents for prayer or to go over the parts of the Mass. Some parishes celebrate an instructional Mass at which time they go through each part of the Mass as if it were being celebrated. During these instructional Masses, the priest or commentator stops at the different parts and explains what occurs. A question-and-answer period can follow the presentation. Tours of the church are another way to help children become engaged in the liturgy. As they learn to recognize the signs and symbols, movements, gestures, words, and songs of the Mass, the liturgy will come alive for them. ♦

Notes

1. Graham Rossiter, “Perspective on Children’s Spirituality and Catholic Primary School Religious Education: A Key Starting Point for Reviewing Issues in Content and Pedagogy,” *Journal of Religious Education*. 60.1 (2012): 31-40.
2. *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 10
3. See St. Augustine, sermon 272

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<http://www.pastoralliturgy.org/resources/FirstCommunionPreparation.pdf>