

PREPARATION FOR THE SACRAMENT OF EUCHARIST

The Celebration of Eucharist is the center of Christian life:

The liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the fount from which all her power flows. For the goal of apostolic endeavor is that all who are made sons of God by faith and baptism should come together to praise God in the midst of his Church, to take part in the Sacrifice and to eat the Lord's Supper. (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* #10)

This is a beautiful statement from the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*. What an awesome endeavor! How do we prepare to fully take part at liturgy? We might ask, "What are we doing at liturgy, what are we preparing for, and what are we celebrating?"

When we celebrate a birthday what are we celebrating? We remember the past, the day of birth. We count the years. We celebrate the changes that have happened in life, the growing older and the ability to be more who we are by what we know and understand. We celebrate who we are today and what we have accomplished in life. We celebrate the future, we will grow and change and hopefully be around for many years to come.

In Eucharist we celebrate a past, Jesus' Last Supper, the many meals he celebrated with his friends, and Jesus' death and Resurrection. We listen to the Scripture readings and prayers that root us in our Catholic heritage of revelation and tradition. We read of the Good Samaritan and understand service to others, the Prodigal Son and realize the call to forgive. We envision the Exodus and see our own journey of faith or the creation story and our responsibility for the care and welfare of our earth. We celebrate the present, the ongoing saving activity of Jesus Christ, the expression of thanksgiving for salvation, and the Body of Christ, the Church that is a reality in our parish. The future is also celebrated; God continues to work in the world. We find God's saving work in our own lives as well as in our parish community. We work for the fullness of the Kingdom of God and we look to the second coming.

Keeping this in mind each and every Sunday can seem daunting. But in order that the sacred liturgy may produce its full effect it is necessary that the faithful come to it with proper dispositions, that their thoughts match their words, and that they cooperate with divine grace lest they receive it in vain. (SC #11)

Pastors of souls must realize it is their duty also to ensure that the faithful take part (knowingly, actively, and fruitfully, fully aware of what they are doing, actively engaged in the rite and enriched by it.) (SC #11)

The full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else; for it is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit. Therefore, through the needed program of instructing pastors of souls must zealously strive to achieve it in all their pastoral work. (SC #14)

We go to Mass, excited about being there, so eager that we cannot wait to be in church. With the opening hymn our voices are raised to God with such exuberance that the church doors will not stay shut. Probably, we have not often had this experience but from what we read it seems like this is what is meant to be. How do we and our family members realize such an experience?

As parents live Christianity, their children will develop as Christians. Children are imitators of their parents, who teach by what they do and how they live. That is why it is good to ask what adults want for themselves. What do they bring to the community? Sacraments are community celebrations of the grace of divine life given to us with each sacrament. In sacrament celebrations the community recognizes God's presence in their lives and their response to that presence. Sacramental preparation is fostering that awareness in the community and in the children. Children see their parents and other adults living in awareness of Christ's presence with an attitude that Eucharist is the center of their lives.

Children and all participants need to talk about what they see and hear at Mass, about the readings, the homily, the symbols and the ritual gestures. We need to explore the richness of our rituals and recognize the meaning that words and gestures contain. We can recognize how these words find their way into every day: peace, forgiveness, sorrow, care, and love as well as a handshake, a greeting, and a hug.

Notice how often the term community is used when talking about the Mass and the church or parish. Eucharist is our community celebration of thanksgiving. Preparation necessitates an experience of community and thanksgiving. We experience community in our homes, in the give and take of family life, the sharing, the listening, and the being present to one another. Appreciating the variety of gifts, talents, and abilities, as we share in the responsibilities and tasks of family life, leads to an understanding of community and the Christian community as the Body of Christ. As children appreciate the diversity of gifts that makes it possible for persons in family and community to support and care for each other, they grow in understanding how God's love is present and see Christ present in the community.

We come to Mass to pray together as a community.

To promote active participation, the people should be encouraged to take part by means of acclamations, responses, psalms, antiphons, hymns, as well as by actions, gestures and bodily attitudes. And at the proper time a reverent silence should be observed. (SC #30)

Prayer is being in the presence of God. We have a sense of the holy. We grow in appreciation of the prayer of the community, the power of the community at prayer. We reflect the prayer of the community in our homes and in our own prayer life. We can use the prayers and gestures of Mass to further our own prayer life and that of our children. We develop a greater understanding of the prayers of the Mass and a comforting familiarity of ritual.

Eucharist is a Sacrament of Initiation into full communion in the Catholic Church. Like Baptism and Confirmation we are initiated into

the worshipping community, a community called to be the presence of Christ, to proclaim and hear the Good News, to welcome and nurture the faith developing in the children and in its members. The Community has the responsibility to instill in its members a sense of worship.

The Church, therefore, earnestly desires that Christ's faithful, when present at this mystery of faith, should not be there as strangers or silent spectators. On the contrary, through a good understanding of the rites and prayers they should take part in the sacred action, conscious of what they are doing, with devotion and full collaboration. They should be instructed by God's word, and be nourished at the table of the Lord's Body. They should give thanks to God. Offering the Immaculate Victim, not only through the hands of the priest but also together with him, they should learn to offer themselves. Through Christ, the Mediator, they should be drawn day by day into ever more perfect union with God and each other, so that finally God may be all in all. (SC #48)

THE ROLE OF THE FAMILY

The family is the medium of society. The family transmits values and attitudes to its children. Parents are to "be recognized as being primarily and principally responsible for their education...it is almost impossible to provide an adequate substitute." (GE #3) Therefore, it is through and with the family that we promote an understanding of and preparation for the sacraments. The parish community in partnership with the parents prepares for sacraments. The sacrament process begins with Baptism and an understanding of sacramental life and the commitment to community. At Baptism parents are accepting the responsibility to prepare their children to participate in the Eucharistic celebration. Thus begins a lifelong journey of faith. The family is as much a candidate for the sacrament as the child receiving the sacrament for the first time (Patrick J. Brennan, *The Evangelizing Parish*, p. 33). Children enter into the reality of Church through their families, through the commitment, example and guidance of their parents or guardians and the witness of their local parish church. The *Directory for Masses with Children* states:

The Christian Family has the greatest role in teaching Christian and human values. Thus Christian education provided by parents and other educators should be strongly encouraged in relation to liturgical formation of children. By reason of responsibility freely accepted at the Baptism of their children, parents are bound to teach them gradually to pray. (#10)

The role of the family is further magnified: "Parents above others are obliged to form their children in the faith and practice of the Christian life by word and example; godparents and those who take the place of parents are bound by an equivalent obligation." (Canon 774 §2)

Every Catholic family is a Catholic household regardless of the number of persons. Expressions of Catholicism are seen by the way life is lived: a sense of justice, of service, care and love for one another and others beyond the household. Catholic heritage is passed on from generation to generation and is carried by parents and guardians to their children and households.

A very important way of sharing and expressing belief is through prayer. Prayer in households is as important as food on the table and should be seen as necessary. Prayer can mark the normal events of the day, praying at mealtime, as well as on rising in the morning and resting for the night. It is a duty and a privilege for our homes to be a place of prayer. It also will introduce children into a lifetime habit of prayer. Prayer is the recognition of God and our dependence on God in our lives.

It is through such family experiences that children come to understand what we celebrate at Eucharist. Concepts like unity and belonging are experienced in families and homes. At home with their families, children experience and learn to understand and value sharing, listening, eating, conversing, giving, thanking and celebrating. These same experiences are applied to Liturgy. Using these concepts with an explanation and appropriate understanding of Eucharist we are able to help children participate meaningfully in the action of the Mass and to receive Christ's body and blood in Communion in an informed and reverent manner.

The involvement of the parents and the family and the parish community in preparation for Eucharist is essential.

- First of all, sacraments are community celebrations. It is through community that we are called to salvation. In and through sacraments we celebrate God's presence in our lives and our response to this presence. We develop and recognize more fully God's presence in our lives during a time of preparation. We are all called to continually grow in faith and this time of preparation is a value to all members of the community and of the utmost importance to the children, other candidates and to their families.
- Secondly, all adults have a need for continuing faith formation. Sometimes families who have been alienated or marginalized in their faith life bring their children for sacrament preparation and celebration. This time of preparation can be a time of healing, reconciliation and recognition of the role of faith in the life of the family members. First Eucharist should never be an isolated celebration. Just as Baptism involves a commitment, a future, so does Eucharist. For all those involved Eucharist preparation is a faith journey toward a fuller and deeper commitment to Jesus Christ and the sacramental life of the Church. It can be a continuation and enrichment of the faith life of participants or a time to return to a life-long faith journey.

Minimum Requirements

The emphasis of this preparation is neither age nor grade dictated. Just as families bring forth their child or children for initiation in Baptism, they bring them to the Eucharist table as a sign of their faith. In the decree, *Quam Singulari*, Pius X stated the requirements for the first reception of Eucharist:

- the ability to distinguish ordinary bread from Eucharist,
- the knowledge of the mysteries of faith according to his / her ability,
- the ability to express some desire to receive Jesus.

Canon Law mandates that the decision about a child's readiness to celebrate the sacrament of Eucharist for the first time is a decision which rests primarily with the parents in consultation with the priest who will administer the sacrament. (Canon 914) The goal is meaningful preparation that leads to lifelong celebration of the sacrament.

The Order for Celebrating Sacraments

In the western Catholic Church, the Latin Rite, we are accustomed to celebrating Baptism in infancy, First Communion around the age of discretion (about the age of seven), and Confirmation in early adolescence. In the Eastern Rites of the Catholic Church the initiation sacraments are received at the same time. An infant brought to Baptism would also celebrate Confirmation and Eucharist. In recent years the discussion to restore the order of the Initiation Sacraments has taken place. Consequently, many dioceses in the United States are celebrating Confirmation prior to or at the time of the celebration of first Eucharist.

An area for concern is the preparation for the sacrament of Penance and the reception of first Eucharist. Canon 914 states "It is the responsibility, in the first place, of parents and those who take the place of parents as well as of the pastor to see that children who have reached the use of reason are correctly prepared and are nourished by the divine food as early as possible, preceded by sacramental confession..." Canons 916, 988, and 989 require that only those persons conscious of serious sin must confess before receiving Communion. This applies to children preparing to celebrate First Communion. Formation for Penance appropriate to the understanding of the child celebrating First Communion must take place prior to and be distinct from preparation for Eucharist. Children are expected to receive Penance before First Communion. *Redemptionis Sacramentum* referring to Canon 914 states: "The First Communion of children must always be preceded by sacramental confession and absolution" (#87).

It is the responsibility of parents as well as pastors to see that children are properly prepared for the sacraments. Parents bring their young children to the Initiation Sacraments: Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist and to the Sacrament of Penance. Children have a right to receive Communion because of their Baptism. If for whatever reason, for example a mental handicap, a child or children do not approach the sacrament of penance they should not be deprived of the right to make First Holy Communion.

Other Issues

There are certainly many pastoral issues when working with families and children in preparation for Eucharist. Adult members of the family may be returning to the faith or are preparing for initiation at the same time as their children.

THE ROLE OF THE PARISH

Since the early 1960's our understanding of Sacraments has shifted from something we receive to something we celebrate and live—the dynamic activity of God in our lives and our participation in that activity. In this shift the Body of Christ, the Church, has developed in awareness and understanding of its role as a community. In preparation for Eucharist the Church has an important role. The Church welcomes its candidates and guides and instructs them in the Catholic way of life.

The Body of Christ, the Church, through preparing and celebrating sacraments, brings the candidates and their families more deeply into the worshipping community. This time of preparation is not only an updating and / or study of theology of Eucharist for parents and adults in the community but is a means for all the faithful to delve more deeply into the sacramental life of the church. Fully participating in liturgy, celebrating the paschal mystery as a community of believers is the center of Christian life.

It is the responsibility of the pastor with the pastoral staff to educate the parish in its role of preparing and celebrating Eucharist. The parish and the parish staff should exemplify the concepts of Eucharist: unity, belonging, sharing, listening, eating, giving, and thanking. The parish and the parish staff should emphasize the connectedness of faith life and sacrament celebration. Eucharist is an ongoing celebration, and central to every aspect of parish life. The pastoral objective for Eucharist is primarily worship, as well as ongoing catechesis, formation, community building and liturgical awareness. The parish staff gives direction, witness and guidance to the parish.

Through the work of the parish staff under the direction of the DRE/CRE the parish should have in place a suitable model for the preparation process that meets the needs of the parish and the candidates. This model should endeavor to bring about an awareness of Eucharist as central to Christian life. "Catechesis for the Eucharist recognizes it as the heart of Christian life...." (NDC p.124) The goal of catechesis for Eucharist is to help the "children participate actively and consciously in the Mass." (p. 127) Catechetical concepts that should be included in the preparation can be found in the *National Directory for Catechesis*, pp. 127-128.

The parish should have policies regarding First Communion based on the Archdiocese of Cincinnati *Religious Education Policies*. The parish staff should also have in place procedures to deal with pastoral situations. This should include addressing such issues as the lack of readiness on the part of a child, non-practicing Catholic families and households, a parent of another denomination, divorced and separated parent situations, parent / guardian resistant to a formation process.

In recent years the area of Adult Faith Formation has appeared as a major concern in the Church. Catechesis of adults is seen as the chief form of catechesis; other forms are oriented to it. The document, *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us* states:

Adult faith formation should serve as the point of reference for catechesis for other age groups. It ought to be "the organizing principle, which gives coherence to the various catechetical programs offered by a particular Church." (GDC, nos. 59, 171, 275.) Maturity of faith is the intent of all catechesis from the earliest years. Thus, all catechesis is geared to a lifelong deepening of faith in Christ. How necessary, then, that the catechetical ministry with adults set an example of the highest quality and vitality. (#41)

The *Adult Catechesis in the Christian Community* (#35) states that all catechesis should strive to build adult Christian communities that are strong in faith, clearly proclaim the Gospel, celebrate vibrant and reverent liturgy, and give courageous witness in charity. Eucharist preparation should keep the primacy of Adult Faith Formation in mind when selecting and preparing a process for use in the parish. For information on the content of catechesis for the Eucharist for parishes see the *National Directory for Catechesis*, pp.124-126.

PASTORAL TEAM FOR PREPARATION AND CELEBRATION OF THE EUCHARIST

It is important that the parish have a group or team that can help with First Eucharist preparation and celebration. The DRE/CRE can not be expected to work alone. Eucharist preparation and celebration is a parish event and all aspects should involve the parish so as to give life to the parish.

The pastoral team for preparation and celebration of Eucharist can give realistic direction and continuity to a parish preparation process. In selecting persons for this group, the parish staff led by the Pastor and the DRE/CRE should spend time in prayer and discussion. The parish staff should recognize the needs of the parish and the rationale for a parish preparation process based on sound Eucharistic theology. The persons drawn from the parish should share this vision. They should also be persons for whom Eucharist is central in their own lives, who continually renew their faith, and who are willing to share their faith and time with others. They should be persons with an awareness of the RCIA process and an understanding of sacraments, and persons who work well with others. They should be knowledgeable about parenting and family life and its varied situations. It is also beneficial if members of this team have personally experienced the process for preparation for the sacrament.

By touching the lives of parishioners through a preparation process for Eucharist, those doing the preparation are able to influence parishioners to explore the richness of their own faith. It is more than just preparation for one experience of receiving Communion. The need to continue to be in touch with all parishioners, parents and families as they journey in faith is important. This is a way to create and sustain a parish community that is united and committed.

COMPONENTS FOR PREPARATION FOR FIRST COMMUNION

The intent of a preparation process for Eucharist is to ensure that children are catechetically and spiritually ready for celebration.

According to the Archdiocese of Cincinnati *Religious Education Policies*, sacrament preparation should provide assistance to parents who have the responsibility to prepare their children for celebrating (#2107.03). Sacrament preparation is an evangelizing occasion for the parish. The preparation process for First Communion should be suited to the age and psychological capacity of the candidate. Preparation is more than a bank of knowledge. It includes formative experiences in faith that promote an active participation in the Eucharist even before the children receive their First Holy Communion.

A Catholic way of life is inconceivable without participation in Sunday Eucharist. The liturgy itself has formative value. The Directory for Masses with Children tells us that necessary importance should be given to catechesis on the Mass. This catechesis should be directed to the child's active, conscious, and authentic participation. "Suited to children's age and capabilities, it should, by means of the main rites and prayers of the Mass, aim at conveying its meaning, including what relates to taking part in the Church's life." This is especially true of the text of the Eucharistic prayer and of the acclamations by which the children take part in this prayer.

The catechesis preparing children for first communion calls for special mention. In it they should learn 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. (#12)

Preparation for children should also include experiences that are both human and liturgical in value. These should include community activity, exchange of greetings, capacity to listen to others, ask for and grant pardon or forgiveness as well as expressing gratitude, experiencing symbolic actions, a meal of friendship and festive celebration. (DMC #9) Various kinds of celebrations and experiences play a role in liturgical formation. These elements of catechesis should not be dominant but should lead to full and conscious participation at liturgy. The word of God has a strong and constant place in the spiritual development of children. Celebrations of the word of God should be frequent. (DMC #13, #14) Seasonal celebrations, Advent, Lent, Christmas and Easter as well as celebration of Liturgy of the Hours are appropriate. Preparation for First Communion may incorporate a Jesus Day Retreat. This experience can include bread baking, liturgical singing, and touring the church noting signs and symbols and giving brief explanations. This can also be a time for children to act out short plays based on a parable or readings from scripture and a time to make a banner using symbols that are appropriate. This can be done in a one-day event or at several meetings.

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