

THE PREPARATION AND CELEBRATION OF FIRST RECONCILIATION AND EUCHARIST WITH CHILDREN

Policies and Guidelines Diocese of Jefferson City

*"Christ's call to conversion continues to resound in the lives of Christians"
(Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1428)*

Evangelization is an ongoing process through which a person experiences a profound conversion and as a result develops a deeper relationship with God and the community. This conversion moves a person toward a more active participation in the mission of Christ and the Church. The reception of sacraments within the Roman Catholic tradition is a significant moment in this process of evangelization.

The time of preparation for and celebration of the sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist provides a tremendous opportunity for conversion to take place in the candidates, their families and the entire faith community. During the process, children can be challenged to begin a life of continuous growth in faith through these sacraments. Parents can fulfill their role as the primary teachers of their children in the ways of the faith within the domestic Church. The parish can become a community of faith that supports the candidates during preparation and renews its own commitment at the celebration of these sacraments.

In order to fully realize this vision through the preparation of children for the first reception of the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist, the following policy, guidelines and options for preparation and celebration are offered for the Diocese of Jefferson City.

Policy

Parishes are to follow the liturgical and Canon Law guidelines of the Church regarding the preparation and celebration of the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist.

- ◆ Children must have reached the age of reason before they enter the process of preparation.
- ◆ The celebration of First Eucharist shall be preceded by the celebration of First Reconciliation for all baptized candidates. (Canon 914, The Code of Canon Law)
- ◆ In order to be adequately prepared to receive Reconciliation children must "be so disposed that, having repudiated the sins committed and having a purpose of amendment, they are converted to God." (Canon 987, The Code of Canon Law)

- ◆ In order to be adequately prepared to receive the Eucharist children must "understand the Mystery of Christ according to their capacity and ...[be able to] receive the Body of Christ with faith and devotion." (Canon 913, The Code of Canon Law)
- ◆ The active participation of parents as the primary catechists for their children is to be recognized and cultivated in the process of preparation.
- ◆ The parish, the community of faith within which the preparation and celebration happens, is to be intimately connected with the candidates and families during the process of preparation and at the celebration.

Guidelines For Preparation

In keeping with the general principles outlined in the preamble and policy statement, the following guidelines shall be observed for the preparation for First Reconciliation and First Eucharist, as they pertain to the individual candidate, the family, and the parish.

The Individual Candidate:

- 1) The normal time for the celebration of First Reconciliation and Eucharist is second grade, but parents who feel their children are ready to receive these sacraments at an earlier age are welcome to enroll them in the preparation process. No candidate may be refused the sacraments if he/she has reached the age of reason, is sufficiently prepared and desires to receive the sacraments.
- 2) The parents, the local pastor and the catechist, as is appropriate, shall determine the readiness of the individual candidate for reception of Reconciliation or Eucharist.
- 3) The faith of the candidates is evident in their desire to receive the sacraments and their eagerness to participate fully, consciously and actively in Reconciliation and the Eucharist.
- 4) With the understanding that the preparation is a process of conversion and not primarily an academic exercise, candidates for Reconciliation should display an age appropriate understanding of the reality of sin in their lives and in the world as well as the grace of forgiveness that comes from a loving God through the sacrament of Reconciliation. The children should have an awareness, appropriate to their age, of the rite of Reconciliation and the meaning of penance. They should be able to express sorrow in a prayer of contrition and understand the sacrament as part of a larger process of conversion in their lives.
- 5) With the understanding that the preparation is a process of conversion and not primarily an academic exercise, candidates for Eucharist should have an age appropriate understanding of the Paschal Mystery; be able to distinguish between regular bread and wine and the Body and Blood of Christ in the

Eucharist; be able to explain why one receives the Eucharist and what it does; and be able to describe the kind of life that Jesus calls His followers to lead. Also, candidates should display a basic understanding of the Mass and sacraments, especially Baptism. The catechesis should be directed toward the child's living, conscious and active participation in the liturgy.

- 6) Special needs children are to be prepared for the reception of the sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist according to their ability. For Reconciliation, they should be able to distinguish between right and wrong, be able to express sorrow and desire to be reconciled sacramentally. For Eucharist, they must be able to distinguish the consecrated host from regular bread and be able to receive the sacrament reverently.

The Family:

- 1) The participation of the family is of primary importance to the catechesis and faith development of the candidate. Their proper role is to be recognized and supported.
- 2) Parents, in conjunction with the pastor, and, when appropriate, the catechist shall determine the readiness of their child to receive Reconciliation and Eucharist based on the child's understanding of the sacrament and the child's spiritual growth.
- 3) Parents are partners with the parish in preparing their children for the sacraments. They shall be given a specific and significant role in the process of preparation.
- 4) Parents are to be afforded the means they need to fulfill their role. It is the responsibility of parish leadership to take advantage of the preparation process as an opportunity to provide adult faith formation for the parents of the candidates.
- 5) Parents play a significant role in enabling their children to see that what is taught as a matter of belief in the classroom is a lived and present reality in the home.
- 6) Parents can help their children understand that catechesis and faith development does not end with the first reception of these sacraments. Therefore, their duties as teacher and example continue throughout the life of the child.
- 7) It must be made clear to parents preparing their children for reception of Reconciliation and Eucharist that regular attendance at Eucharist is a duty and expectation for all families.

- 8) Pastors and parish leaders are urged to reach out to families with special circumstances (divorced, inactive, mixed marriages, etc.) to assure that they have every opportunity to become involved in the preparation process.
- 9) Parents that homeschool their children must participate in the parish preparation process undertaken by the larger parish community.

The Parish:

- 1) The parish shall provide the means, through its formal catechetical programs, to prepare the candidates well and to assist the parents in their duty as the primary catechists of their children.
- 2) Pastors, using their pastoral discretion, shall seek to maintain a uniform preparation of the candidates based on the traditions of the parish, the requirements of the Church, and policies of the diocese.
- 3) Careful planning by the parish can help insure that the preparation of candidates for Reconciliation and Eucharist is a profound conversion experience.
- 4) The liturgical rituals of the Church and their deeper meaning offer the parish a strong curriculum for preparing candidates for Eucharist and Reconciliation. The Church calls each person to full, active and conscious participation in the celebration of liturgy.
- 5) Catechesis on Reconciliation must precede and be distinct from catechesis on Eucharist. Recognition of sin and Reconciliation can facilitate a greater appreciation of Eucharist and communion in the Body of Christ.
- 6) Parishes are to place a high priority on the training and resourcing of catechists for these sacraments.
- 7) Parishes must take care to provide ongoing formation on these sacraments as children grow and mature.

Options for Preparation: The following activities may assist parishes in making the preparation process meaningful for the candidates, their families and the entire parish community.

On Catechetical Sunday during the commissioning of catechists at Sunday liturgy, the pastor can give special recognition to the catechists for Reconciliation and Eucharist. This would be an opportunity to recognize the parents as the first and primary catechists of the candidates as well.

The names of the candidates can be placed on a banner that is displayed in Church during the preparation process to serve as a reminder to the community.

Most parishes have parent meetings in order to catechize the parents and help them to fulfill their role in the preparation process. There are some excellent videos available that might be used during the meetings (e.g. *Eucharist, A Taste of God, Celebrating Our Faith: Reconciliation*, and *Celebrating Our Faith: Eucharist* by Fr. Joe Kempf).

Interviews with candidates and parents by the pastor during the process of preparation can enable the pastor to get to know the families better, encourage the parents to fulfill their role and engage the candidates in a dialogue about the meaning of Reconciliation and Eucharist.

Many parishes have included "sacrament stations" in the preparation process. These stations are learning centers on the themes of Reconciliation and Eucharist. Parents and children move through the stations one by one discussing and learning about the themes. The interaction between parents and candidates is worth the time it takes to prepare and set up the stations.

The parish community can get to know and begin to support the candidates through a ritual of presentation and enrollment of candidates and their families at a Sunday liturgy. This ritual could be modeled after the rites used in the RCIA.

Members of the parish community can actively support the candidates and their families by being a prayer partner. The prayer partner can encourage the child through notes and cards and be present at the celebration.

A short retreat or reflection day can be a significant spiritual experience for parents and children. A number of publishers provide retreat outlines and resources in their preparation materials for Reconciliation and Eucharist.

A special day of prayer for the candidates may be designated in the parish. It can be a time for parishioners to come together and focus on the meaning of Reconciliation or Eucharist and through prayer unite with the candidates and their families. Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament can be part of this day of prayer. It could be scheduled at the same time as a retreat experience or as a vigil on the day before the celebration.

Children preparing to receive Reconciliation and Eucharist can be invited to take part in a service project to highlight the challenge to action inherent in the meaning of the sacraments.

Guidelines For Celebration:

In keeping with the general principles described in the preamble and policy statement, the following guidelines shall be observed for the celebration of First Reconciliation and First Eucharist, as they pertain to the individual candidate, the family, and the parish.

- 1) When the children and parents have a significant role in the celebration of the sacraments it deepens their experience of conversion.

- 2) When the celebration of these sacraments is seen as the beginning of a life of growth in faith rather than a reward for completing the preparation or an end to a process, conversion becomes more possible.
- 3) The celebration should enable the families and the entire parish community to reaffirm their faith and experience Reconciliation and Eucharist more deeply.
- 4) The celebration should be planned so that all families are afforded the opportunity to adequately prepare their child and participate fully in the celebration.
- 5) Keeping the needs of the child and family in mind, parishes are to celebrate First Reconciliation in a way that encourages the parents of the children to receive the sacrament as well. The celebration of First Reconciliation sets the tone for a lifelong understanding and celebration of the sacrament.
- 6) Although often celebrated during Advent and Lent, the sacrament of Reconciliation is a regular part of the ongoing spiritual development of a person of faith and can be received at any time.
- 7) When possible First Eucharist is celebrated at a normally scheduled weekend liturgy with the parish community present.
- 8) Since Eucharist is a Sacrament of Initiation, it is fitting that First Eucharist be celebrated during the Easter season.
- 9) When making a decision to initiate a significant change of practice in the celebration of these sacraments, parish leaders must take time and care to help the parish community and families understand and adjust to the changes.

Options For Celebration:

There are a number of ways a parish might decide to celebrate first Reconciliation:

- ◆ A communal penance service with only the candidates and their families present
- ◆ Individual confession at the regularly scheduled time in the parish,
- ◆ One of the parish communal penance services during Advent or Lent
- ◆ An individual appointment with the parish priest.

Parishes may choose to schedule the celebration of First Eucharist on an individual basis when, according to the judgement of their parents and parish leadership, a child is ready to receive the sacrament. When all children have received individually, the entire group may come together and celebrate.

Keeping in mind the importance of the parish community and family involvement, a parish may schedule a single annual Eucharistic celebration for the entire group of first communicants. Typically, this would take place in the Easter season.

A parish may schedule First Eucharist celebrations at several Sunday liturgies throughout the spring and summer. Depending on the readiness of their child, parents and children could choose a celebration that would best meet their needs. A number of Sundays would lend themselves to the celebration especially Good Shepherd Sunday, Pentecost and Corpus Christi, as well as other Sundays throughout the year.

CONTACT THE RELIGIOUS EDUCATION OFFICE FOR MORE INFORMATION, IDEAS AND RESOURCES FOR CELEBRATING THE SACRAMENTS OF RECONCILIATION AND EUCHARIST