

Guidelines for Catechesis during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The Coronavirus pandemic has significantly disrupted the ways that we have formed people in the faith and promoted a loving relationship with God. In the spring, as our churches were closed, classes were either cancelled or moved to an online format extremely rapidly. We had no choice but to react rapidly as the ground shifted beneath our feet and the world went into lockdown in order to slow the spread of COVID-19.

Now that we are beginning to get a clearer sense of what the public health climate in New Brunswick will look like in the fall, we can begin to make plans for what catechesis may look like in the era of COVID-19. In all things, we need to be mindful of the current health restrictions set out by the province as they may change at any time due to further outbreaks or a second wave.

As a parish, you will need to decide which elements of your religious education and sacramental preparation can be done online, by families in their homes, or safely in person.

Gatherings for Religious Education

Any gatherings that take place for religious education must be done with utmost care for safety of all involved, and with increased sanitation and attendance-tracking requirements.

<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/diseases-conditions/cleaning-disinfecting-public-spaces.html>

Small Faith Formation In-Person Gatherings

As per the guidelines issued for religious gatherings, children's religious formation must adhere to the same guidelines for schools as outlined by the province.

<https://www2.gnb.ca/content/dam/gnb/Departments/ed/pdf/return-to-school-guide.pdf>

When gathering in person, it is important to keep in mind all of the regulations in the document above.

Some Key Highlights:

- Kindergarten–Grade 2 reduced group sizes, as close to 15 students as possible.
- Grades 3–5 reduced group sizes, as close to 22 students as possible.
- Grades 6–8 regular class sizes.
- When physical distancing is not possible masks are strongly recommended.
- Physical distancing between groups should be in place for drop-off and pick-ups, and only one group at a time should be in a shared space. Increased hygiene protocols, with cough and sneeze guideline reminders

Can we go back to gathering as normal, with small class sizes?

Even if your parish can meet the criteria for small faith formation gatherings listed above, that does not mean that you are expected to re-instate religious education *as it was* as soon as possible. Prudence and discernment must be used in determining when and how to conduct religious education in the fall.

For instance, you may choose to gather in person only once per month, or every second week, rather than weekly. With the current attendance restrictions of public Masses and Sunday obligation currently lifted, religious education will likely not be tied to Sunday Mass attendance for quite some time. Less frequent gatherings would ensure that they can be done with greater care for safety and sanitation, and also would alleviate some of the anxiety that may be natural when rejoining public life after a lengthy lockdown. It also would give parents an opportunity to monitor for symptoms, and for the parish to follow up with other attendees in between gatherings if any incident of illness occurs.

Many parishes may choose to move all religious education to an online format, or a home-based family faith formation model this fall, and they should not feel any pressure to gather in person.

Best Practices

Involvement of Parents/Families

Parents are the primary educators for their children in the faith, and their role cannot be overstated. “Family catechesis, therefore, precedes, accompanies, and enriches all other forms of catechesis.”¹ With the current gathering restrictions in place, now more than ever we need to rely on parents to assist in a critical way with the catechesis of their children.

As more programs move to family-based or parent-based, we should remember that the goal is not for parents to simply to imitate a catechetical classroom environment. “The ministry of evangelization carried out by Christian parents is original and irreplaceable. It assumes the characteristics typical of family life itself, which should be interwoven with love, simplicity, practicality and daily witness.”²

Religious education in the family goes beyond teaching, and is modeled in daily life. Catechists can find ways to help parents bring the faith into their daily life through supporting them to pray with their children before meals or before bed, discover a new saint together, or watch religious media together that is designed for children (such as through www.formed.org).

If religious education takes place mainly in a home-based model, the role of a catechist shifts from primarily a teacher to primarily a coach and support for the parents. You may choose to use the *Be My Disciples* “At Home Family Guide” as a guide towards having religious education at

¹ Pope Saint John Paul II, *Catechesi Tradendae* (Catechesis in our Time), 68

² *Familiaris Consortio* (The Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World), 53

home in some fashion. It might also be helpful to offer the “With My Family” booklet which provides a chapter background and family activities.

A key value in this time is flexibility and adaptability and will be unique from family to family. The parent, with the support of the catechist, can adapt the At Home Family Guide in order to suit the needs of their children.

Online Gatherings

Modern technology has given us the opportunity to gather online in new ways. Many parishes have started to use Zoom or other meeting tools to gather for catechesis or small groups. We continue to encourage creativity in using these tools to gather for prayer and teaching, but also to build community with one another while remaining physically distant.

Online gatherings are most successful when there is a high amount of interaction between everybody involved. Try to find ways to engage the students as much as possible so that they are not merely passive recipients of content.

Have Consistency Where Possible

One thing to keep in mind is to try to have consistency with what we are offering throughout the year. When planning, try to develop something that can be easily adjusted as the health climate changes and restrictions are either tightened or loosened. Catechists and parents do not want, or need, to be starting from scratch mid-way through the year.

Remember in all of your considerations, the focus really needs to be on families and how we can support them in their faith. Encourage family prayer in its many forms...traditional prayers and devotions, online prayer sites, meditation, music playlists.

As much as possible, we should try to plan for our catechetical year in a way that can remain consistent even if we need to tighten up restrictions on in-person gatherings due to a second wave of infections.

Facebook and Catechetical Website – additional resources, tips and ideas will be shared on both locations.

<https://www.facebook.com/diocesesjreform>

<https://sjdfaithformation.com/>

Diocesan webpage – any updates with respect to diocesan protocol and faith gatherings will be shared.

<https://www.dioceseofsaintjohn.org/>

Site for up-to-date information on Public Health statements

<https://www2.gnb.ca/content/gnb/en/corporate/promo/covid-19.html>