



Introduction

Preparing children and youth for the celebration of the sacraments is a time of great joy and anticipation. It is also a lot of work! There is a need for long-range scheduling, recruitment of volunteers, coordination of key staff and other ministers, communication and meetings with parents, selection of appropriate resources, facilitation of catechetical sessions, and planning the liturgical event. Whether you are new to the process of sacramental preparation or a seasoned coordinator, this series of booklets will serve as a helpful guide toward effective planning and implementation of sacramental programs. Creative ideas for engaging candidates and families, along with reminders around key moments in the process provide practical as well as inspirational help in developing a program that fits your parish needs.

Preparation for the sacraments offers great opportunities for welcoming and engaging families in their walk of faith and experience of the parish community. May you find great blessings as you undertake this work and minister to those about to take part in celebrating the sacraments.

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The Big Picture

In writing this book about sacrament preparation for First Eucharist, my assumption is that, in addition to the sacrament preparation program for Eucharist, you are responsible for the parish faith formation program as well as other sacrament preparation programs in the parish. If you are responsible for the parish faith formation program, you may also be responsible for the Eucharist preparation for students in the Catholic school if one is part of your parish.

Whether you are a new catechetical leader or you've been in that position but are now starting in a new parish or collaborative, or you're a member of the parish but new to the position of catechetical leader, it's good to know some history of why the Eucharist sacrament program is what it is. Rome wasn't built in a day, so the saying goes, and neither is a quality First Eucharist program. It's probably wise to maintain the status quo the first year... watching, listening, and asking questions. On the other hand, maybe the sacrament preparation program has been identified as a priority that needs a new vision. Be enthusiastic, encouraging, and nurturing.

➔ Suggestion

Ask "inquiring-minds-want-to-know"-type questions to collect any information in getting the "big picture." Try to find out about past history, traditions, the who, what, when, where, why, and how of the existing program.

Consider: Probing questions can seem "innocent," just getting background information, or they can come across as sounding intimidating or critical of what has been done. Start your

probing with questions like this: “I notice that _____, could you tell me about that?” or, “It seems like _____. Am I correct?” “Am I correct in understanding that _____?” Avoid questions like “Why aren’t you doing _____?” or “Why aren’t you using _____?”

A Clear Picture

Is your catechetical program described and explained in print, including expectations? Are policies, practices, and expectations for sacrament preparation programs established, written down, and shared so parents know what the First Eucharist program will entail? People don’t like surprises at the last minute. For instance, if students need to complete a first-grade program before entering second grade (typically the sacrament preparation grade), is this clearly spelled out somewhere?

Is there a handbook for parents/families about the catechetical program and sacrament programs? If you don’t have a handbook, start to think about what this could look like, even if it is not at the top of your priority list the first year.

➔ Suggestion

Start to change a mindset from “grade level” to “year.”

Instead of referring to Grade 1, Grade 2, etc., use “Year 1,” “Year 2,” etc. when describing your program. For example, “Our sacrament preparation program for reconciliation and Eucharist is in Year 2 of our faith formation program. All students must participate in our Year 1 program before entering Year 2.” Do you get my point? I think this helps take away the “stigma” that might be associated with this policy, but it also supports the policy in a nice way.

Who's on First?

Be clear about who constitutes the parish team (pastor, other priests, deacons, catechetical leader(s), liturgy/music director, youth minister, adult education coordinator, parish nurse, principal/if there is a Catholic school, other). How does the team work together, and who is responsible for what? Is there a regularly scheduled parish staff meeting for collaboration? Do you have anyone identified as a “coordinator” to help with your sacrament programs? What, if anything, does the pastor need/want to approve that impacts your job as catechetical leader/director of sacrament preparation programs? Ask about how things get done and whose responsibility it is.

Is there a parish bulletin? Who is responsible, and what is the deadline for submitting articles? Is social media used for communication? What process is used? How do I schedule and book space in the parish for meetings and activities? Who is responsible for a master calendar?

Consider identifying individuals as “go-to people” to assist with meetings and events. Enlist veteran catechists who have been involved in the First Eucharist preparation program. They know the content and importance of this year and could possibly offer help with activities and meetings.

Plan Like Your Child Is in the Program

Have you seen this sign posted on any lawns in your neighborhood: “DRIVE LIKE YOUR KIDS LIVE HERE”? There are several in my area, mostly on properties in busy, high-traffic residential areas. The message is simple: “put yourself in my place.” Make use of this idea as you plan, organize, and describe your sacrament program and expectations.

Being the catechetical leader doesn't mean you have to make parents "jump through hoops." Believe it or not, this sometimes seems to be the case. It only leads to a "Us (Church)" / "Them (Parents)" mentality. If you had a child in the First Eucharist preparation program, what would you like to do and see happen? My guess is that you would want your child excited about this sacrament. I would hope you would want to be engaged with your child. I'm sure you would like to see a program that is organized and well run, a program that involves parents in a realistic way. And definitely you would want to sense hospitality and a welcoming feeling as a partner in this sacrament program. So, now you know what you need to do!

In many respects, family involvement in sacrament preparation programs presents opportunities for teachable moments. Not all families attend Mass. Not all parents are invested in being the primary educators of the faith for their children. However, with their child in the First Eucharist program, they can grow with their child in understanding the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist and the importance of this sacrament in the life of the Church.

Be sure your parent or parent/child meetings and events are welcoming, well planned, and organized, with opportunities for engagement. Remember, this is not an opportunity to impress parents with your catechetical knowledge and background. We don't want to overwhelm or intimidate them. To some of them, it's just making First Communion. Accompany parents where they are. It is much easier to engage parents when meetings include both parents and children.

➔ Suggestion

Schedule meetings for one hour...and stick to it. Whatever needs to be said could be said in one hour, especially if both parents and children will be attending. Parents will be appreciative knowing that you only expect them to be there for that one hour. ***Provide options for meetings.*** Let parents know what you have scheduled and the options for days/times. Feel free to add: "If you are unable to attend, I will call and arrange a time to meet privately with you after the sessions have all ended." Providing options makes your approach hospitable and accommodating and offers "leverage" for getting everyone involved.

You may want/need parent-only meetings (when you would like to talk to parents only). Hopefully, you won't need many of these. These should be for organizational/ procedural issues, such as an orientation meeting to explain the program. Necessary information that would be important to provide could include: class schedule, student text used, supplementary parent resource for at-home family involvement in the preparation program, expectations for parent involvement, dates for special events (the retreat!), date(s) for celebration of First Eucharist, rehearsal, etc. The importance of Mass attendance would also be stressed within the context of preparing for the reception of First Eucharist later in the year. These parent-only meetings could be scheduled during the time their child is in class. If possible, provide coffee, water, and simple refreshments to make parents feel comfortable and welcome. Remember, not all of them are excited to be there. If parents are unable to attend on the day of their child's class, give them the option of attending a meeting during a different class session on another day/time.

Suggested Orientation Meeting Format*

Welcome/Brief opening prayer

Overview of the meeting (agenda topics)

Introductory brief activity (optional)

Agenda topics

Questions and answers / discussion

Brief closing prayer

** Be sure you have any handouts, materials, videos, takeaways, etc., ready so you can maintain momentum and time isn't wasted.*

Everyone is busy. The required sessions in your Eucharist program may be competing with many other activities and family commitments. Don't schedule one time, expecting everyone to be there, and set yourself up for disappointment. Provide an option.

Consider: In one parish, the DRE wanted to encourage and suggest appropriate gifts for First Communion. She made arrangements with a Catholic religious supply store to have available at a parent meeting sample gifts and accessories for First Communion. This was not a moneymaking venture, but a service for parents. Parents had an opportunity to order, and the company shipped all purchases to the parish for parent pick up. Check out Catholic religious supply stores in your area and their interest in doing this.

When I talk to parents at the beginning of the year, I suggest not waiting until First Communion for a gift(s) from Mom and Dad. Make this whole year special. Parents can shop with their child for a special gift(s) (children's Bible, crucifix, Mass book, etc.) and have that gift during the year preparing for First Communion.