



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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Knowing Your Team

Preparing children to receive the sacrament of reconciliation is a group project requiring the cooperative participation of a cross-section of the parish community. Your first challenge as the director of the sacramental preparation program for reconciliation is to discover, support, and coordinate the diverse talents, strengths, and weaknesses of those who will form the program's team. Getting to know your team is a must.

The Pastor

Well in advance of the program's starting date, arrange to meet with the pastor. Use that time to get to know one another better and to share your visions for the reconciliation program. Working together, consider how you will divide the duties and responsibilities crucial to the smooth functioning of the program. This straightforward conversation can produce the kind of understanding between you and the pastor that will reduce errors, conflicts, duplication of effort, and confusion as the program unfolds. Before your meeting ends, take time to record your decisions on paper. Your written commitment guarantees that, from start to finish, you both will be literally on the same page.

The Catechists

Follow up your pastoral meeting with a gathering of the catechists who will staff the reconciliation program. You'll find that while catechists share a genuine willingness to assist in the faith formation of children, they differ considerably in background, skills, and catechetical style.

The best approach to getting to know your catechists is *any* approach that opens the door to relaxed, productive communication. You might survey them informally, chat with them

individually, observe them in action, or just be available to hear both their good news and not so good news.

Whatever method you choose, be fully attentive, and gently but firmly respond to what you hear and see, following up over time as needed.

The better you know the strengths and weaknesses of each catechist, the more you can do to maximize their contributions and minimize their teaching concerns.

Custodial Assistants

A smoothly operating reconciliation program requires the support of conscientious and reliable custodial assistants. These men and women provide the clean space and furniture/equipment arrangements that frame every meeting, activity, and event you plan. Developing a positive working relationship with those who fill such a vital role revolves around inclusion and respect.

Take the steps and say the words that publicly and privately recognize custodians as valuable contributors to the reconciliation program.

Getting to know your team means seeing clearly the valuable part each individual plays and appreciating how together you can produce an effective reconciliation program for the children of the parish.

Choosing Reconciliation Program Materials

The first, best step you can take to assist program catechists is to offer them quality catechetical tools, specifically children's texts and catechists' guides.

Which Way to Go

A commonsense approach to choosing reconciliation program materials is to review the quality of the text and guide currently used in the parish by considering these questions:

- Is the catechist guide well organized and easy for catechists to teach from?
- Is the text content presented in ways that children find interesting and helpful, not boring and outdated?
- Would a few alterations in the current resources create a satisfactory version of this same program or should the present program be replaced?

If evaluation suggests that the current resources, or a modified version of those resources, can no longer meet the needs of catechists or children, it's time to consider other options.

Purchasing Guidelines

In your search, determine to be guided by a few budget/quality considerations.

- Neither the parish nor parents have *unlimited* financial resources for new text purchases.
- New* does not always mean *better*.
- Expensive* isn't necessarily more *valuable*.
- A *purchase* is also an *investment*.
- Sound shepherding* over time can reduce long-term expense.

Finding a Friendly Solution

Among the many acceptable choices of texts and guides authored by catechetical professionals and approved by Church leadership, look for those friendly to children, catechists, parents, and the parish.

A “child friendly” text is one in which vocabulary and activities are age appropriate. It also means you can easily imagine parish children connecting to and learning from the examples, stories, projects, and prayers the text offers.

Guides that are “catechist friendly” are packed with helpful teaching suggestions to support the efforts of both veteran and novice catechists. The best guides explain activities in language that is plain, direct, and easy to follow. “Catechist friendly” guides and texts will not require frequent interruptions for rephrasing or extensive explanations.

Look for a program that is also “parent friendly.” Estimate if the overall tone of the material is a good fit, not just for children but also for their parents. Does the program present at-home conversations and activities that will make sense to parents and offer them ways to comfortably discuss the sacrament of reconciliation with their children?

Finally, choose a program that is “parish friendly.” Be convinced the chapter/content organization of the program you are reviewing will match up easily with the parish calendar and allow for parish-wide connections and involvement.

Help Along the Way

Don’t let the search overwhelm you. Seek advice from experienced catechists, especially those who have prepared children for the sacrament of reconciliation in your parish in the past. Discover and note what has worked and what has not.

Talk to faith formation leadership in nearby parishes about

the pros and cons of material they are currently using and why other resources were dropped. Still in doubt? Confirm the value of possible choices by seeking advice from regional or diocesan faith formation leadership.

Don't hesitate to call sales representatives of text/guide publishers. Many are former faith formation leaders or catechists who will genuinely listen, understand, and respond to your needs. Most will send sample copies for review on request.

Be thorough in your search. Try to envision how catechists, children, and parents in your parish will benefit from the material. Be convinced before ordering that this program is a solid match for the people who will use it.

If choosing reconciliation program materials sounds like a serious matter, that's because it is. *What* students learn about the sacrament of reconciliation and *how* they learn it will color how they regard the sacrament for years to come.

Scheduling Guide

The key elements of the reconciliation program are a well-organized catechetical team and carefully chosen catechetical materials. What brings that team and those materials together and allows them to produce a successful reconciliation program is a thoughtfully constructed schedule.

Start the scheduling process by reviewing last year's parish calendar. Note the date when catechetical programs began, the duration of the reconciliation program, and when the reconciliation rehearsal and the rite of reconciliation took place. Let that information direct you as you frame the program for the year ahead.

When the Last Should Be First

An unlikely but productive way to create the reconciliation program calendar is to begin by setting the date for the celebration of the rite of reconciliation. The early announcement of this pivotal date serves to focus and inspire everyone involved in the program. On the practical side, the earlier you act to choose a date, the more options are available.

Using the date of last year's ceremony as a guide, consider comparable dates for the current year. Review a short list of potential dates with the pastor. Make the final selection together, but only after you have confirmed some key elements:

- The availability of confessors,
- The availability of church space,
- The absence of conflict with school or community events.

Once the date for the rite of reconciliation is established, follow up by scheduling reconciliation rehearsal for the best date/time available in the preceding week.

To avoid potential conflicts, immediately list the date and time of the reconciliation rehearsal and the rite of reconciliation in parish and community calendars. Promptly and repeatedly share this same information with students, parents, catechists, and the parish staff. It is impossible to over-publicize this information.

As time-consuming and detail-oriented as the date-setting process may seem, experience confirms it is far less taxing than trying to patch together a last-minute alternative, should conflicts suddenly appear.

All the Rest

With these dates in place and your opening date likely established for you by parish practice, direct your attention to organizing the balance of program sessions.

Calculate the number of teaching days available between the first meeting and the rehearsal date. Then, mindful of the sequential order found in your catechist's guide, assign lessons, a retreat, and other special events or activities to specific calendar dates.

It might be the case that the number of meeting days and the number of text lessons will not match. Resolve the mismatch by doubling up on consecutive lessons or passing over parts of lessons in which material has already been adequately covered.

Complete your scheduling by locking in dates of special interest to adults: registration deadline, opening parents' meeting, catechists' meetings.

As you plan, be respectful of the parallel demands on the free time of children and adults. Factor in vacations, holidays, and other potential school or community conflicts. Check your schedule against last year's parish calendar for possible errors or oversights. Then double check it with custodial assistants and a few veteran catechists, and get final approval from the pastor.

Forward copies of the completed schedule for inclusion on parish and community calendars. Make copies available to catechists, children, and parents. During the year, when special calendar events approach, highlight dates and related information via the parish bulletin, altar announcements, social media, and take-home notices.

Finally, be prepared to accommodate unavoidable schedule changes. Stand ready to postpone and reschedule events and meet the unexpected with even-tempered flexibility.