



Introduction

Preparing parents, children, and/or 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.

A Welcoming Approach to Infant Baptism

A few years after leaving my role as a pastoral associate I ran into a young mother who had gone through the sacramental preparation process for infant baptism that I had coordinated. She told me how welcoming the entire experience was and how she continued to participate in the parish now that her child was in preschool. It was not only a gratifying—and somewhat rare—experience but also one that affirmed the approach to all sacramental preparation at the parish during my time on the staff. With so many young families comprising the community, our pastoral team decided we needed to form all ministry, but especially preparation for baptism, with an emphasis on hospitality. When new parents contacted the parish about their child's baptism, we knew it was an opportunity for evangelization. This required flexibility, accommodation to family needs and issues, and a willingness to change course around individual parental concerns. In the end, this worked best not only for the parents but also for the parish at large. Baptismal celebrations became occasions of great festivity and welcome.

Where to Begin

Evangelizing parents, while also affirming their role in raising children in the faith, is paramount. Drawing others, especially godparents, into this task underscores the important role the community plays in the sacrament. Thus, the appropriate time and place for the celebration of the rite is during the Sunday liturgy when the entire parish community can participate. "Baptism should be celebrated, insofar as possible, on a Sunday, the day on which the Church recalls the Paschal Mystery, and indeed in a common celebration for all the newly born, and with the attendance of a large number of the faithful,

or at least of the relatives, friends, and neighbors, and with their active participation” (*Order of Baptism of Children* 72).

A starting point for sacramental preparation, therefore, is the consideration of those involved in the process. This includes, of course, the pastor and other clergy, liturgical ministers, catechists, and volunteers who will participate in the planning, implementation, and celebration of the sacrament. Depending on the size of the parish and the frequency of infant baptism, it may or may not be necessary to convene a team. Either way, it is vital to set up lines of communication so that all of those involved will remain informed and involved. In order to continue efforts around evangelization, it will be helpful to seek the expertise of those involved in programs that comprise post-baptismal outreach. This might include MOMs groups, preschool programs, and catechetical ministry. Given the need to keep accurate records around baptisms, it will also be necessary to consult with administrative staff so that certificates are issued and the appropriate information is maintained in the official parish registry.

While the Code of Canon Law names the criteria for baptism, individual (arch)dioceses often have additional pastoral directives around the preparation process, involvement of godparents, and recommendations for resources and pastoral needs. It is also important to consider the traditions around baptism that are part of various cultures represented in your parish. These might include blessings, clothing, or involvement of godparents and grandparents. A welcoming approach can adhere to Church practice while also including family or cultural customs.

Setting Up a Program

Once these larger considerations are addressed, the practical considerations can fall into place. Some will be driven by parish demographics. As noted in my own experience, the parish consisted largely of “full-nest” families. Thus, it was not unusual to have baptisms of babies and young children happening throughout the year. As a way to accommodate them, I scheduled individual interviews as soon as possible after the initial contact from parents. This was followed up by quarterly parent sessions. Since families were so busy, we made a determination to only convene the parents one time as a way to offer information about the scheduling of the baptism as well as to provide catechesis around the sacrament and the role of the parent in nurturing faith in the home. Such an approach meant compiling resources that would assist the parents in preparing for and taking part in their child’s baptism. Here are some general suggestions for setting up a program that will fit your individual parish needs:

Communication and Scheduling

- General information can be listed as part of a regular Sunday bulletin and on the parish web site. Begin with the basic information: how and who to contact about arranging for a child’s baptism.

- Make phone calls or send emails in response to the first contact. Let parents know you are glad to assist them and look forward to welcoming their child into the Church family. This communication should include basic details about the preparation process: how baptisms are

scheduled, initial interviews, parent sessions, and next steps. Framing each of these as part of an overall tone of pastoral care will go a long way in setting a hospitable tone to your sacramental preparation efforts.

- Formal registration in the program takes the parents to the next step. This might include a one-on-one meeting to greet the parents, learn about their expectations, respond to their questions, and acquaint them with the parish procedure. Such meetings, while time-consuming, go a long way in surfacing any pastoral concerns around the parents' current involvement in the Church, uncovering issues about the parents' commitment to raising their child in the faith, learning about family or cultural expectations, and providing an environment for sharing confidential information. If parents have already gone through sacramental preparation with an older child, this meeting can also determine the need or interest for participation in the parent sessions.
- Registration for the program should also include information about when and where parent sessions will take place, what they will cover, who should attend, and whether childcare will be provided for the children to be baptized and/or their siblings. Use a welcoming approach when it comes to these gatherings so that parents see them as an opportunity to plan for and celebrate this joyous time in their family life.
- As the date of the baptism approaches, send a short letter—via regular mail or email—to remind parents of the date, time, and other details relative to the celebration.

Provide reminders about reserved seating and the importance of arriving early enough to go over the ritual with the presider or sacramental preparation coordinator. A blessing prayer for the baby, the parents and/or godparents, or the family is a good way to encourage reflection around the importance of this moment in the child's life.

- Post-baptismal communication is just as vital as the preparatory materials. These might include another blessing prayer, ideas for sharing faith in the home, and information about programs in the parish for parents of young children. If your parish has a post-baptismal program, send along any preliminary materials to inform the parents about continued outreach. With each of these communications, consider the use of bilingual materials as needed.
- Don't forget the importance of communicating with those in the parish who are involved in the preparation process. This begins with the pastor, of course, but also includes other clergy and members of a formal or informal team. Make sure the administrative assistant has copies of all messages to parents so that accurate information can be given out when contacts are made with the parish office.

Resources

- Depending on the size and scope of your parish program, choose resources that will assist in both gathered and non-gathered activities and events. There are several baptismal programs available from Catholic publishers

that contain leader's guides, parent booklets or pamphlets, and information and guidance for godparents. Some also contain digital components, such as DVDs or online videos. Published programs assist greatly in providing a complete and systematic approach to the preparation process. Be aware, however, of the need to tailor them to your individual parish situation. Simply handing parents a book or plugging in a video does not provide the personal touch that is so important in reaching out to and maintaining contact with parents and families.

- One of the most frequent questions parents ask with regard to their child's baptism has to do with the role of the godparent. How do they choose a godparent? Is it necessary to have two godparents? (no). Do godparents need to be Catholic? (yes). Can the parent also be the godparent? (no). Then there are questions about what a godparent does prior to and after the baptism. Make sure your list of resources includes material for both the parents and the godparents around this important responsibility. In addition, include prayers for godparents as part of the preparation process, and suggest ways for them to be involved as the parents prepare for the day of the baptism. If godparents cannot be physically present for the rite, invite them to send a message to the child that the parents might read on the day of the baptism. When compiling post-baptismal resources, don't forget to include suggestions for godparents that will keep them in touch with their godchild. These might include sending cards on the anniversary of the baptism, prayers for one's godchild, and storytelling and/or conversation prompts that keep the relationship special and ongoing.