

The Celebration of First Holy Communion with Children

Introduction

“At the Last Supper, on the night he was betrayed, our Savior instituted the Eucharist sacrifice of his Body and Blood. This he did in order to perpetuate the sacrifice on the cross throughout the ages until he should come again, and so entrust to his beloved Spouse, the Church, a memorial of his death and resurrection: a sacrament of love, a sign of unity, a bond of charity, a Paschal banquet in which Christ is consumed, the mind is filled with grace, and a pledge of future glory is given to us.” (CCC #133)

1. Celebrating the Sacrament of Eucharist for the first time should be an integral part of the ongoing religious experience of a child. Receiving First Communion further initiates a child into the life of the Christian community. Catechesis should take into consideration the child's age, ability and development.
2. Since Sacraments are a community celebration, reception of First Communion should occur in a communal setting at a Sunday celebration of the Mass. All members of the parish community should be advised of and invited to the celebration of this sacred event.
3. As the primary educators of their child, parent/guardian have the first and most important influence on the faith development of their child. The best and most fruitful catechesis for the reception of First Communion must involve them. Parishes must provide catechesis for parent/guardian on Eucharist before their child's first reception of the sacrament. This catechesis is meant to present the Church's rich teaching of the sacrament. It should be designed to deepen the parent/guardian understanding and love of the sacrament so they can guide their child into fuller participation in the life and worship of the Christian community.
4. The normal time for a child to be catechized for the reception of First Communion is in the winter and spring seasons of second grade, after having been prepared for the reception and receiving of the Sacrament of Penance. The preferred time for the reception of First Communion is during the Easter Season.

POLICIES

I. Prerequisites for Candidacy

- A. At least one parent/guardian should be a practicing, active member of their Parish Faith Community.
- B. Parent/guardian must provide a copy of the child's Baptismal certificate if baptized in a Parish other than in the one in which he/she will receive First Holy Communion.
- C. A child must have attained the age and/or use of reason.¹
- D. Parent/guardian and the child are expected to participate in the Sunday mass every week.
- E. A child must have completed the previous year of formal religious education in a Catholic school, the parish program or in their previous parish. The parish curriculum must have been completed either at home or in parish classes as outlined in parish policies.
- F. The child must be currently participating in a program of systematic, approved catechesis either in a Catholic school or as a registered student of a parish program. A child who is receiving religious education as part of an overall home school program must follow text that is currently listed on the conformity list approved by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.
- G. At the same time, the child must also be enrolled in a parish process of preparation for the reception of First Holy Communion in which children from the Catholic schools, home schooling and the catechetical ministry programs are united. They must participate in all of its communal dimensions (ritual, prayer services, etc.) and any other requirements determined by the parish.
- H. A child must have been thoroughly prepared for and celebrated the sacrament of Penance, unless some serious pastoral reason suggests otherwise in a particular case.²

¹ *Canon #97.2*: Before the completion of the seventh year a minor is called an infant and is to be held incompetent (non sui compos); with the completion of the seventh year one is presumed to have the use of reason.

- I. Any child, through age 17, who does not meet these prerequisites, is addressed in the Pastoral Considerations section of this document.

II. Catechesis

- A. Catechesis for the sacrament of Penance is to precede and be kept distinct and separate from the catechesis for the celebration of First Holy Communion.³
- B. Catechesis is to be based on the Rite of First Eucharist, be attentive to the experiences of the child, be sensitive to language and family considerations, and foster active involvement in the liturgical celebrations.⁴
- C. Catechesis for the child must be taken from text that have been found to be in doctrinal compliance with the Catechism of the Catholic Church by the Bishops' Ad Hoc Committee on the Catechism and should:
 1. Familiarize the child with the major events in Christ's life as proclaimed in the Gospels. Special attention should be given to the Last Supper, the Jewish roots of this covenant meal, and the Paschal Mystery.⁵
 2. Familiarize the child with the Mass and encourage their full, active and conscious participation.

² *Response to question about Canon #914:* That children should be prepared to celebrate First Confession before First Communion. "The basis for this observation, for children, is not so much the state of sin in which they may be, as the formative and pastoral aim; that is, to educate them, from a tender age, to the true Christian spirit of penance and conversion, to the necessity of asking pardon of God and above all to a loving and confident abandonment to the mercy of the Lord. (*LETTER FROM THE CONGREGATION FOR THE SACRAMENTS TO THE NCCB ON THE SACRAMENTS OF RECONCILIATION, HOLY ORDERS AND MARRIAGE, Rome, December 20, 1986.*)

³ *Canon #914 part 1:* It is the responsibility of parents and those who take the place of parents as well as the pastor to see the children who have reached the use of reason are correctly prepared and nourished by the divine food as early as possible, preceded by sacramental confession.

⁴ *DMC #13:* Special mention should be made of the catechesis through which children are prepared for First Communion. Not only should they learn the truths of faith concerning the Eucharist, but they should also understand how from First Communion on – prepared by penance according to their need and fully initiated into the body of Christ – they may actively participate in the Eucharist with the people of God and have their places at the Lord's table and in the community of their brothers and sisters. By the very fact of celebration children easily come to appreciate some liturgical elements, for example, greetings, silence and common praise (especially when this is sung in common).

⁵ *NDC #121:* Catechesis recognizes the Eucharist as the heart of Christian life. Reflecting upon Christ's life as proclaimed in the Gospels, catechesis considers the Last Supper and the Jewish roots of this covenant meal. It expresses the Church's faith that Christ is present, not only in the Christian assembly and in the reading of His word, but in a unique and most excellent way in this sacrament; that the bread and wine are changed, a change traditionally and appropriately expressed by the word transubstantiation, so that while the appearance of bread and wine remain, the reality is the Body and Blood of Christ.

3. Help the child understand that under the consecrated species of bread and wine Christ himself, living and glorious, is present in a true, real, and substantial manner: his Body and his Blood, with his soul and divinity⁶.
4. Present the Eucharist as a sign of communion with God and the Catholic community as the “sacrament of sacraments.”⁷
5. Help the child understand the celebration of Eucharist: as a living sacrifice and a sacred meal, as thanksgiving, as nourishment for the Christian life, as the source and summit of the Christian life, and as a call to works of charity, service, missionary activity and witness to the faith.⁸
6. Instruct the child on: the reception of Christ’s Body and Blood in an informed and reverent manner, the reception of the Body of Christ either in the hand or on the tongue, the reception of the Blood of Christ from the chalice⁹, the Eucharistic fast, the obligation to be free from serious sin before sharing in Holy Communion¹⁰, and the obligation to share in Holy Communion at least during the Easter Season¹¹.
7. Help the child learn the prayers and responses used during the Eucharistic celebration.
8. Encourage the child and their families to celebrate the sacrament of Eucharist regular and often after their First Communion.

D. Catechesis for Parent/Guardian

1. As the primary educators of their child, parent/guardian have the first and most important influence on the faith development of their child. It is very important to have the parent/guardian involved in this process of

⁶ CCC #1413 – Council of Trent: DS 1640;1651

⁷ GDC #11 ...The sacraments, which like regenerating forces, spring from the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ, are also a whole. They form an organic whole in which each particular sacrament has its own vital place. In this whole, the Eucharist occupies a unique place to which all of the other sacraments are ordained. The Eucharist is to be presented as the “sacrament of sacraments.”

⁸ GDC #70: In the Christian community the disciples of Jesus Christ are nourished at a twofold table: that of the word of God and that of the Body of Christ. The gospel and the Eucharist are the constant food for the journey to the Father’s House. The action of the Holy Spirit operates so that the gift of “communion” and the task of “mission” are deepened and lived in an increasingly intense way.

⁹ GIRM #281: Holy Communion has a fuller form as a sign when it is distributed under both kinds. For in this form the sign of the Eucharistic banquet is more clearly evident and clear expression is given to the divine will by which the new and eternal Covenant is ratified in the Blood of the Lord, as also the relationship between the Eucharistic banquet and the eschatological banquet in the Father’s Kingdom.

¹⁰ Canon # 916: A person who is conscious of grave sin is not to celebrate Mass or receive the Body of the Lord without previous sacramental confession.

¹¹ Canon #920: All the faithful, after they have been initiated into the Most Holy Eucharist, are bound by the obligation to receive Communion at least once a year. This precept must be fulfilled during the Easter season unless it is fulfilled for a just cause at some other time during the year.

preparation.

2. Parent/guardian of all children are to participate in those catechetical programs offered by the parish that prepare parent/guardian and to help them grow in their own understanding and appreciation of the Eucharist so that they can guide their child into fuller participation in the life and worship of the Christian community.¹² These sessions must include the rich teachings of the Church on the sacrament and should be sensitive to the cultural and inviting to the faith experiences of those involved.

III. Discernment of Readiness

- A. Parent/guardian and the catechist are expected to foster the child's desire and readiness to celebrate First Communion.
- B. A child should be able to demonstrate an understanding of the difference between the consecrated bread and wine (the Body and Blood of Christ) and ordinary bread and wine.
- C. It is ultimately the responsibility of the parish Pastor or Sacramental Minister in collaboration with the parent/guardian, program director and catechist to insure that the child has reached the age and/or use of reason and are properly prepared.¹³

IV. Celebration of the Sacrament

- A. The celebration of First Communion should take place at a regularly scheduled Sunday Eucharist.¹⁴
- B. Because of the paschal character of the sacrament of the Eucharist, the Easter season is the appropriate time for the celebration of First Communion.

¹² *Canon #914, part1:* It is the responsibility, in the first place, of parents and those who take the place of parents as well as the pastor to see the children who have reached the use of reason are correctly prepared.

¹³ *Canon #843, part 2:* Pastors of souls and other members of the Christian faithful, according to their respective ecclesiastical function, have the duty to take care that those who seek the sacraments are prepared to receive them by proper evangelization and catechetical instruction, attentive to the norms issued by competent authority.

¹⁴ *CCC #2182:* Participation in the communal celebration of the Sunday Eucharist is a testimony of belonging and of being faithful to Christ and to His Church. The faithful give witness by this to their communion in faith and charity. Together they testify to God's holiness and their hope of salvation. They strengthen one another under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

- C. The place for the celebration of First Communion at Eucharist is the parish church.¹⁵
- D. Sensitivity to language issues of those involved should be considered in the preparation of the celebration of the sacrament.
- E. Children in parish catechetical programs, Catholic schools, and home schooled children should be integrated into each celebration. No group should have a private or separate celebration.¹⁶
- F. The preparation of the liturgical celebration should involve the director of catechetical ministry, the director of liturgy, the religion coordinator in the school, the catechists and the Pastor/Sacramental Minister.
- G. It is the responsibility of the priest celebrant to adapt the homily to the children.¹⁷

V. Records

- A. The names of those children who celebrated First Communion, the minister, and place and date of the ceremony are to be recorded in the parish Communion register and sent to parish of baptism.

VI. Pastoral Considerations

- A. Celebration of First Holy Communion for children with disabilities

In compliance with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, we should always strive to make all forms of liturgy and sacraments accessible to persons with disabilities. The inclusion of these special people provides the community with a reminder that the Christian community reflects the diversity of God's love. Parish sacramental

¹⁵ DMC #25: The primary place for the Eucharistic celebration for children is the Church.

¹⁶ Canon #837: Liturgical actions are not private actions but celebrations of the Church itself, which is *the sacrament of unity*...Inasmuch as liturgical actions by their nature entail a common celebration; they are to be celebrated with the presence and active participation of the Christian faithful.

¹⁷ DMC # 23: It is the responsibility of the priest who celebrates with children to make the celebration festive, fraternal and meditative. Above all the priest should be concerned about the dignity, clarity and simplicity of his actions and gestures. In speaking to the children he should express himself so that he will be easily understood, while avoiding childish speech.

celebrations should be accessible to persons with disabilities and open to their full, active and conscious participation according to their capacity.

Parent/guardian and pastors are to see to it that children who have reached the age/use of reason are correctly prepared and are nourished by the Eucharist as early as possible. Pastors are to be vigilant lest any children come to the Holy Banquet whom they judge not sufficiently prepared. It is important to note, however, that the criterion for reception of Holy Communion is the same for persons with developmental and mental disabilities as for all persons, namely that the person be able to distinguish the Body of Christ from ordinary food, even if this recognition is evidenced through manner, gesture or reverential silence rather than verbally. Pastors are encouraged to consult with the parent/guardian, diocesan personnel involved with disability issues, psychologists, religious educators and other experts in making their judgment if necessary. If it is determined that a child who is disabled is not ready to receive First Holy Communion, great care is to be taken in explaining the reasons for this decision. Cases of doubt should be resolved in favor of the right of the baptized to receive the sacraments.

B. Home Schooled Children

The Church recognizes that parent/guardian is the primary educator of their child and that some parents choose to live out their role of primary educators by providing formal catechesis at home. The parish pastor and his delegates also have the responsibility to provide catechetical instruction for the child. The rights and responsibilities of parent/guardian and the parish call for collaboration between the two. The same prerequisites for candidacy apply to children who are home schooled for religious education as are required for children in parish programs and Catholic schools. These are detailed in the **Prerequisites for Candidacy** section of this document.

C. Special Circumstances

Every year most parish programs are faced with the enrollment of children Catholic and non-Catholic, catechized and un-catechized, who are not in sequence with the norms of our Diocese. Determination of where these students belong in a specific program/process must be made on an individual basis through an interview process that may include the family, pastor or sacramental minister and program coordinator.

Catholic Families

- a. Baptized Catholic children who are not catechized to age/grade level need to fulfill the prerequisite of a year of approved formal catechesis before starting a sacramental preparation program. Special consideration should be given to the families of these older children, as the parent/guardian also have need of catechesis.¹⁸ Parishes may consider instituting a program such as *Remembering Church* or *Coming Home* as the best way to help bring these families back into the faith community. Parishes are strongly encouraged to require family participation in this type of process in addition to the child's regular participation in religious education classes. Participation in this type of process *may* fulfill the prerequisite of a previous year of religious education, but final decisions on this should be on an individual basis.

Catholic or non-Catholic Families

- b. Un-baptized children, from either Catholic or non-Catholic families, or baptized non-Catholic children, over the age of seven, should be included in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Children. After completing this process, they should be fully initiated into the Church through Baptism/Profession of Faith, Eucharist and Confirmation. Family participation in this process is expected as these parents/guardians need to be involved in a formation process that supports their child's journey towards the sacraments as well as their own faith journey.

Promulgated on September 30, 2004 by

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¹⁸ N.B. Parishes catechizing baptized Catholic children over the age of seven may include those children in an RCIA process for catechesis. They *may* receive their First Holy Communion at the Easter Vigil, but they should not be confirmed.

**Bibliography of References
for the Policies for
First Holy Communion with Children**

<i>Canon</i>	The Code of Canon Law
<i>CCC</i>	Catechism of the Catholic Church
<i>DMC</i>	The Directory for Masses with Children
<i>GDC</i>	The General Directory for Catechesis
<i>GIRM</i>	General Instruction of the Roman Missal
<i>NDC</i>	National Directory for Catechesis

