

Instruction for Sacraments

First Holy Communion



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Diocese of Richmond

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Office of the Bishop

Dear Friends,

I am pleased to share with you the diocesan *Instruction for Sacraments – First Holy Communion*. This *Instruction* includes four elements: a brief Introduction to the theology of the sacrament, Pastoral Directives, Frequently Asked Questions (in English and Spanish), and Pastoral Notes for Persons with Disabilities. The latter three sections explain how Church law pertaining to First Holy Communion is to be implemented within our diocese.

The task of creating the diocesan *Instruction for Sacraments* was undertaken by the Office of Catholic Education in collaboration with the Christian Formation Commission, Office of Hispanic Ministry, and the Office of Persons with Disabilities, in an effort to update policies presented in the 1997 *Called to Faith* sacramental guidelines. I am grateful for their dedication and commitment to this project.

Our Catechism states, "...the family home is rightly called 'the domestic church,' a community of grace and prayer, a school of human virtues and of Christian charity" (CCC 1666). With this principle in mind, the *Instruction* directs our parish efforts to the "first teachers of their children in the ways of faith," the parents or guardians (*Rite of Baptism for Children*, no. 70). Recognizing the positive influence of the parish community, the *Instruction* encourages parishes to welcome families seeking First Holy Communion for their children and strengthen their ability to pass on the faith to their children by means of catechesis and ongoing support of Catholic home life. Through genuine hospitality toward all who come seeking sacraments for their children, parishes spread the Good News of God's unconditional love for all people.

To assist with the implementation of this *Instruction*, the Office of Catholic Education will provide catechetical models and samples and recommend published resources, making this help available as an online companion to this *Instruction*.

Full implementation of this diocesan *Instruction for Sacraments – First Holy Communion* will enrich parish communities, sacrament formation teams, and families who request First Holy Communion for their children. Therefore, I ask you to begin now implementing this *Instruction* through study of the document, review of the associated online offerings, and thoughtful examination and renewal of existing parish practices.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Francis X. DiLorenzo".

Most Reverend Francis X. DiLorenzo
Bishop of Richmond

1 July 2013



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Getting Started

Guiding Principles

Parents are the primary teachers of their children.

Sacraments are gifts of grace.

Sacraments create opportunities for new evangelization.

Sacramental catechesis can help invigorate the faith participation of families.

All catechesis seeks to draw persons into deeper communion with Christ and his Church.

What is a diocesan *Instruction*?

A diocesan *Instruction* is an official document explaining the basic Catholic theology of the sacrament and describing how the body of instruction that introduces the rite for each sacrament and other law pertaining to the sacraments are to be implemented within a particular diocese.

Rev. Msgr. R. Francis Muench J.C.L., Judicial Vicar

What is the intent of the *Instruction*?

The *Instruction* is intended to be a positive, pastoral, helpful tool for shaping effective parish sacramental formation for families and children.

Who should use the *Instruction*?

Pastors, deacons, parish leaders, sacrament teams, and others designated by the pastor

When does the *Instruction* become policy?

July 1, 2013

What does the *Instruction* include?

The *Instruction* consists of an Introduction to the theology of the sacrament, Pastoral Directives, Frequently Asked Questions (in English and Spanish), and Pastoral Notes for Persons with Disabilities.



How should implementation proceed?

Implementation should begin on the policy date and proceed step-wise, as follows:

- Study *Instruction* with staff and sacramental team.
- Review online samples and resources available on Christian Formation website.
- Examine and evaluate existing parish formation for First Holy Communion in light of *Instruction*.
- Develop a plan for renewal of parish practices.
- Provide formation for sacramental team and parish community, as necessary.
- Renew parish practices for full implementation.

Will additional print copies of the *Instruction* be available?

Yes, print copies may be ordered from the Office of Christian Formation. Parishes may also download the *Instruction* from the Christian Formation website and print copies at the parish.

Where can the parish get help implementing this *Instruction*?

For assistance, contact the Office of Christian Formation, the Office of Hispanic Ministry and/or the Center for Marriage, Family & Life, as needed.

Where can the parish find quality resources for sacramental formation?

See the Christian Formation website for an annotated list of print, DVD, and online resources available from publishers; the Office of Hispanic Ministry website for Spanish-language resources; and the Center for Marriage, Family & Life website for disabilities resources.

Where can the pastor, deacon, and pastoral staff find additional clarification of *Instruction* directives?

Questions related to canon law, interpretation of the *Instruction* directives, and other pastoral questions will be answered by the Judicial Vicar. Questions and Answers will be posted on the extranet for Pastors and Deacons and on the Christian Formation website for Lay Leaders.



Resources for Implementation

To assist the parishes of the Catholic Diocese of Richmond in implementing this diocesan *Instruction for Sacraments – First Holy Communion*, a collection of resources is available on the Christian Formation website. New and updated resources will be added periodically.

Resources on the Website

Parents

- Online resources to enrich family faith
- Published print resources available for purchase
- Resources to enrich the faith of parents
- Developmental and spiritual characteristics of children ages 3 through 14

Pastors

- Resources for supporting catechetical leader and/or sacrament team coordinator(s)
- Sample form for gathering information necessary to record First Holy Communion
- Sample welcome letter from parish to family seeking First Holy Communion

Catechetical Leader

- Suggestions for implementing the new diocesan *Instruction* in the parish
- Resources to purchase or download for use in parish sacramental formation
- Resources for assisting parents as primary teachers of the faith
- Ideas for ongoing formation of families following First Holy Communion



Sacrament Teams

- Resources to deepen the theological understanding of team members
- Strategies for providing instruction to parents
- Live web links for access to activities, prayers, and icebreakers
- Sample forms

Resources in Spanish

Many of the resource categories listed above will include items in both English and Spanish. Visit the Christian Formation website and/or Office of Hispanic Ministry website to see the options. In addition, see below.

- FAQs Sacramento de la Primera Comunión, pp. 31-39 of this *Instruction*
- Developmental and spiritual characteristics of children 3 to 14 years, available in Spanish in the Catechetical Curriculum – Parish Religious Education Pre-K through 8th Grade

Resources for Celebrating Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities

- Pastoral Notes for Persons with Disabilities, pp. 40-44 of this *Instruction*
- Center for Marriage, Family & Life website.

Diocesan Assistance

For assistance, contact:

Office of Christian Formation

804-622-5113

cf@richmonddiocese.org

Office of Hispanic Ministry

804-622-5128

Center for Marriage, Family & Life

804-622-5109



Introduction: Understanding First Holy Communion

In the Eucharist, Jesus Christ offers us his entire person and all of his saving work, for “to receive in faith the gift of his Eucharist is to receive the Lord himself.”¹

At the Last Supper, Christ anticipated his Paschal Mystery—his Passion, Death, and Resurrection—and entrusted the Church with a perpetual memorial of his Sacrifice.² He took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying: “Take this, all of you, and eat of it, for this is my Body, which will be given up for you.” Likewise, he took the chalice filled with wine, gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying: “Take this, all of you, and drink from it, for this is the chalice of my Blood, the Blood of the new and eternal covenant, which will be poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this in memory of me.”³ In the course of the meal, Christ stooped low and washed his disciple’s feet, showing his love for them “to the end” (Jn 13:2) and giving them “a model to follow” (Jn 13:15). In this way, he prefigured his own self-sacrifice and called his disciples to serve others in his name, thereby establishing a firm connection between the Eucharist and service.⁴

In obedience to Christ’s command, “Do this in memory of me,” the Church has continually celebrated the Eucharist: “For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes” (1 Cor 11:26). This action sustains the Christian faithful, as Christ himself declares:

Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. For my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him (Jn 6:53–57).

Through the centuries, the Church has come to a deeper understanding of this sacred reality. Accordingly, Catholic doctrine explains that the Eucharist is both a sacrifice and a sacrament.



As a sacrifice, the celebration of the Eucharist “truly makes present the sacrifice of the cross.”⁵ In other words, the Mass renews the Paschal Mystery. For this reason, the Mass is also called the “Holy Sacrifice” or the “Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.”⁶ Those who participate in the Mass join in the Sacrifice of Christ; they offer their lives together with his, according to the exhortation of St. Paul: “I urge you...by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship” (Rom 12:1).⁷

As a sacrament, the Eucharist makes accessible the Real Presence of Christ in the consecrated bread and wine that are his Body and Blood.⁸ The Council of Trent (1545–1563) taught that in the Eucharist “the body and blood, together with the soul and divinity, of our Lord Jesus Christ and, therefore, *the whole Christ is truly, really, and substantially contained.*”⁹ The name “Holy Communion” designates the Eucharist when it is received. According to the literal meaning of “communion,” the Eucharist brings about a “union with” Christ (cf. Jn 6:56; 1 Cor 10:16)¹⁰ and with his body, the Church.¹¹ (The term “Blessed Sacrament” designates the Eucharist when it is reserved in the tabernacle.)¹²

In the Mass, sacrifice leads to sacrament: that which is offered on the altar is subsequently received as Holy Communion. Thus, according to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*,

The Mass is at the same time, and inseparably, the sacrificial memorial in which the sacrifice of the cross is perpetuated and the sacred banquet of communion with the Lord’s body and blood. But the celebration of the Eucharistic sacrifice is wholly directed toward the intimate union of the faithful with Christ through communion. To receive communion is to receive Christ himself who has offered himself for us.¹³

Through the Eucharist, Christ draws Christian disciples into ever more intimate union with himself and unites them in love with all the faithful in his one body, the Church. Holy Communion “renews, strengthens, and deepens this incorporation into the Church, already achieved by Baptism.”¹⁴ Thus reception of the Eucharist is the pinnacle of Christian initiation: the other sacraments of initiation (Baptism, Confirmation) are “oriented toward it.”¹⁵

Since the term “Eucharist” can denote either the Mass (the Eucharistic Sacrifice), or the Body and Blood of Christ (the Eucharistic species), it is more precise to refer to a child’s “First Holy Communion,” or “First Reception of the Eucharist,” rather than to his or her “First Eucharist.” Presumably, a child who has attended Mass since being baptized has already participated in the Eucharist. However, by receiving Holy Communion, the child participates in the Mass fully, strengthening his or her “union with” Christ¹⁶ and his Church.¹⁷



Beyond initiation, Holy Communion strengthens a child for lifelong discipleship:

What material food produces in our bodily life, Holy Communion wonderfully achieves in our spiritual life. Communion with the flesh of the risen Christ, a flesh “given life and giving life through the Holy Spirit,” preserves, increases, and renews the life of grace received at Baptism. This growth in Christian life needs the nourishment of Eucharistic Communion, the bread for our pilgrimage until the moment of death, when it will be given to us as viaticum.¹⁸

The Eucharist is the action of the Lord for his people. Filled with Christ himself, disciples of all ages are empowered to live like him,¹⁹ sharing the Good news and serving others in his name. Thus, the common name for the Eucharistic Celebration—the “Mass” (in Latin: *Missa*)—comes from its brief ending. In Latin, *Ite missa est* means, “Go forth; you are sent.” The Lord, present among us at Mass, sends us into the world to testify to his saving work.²⁰ Other forms of the Dismissal highlight our task: “Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord;” and, “Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life.”²¹

Key Documents for Further Reading

1. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000), nos. 1212, 1322–1419; also available in online format at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops website (<http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catechism/catechism-of-the-catholic-church/epub/index.cfm>).
2. *Code of Canon Law*, canons 897–958; available in online format at the Vatican website (http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENGLI04/_INDEX.HTM).
3. A helpful summary of the canonical aspects of First Holy Communion is found in John Huels, *Pastoral Companion: A Canon Law Handbook for Pastoral Ministry* (Quincy: Franciscan Press, 1992), pp. 77–117.
4. Sacred Congregation for the Discipline of the Sacraments, Decree on First Communion, *Quam Singulari* (1910); available in online format at the Papal Encyclicals Online website (<http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius10/p10quam.htm>).
5. Sacred Congregation for the Clergy and Sacred Congregation for the Sacraments and Divine Worship, On Children’s First Confession Prior to First Communion, *In Quibusdam Ecclesiae* (1977); available in online format at the Catholic Liturgical Library website (<http://www.catholicliturgy.com/index.cfm/FuseAction/DocumentContents/Index/2/SubIndex/40/DocumentIndex/203>).
6. General Instruction of the Roman Missal, from the *Roman Missal*, 3rd edition (2010); available in an online format at the USCCB website (<http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/the-mass/general-instruction-of-the-roman-missal/>).



7. Pope Benedict XVI, Apostolic Exhortation on the Eucharist as the Source and Summit of the Church's Life and Mission, *Sacramentum Caritatis* (2007), nos.17–21, 64, 67; available in online format at the Vatican website (http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20070222_sacramentum-caritatis_en.html).
8. Pope Blessed John Paul II, Apostolic Letter on Keeping the Lord's Day Holy, *Dies Domini* (1998); available in online format at the Vatican website (http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_05071998_dies-domini_en.html).
9. Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship, *Holy Communion and Worship of the Eucharist Outside of Mass* (1973), nos.1–25.
10. *Follow the Way of Love: A Pastoral Message of the U.S. Catholic Bishops to Families*, USCCB, (1994); available in online format at the USCCB website (<http://old.usccb.org/laity/follow.shtml>).



Pastoral Directives Regarding First Holy Communion

Role of Parents and Guardians

“Children’s preparation for first reception of the Eucharist begins in the home. The family has the most important role in communicating the Christian and human values that form the foundation for a child’s understanding of the Eucharist. Children who participate with their family in the Mass experience the Eucharistic mystery in an initial way and gradually learn to join with the liturgical assembly in prayer.”²²

The daily life of the Christian family is a true expression of the Church, the Body of Christ, which merits the designation “domestic church”²³ or “church of the home.”²⁴ Family members, as members also of Christ’s Body, strengthen each other’s faith by proclaiming the Gospel in the course of everyday life: sharing experiences, forgiving one another, praying and eating together, and loving and caring for one another and their neighbors in the name of the Lord Jesus. These ordinary yet profound experiences become “the threads from which the family can weave a pattern of holiness.”²⁵

As the primary teachers of children, parents pass on their knowledge of the faith, and, by their example, help children to develop Christian values.²⁶ Such “family catechesis...precedes, accompanies and enriches all other forms of catechesis.”²⁷ It is naturally “more witnessed to than taught, more occasional than systematic, more ongoing and daily than structured into periods.”²⁸ Indeed, “It is through the example of mothers and fathers, grandparents, siblings, and extended family members that one most concretely witnesses how to live a Christian life.”²⁹



Incidental by nature—but not accidental—family catechesis requires intention and discipline. To help their children grow in faith, parents should be encouraged to cultivate family practices that nurture the grace of Baptism, starting with regular participation in the Sunday Mass: “For Christian families, the Sunday assembly is one of the most outstanding expressions of their identity and their ‘ministry’ as ‘domestic churches.’ ”³⁰ At Mass with their children, parents can point out the basic actions of the liturgy in accessible language (i.e., gathering, storytelling, meal sharing, going forth) and assist their children in learning the prayers and responses by heart. They can teach their children the ritual gestures and postures (e.g., making the sign of the cross; signing forehead, lips, and heart at the Gospel; bowing; genuflecting) and their meaning. By their own “full, conscious and active participation”³¹ in the Sunday Mass parents can encourage their children to become active participants themselves, thus preparing them to receive their First Holy Communion.

The life of the Christian family reinforces the values evident in the Eucharistic Celebration.³² Thus, family members who greet one another, listen to each other, seek and offer forgiveness, show gratitude, eat meals together, and celebrate festive occasions, apply the grace of the Eucharist on a daily basis.³³ Parents and children who read and reflect on Scripture stories together, before bedtime prayers or at the start of the day, honor the Word of God in daily life and underline its prominence in the Sunday liturgy. Family meals that take place in an atmosphere of mutual hospitality, that begin with prayer and encourage family conversation, establish a discernible pattern of life sharing that also characterizes the Sunday ritual, helping children to understand the Eucharist as a sacred meal, shared by the family of Jesus Christ—the community of his disciples.

As they interact with their child, both in the home and at Sunday Mass, parents can discern his or her readiness to begin preparation for First Holy Communion by considering the following questions:

- Has the child been baptized and reached the age of reason (about seven years)?³⁴
- Is the child interested in receiving Holy Communion?
- Does the child have a sense of belonging to the Catholic community?
- Does the child participate in the Sunday Mass according to his or her ability?
- Does the child pray at home?
- Does the child relate to Jesus as one who loves and cares for him or her?
- Does the child understand that he or she is to care for others?
- Has the child prepared for and had an opportunity to receive the Sacrament of Penance?



Once they have discerned that their child is ready to begin preparation for First Holy Communion, the parents should obtain a copy of the child's baptismal record (including the child's name; the date of Baptism; the pastor's signature and the parish seal, both from the parish of Baptism). This certificate should be given to the parish where the child will prepare to receive First Holy Communion. (If the child was baptized in the same parish where he or she will receive First Holy Communion, the parents need only inform the catechetical leader or sacramental coordinator of this fact.) Parents should then attend a parents' session at the parish, to deepen their own understanding of the Eucharist and to prepare for their role in the home learning component of the parish preparation program for First Holy Communion. Sacramental preparation requires a commitment of time, effort, and energy, on the part of parents and children; accordingly, some rearrangement of family priorities may be necessary.

Normally, children preparing for First Holy Communion should be concurrently participating in systematic religious education (in the parish, the home, or the Catholic school); sacramental preparation occurs in addition to this ongoing instruction in the faith (see FAQ # 5). Parents are responsible for their child's participation in the First Holy Communion preparation program offered by the parish, and for attending family sessions or retreats with their child. If exceptional circumstances arise during the period of preparation for First Holy Communion, parents should communicate with the parish as soon as possible, so that alternative arrangements can be made.

Parents who regularly provide systematic religious education in the home may embrace the parent-led home learning component of the parish preparation process with enthusiasm and desire to do more of the necessary instruction at home. In such cases, flexibility and good will can lead parents and parish to common ground. For example, an additional portion of the preparation (as might be taught by a catechist to the children in a classroom setting) may take place at home with the parents as catechists. At the same time, regular participation in the Sunday Mass should be expected, as well as attendance at First Holy Communion family sessions and family retreats. In this way, preparation for the sacrament will occur within the context of the Christian community,³⁵ providing greater support to all the families involved.

Role of Godparents

"Within the Christian community, godparents or other persons noted for their dedicated service"³⁶ can make a significant contribution to children's preparation for the sacraments, especially when parents struggle in their own practice of the faith and thus find it difficult to train their children.

Although the Church does not specify a formal role for godparents with respect to First Holy Communion, their promise, made at the child's Baptism, to assist the parents "in their duty as Christian mothers and fathers,"³⁷ still holds. By remaining in regular contact with their godchild, godparents can help parents to discern the child's readiness for First Holy Communion. Those who live nearby can take a more active role in their godchild's sacramental preparation. With the help of technology, even godparents who live at a distance can share with their godchild the value and the meaning of the Eucharist in their lives.



Role of Parish Community and Catholic School

Children baptized as infants (from birth to age seven) continue their Christian initiation by receiving Holy Communion at the age of reason (about seven years).³⁸ The responsibility for preparing them for this moment rests not only with parents, godparents, and catechists, but with the entire parish community.³⁹

As it bears witness to the Gospel, the Christian community shapes the faith of children within it.⁴⁰ Thus, the faith of the Church is “caught” by the children as well as taught to them. According to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops,

An adult community whose faith is well formed and lively will more effectively pass that faith on to the next generation. Moreover, the witness of adults actively continuing their own formation shows children and youth that growth in faith is lifelong and does not end upon reaching adulthood.⁴¹

In the parish, as in the family, children look up to adults and learn from their example.

To raise the awareness of the community and to inspire its engagement in the children’s preparation for First Holy Communion, parishes might consider the following strategies:

- Publish articles in the bulletin and on the parish website to catechize on the Eucharist and to highlight the community’s role in modeling the faith for its younger members through “full conscious and active participation” in the Sunday Mass.⁴²
- Include a petition in the Universal Prayer (Prayer of the Faithful) at Mass for those preparing for First Holy Communion (e.g., “For the children among us, preparing to receive Holy Communion for the first time; may they grow in their understanding and love of the Eucharist through the testimony of their parents, their catechists, and this parish community, we pray.”).
- Have the priest bless the children at Mass.⁴³
- Provide an opportunity for parishioners to become prayer “companions” for families whose children are preparing for First Holy Communion.
- Invite families whose children are preparing for First Holy Communion to pray before the Blessed Sacrament during periods of Eucharistic Adoration.⁴⁴
- Invite families whose children are preparing for First Holy Communion to participate in the parish’s service activities.

The responsibility for sacramental preparation rests on the parents and the parish. Catholic schools may reinforce and enhance this preparation but may not replace it. Adapting the strategies above, schools can support Catholic school children and their families who are preparing for the sacraments in their parishes.



Role of Pastor, Deacons, and Lay Catechists

According to the *National Directory for Catechesis*, “All believers have a right to catechesis; all pastors have the duty to provide it.”⁴⁵ This includes “suitable catechesis...for the celebration of the sacraments.”⁴⁶ In the case of First Holy Communion, much of this “suitable catechesis” should be directed toward the adults in the child’s life. In this way, faith taught in the parish can be reinforced at home, as parents “strive to follow and repeat, within the setting of family life, the more methodical teaching received elsewhere.”⁴⁷

The United States Bishops address this point, stating, “Adults are eager for resources, guidance, and support that will help them form a community of faith within their families...and share together in the life and mission of their parish and the wider Church.”⁴⁸ It is important, then, that pastors, and those to whom they entrust parish catechetical work (parochial vicars, deacons, catechetical leaders, lay catechists) fashion formation opportunities that allow parents to become more intentional about their own faith development, as they participate in the preparation of their children for First Holy Communion, and afterward, as they seek to maintain a Christian family life.

Catechesis prior to First Holy Communion

Preparation for First Holy Communion should follow (not precede) preparation for First Penance and “be kept distinct by a clear and unhurried separation.”⁴⁹ These two periods of preparation should be offered in addition to systematic religious education. Being thus separate from children’s ongoing instruction in the faith, sacramental preparation need not be bound to a particular grade. Rather, a child’s readiness, as discerned by his or her parents (see criteria, p. 13), should determine the best time for the child to begin preparation. Although the majority of children may attain the use of reason at about age seven and be deemed ready to prepare for First Penance and First Holy Communion together with their peers, some may need more time to mature (but not necessarily an entire year). In addition, there may be older children who, for various reasons, did not receive First Penance and First Holy Communion at the age of reason. Catechetical leaders and catechists should be flexible in accommodating these children and their families.

Parishes may prepare children for First Holy Communion through some combination of parent-led home-learning, catechist-led instruction for children, formation opportunities for parents, and learning events for children and parents together (family sessions, family retreats). The number of children, the space available, and other factors unique to each parish will influence the program’s structure, but all four contexts merit consideration. Since families are expected to participate in sacramental preparation in addition to systematic religious education, whether in the parish, the home, or the Catholic school (see FAQ # 5), a reasonable preparation program that combines parent-led home learning with a limited number of catechist-led sessions for children, parents, or both, often works best. Those families in exceptional circumstances, for whom the normal expectations of the parish represent a hardship, may contact the pastor to seek an accommodation.



Recognizing the role of parents as the “first teachers”⁵⁰ and “primary educators in the faith,”⁵¹ parishes should provide parents with the option of instructing their children at home in preparation for First Holy Communion. At the same time, parishes should set forth the expectation that families choosing this option will participate regularly in the Sunday Mass and take part in family sessions and family retreats offered by the parish in preparation for First Holy Communion.

Wherever it occurs, catechesis prior to First Holy Communion should focus on the rites, symbols, and prayers of the Mass as primary catechetical resources,⁵² and utilize instructional materials approved by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.⁵³

Following the guidance of the *National Directory for Catechesis*,⁵⁴ preparation for First Holy Communion should help children to:

- Understand that the Mass makes present the saving Death and Resurrection of Jesus and recalls his last meal with his disciples.
- Realize that with First Holy Communion they become fully-participating members of the Body of Christ at Mass.
- Receive the Sacrament of Penance before receiving First Holy Communion.
- Know the Father’s love, Christ’s sacrifice, and the gift of the Holy Spirit.
- Learn the difference between the Eucharist and ordinary food.
- Believe that the consecrated bread and wine of the Eucharist are the real Body and Blood of Christ.
- Learn about receiving Holy Communion under both species of bread and wine.
- Participate consciously and actively in the Mass (e.g., gestures, postures and processions; responses, acclamations, and prayers).
- Learn to receive Christ’s Body and Blood reverently.

On a practical level, parishes should provide children the opportunity to practice receiving Holy Communion. Such rehearsal should focus on processing, bowing, positioning the tongue or hands to receive the bread, grasping and drinking from the cup, handing the cup back to the minister, and returning to one’s seat, all in a reverent manner. Children should be taught both methods of receiving the consecrated bread (in the hand, on the tongue), so that each child (with his or her parents) may choose his or her method of reception. A child receiving on the tongue may need extra practice to ensure that his or her mouth opening permits the placement of the host on the tongue by the minister.

In addition, parishes should provide detailed information concerning the parish’s celebration of First Holy Communion (dates, times, rehearsals, seating arrangements, appropriate dress, photography, receptions, etc.), so that families are aware of their options, and of any limitations, well in advance.



Readiness for First Holy Communion

As a child's preparation for First Holy Communion comes to an end, a process of discernment once again takes place. This time, the catechist, catechetical leader, and pastor assist the parents in assessing the child's readiness to receive the sacrament. This process may take various forms, but the focus is on the child's understanding of the saving "mystery of Christ" enacted in the Mass, and his or her ability to receive the Body and Blood of the Lord "with faith and devotion."⁵⁵ The Church does not expect a child to grasp the breadth of Christian doctrine before receiving Holy Communion.⁵⁶ (A child in danger of death need only realize the difference between the Eucharist and ordinary food and receive it reverently.⁵⁷)

Children have an affinity for the sacred.⁵⁸ Though they may lack the theological language to articulate it, they sense the "mystery of Christ" in the celebration of the Eucharist. Thus, it is appropriate, during the process of discernment, to invite them to talk about the Mass in their own words, prompted by questions such as: In what ways is Christ present in the Mass? Why do we bow our head just before we receive Holy Communion? Why do you want to receive Christ in Holy Communion? The answers to such questions can provide a window into the child's religious sensibility and his or her desire to receive the Eucharist.

Regarding the specific criteria for readiness, parents, catechists, catechetical leaders, and pastors should work together to ensure that the child:

- Has been baptized Catholic (as corroborated by the parish's baptismal record or by a baptismal certificate from another Catholic parish).
- Has attained the use of reason.⁵⁹
- Has prepared for and received the Sacrament of Penance.⁶⁰ (The testimony of the parents that that child has participated in the sacrament must suffice, since any other form of proof would compromise the seal of confession.)
- Participates in the Mass.
- Understands and believes that Christ is present in the Eucharist.⁶¹
- Realizes the difference between the Eucharist and ordinary bread and wine.⁶²
- Understands the importance of observing the Eucharistic fast.⁶³
- Knows how to receive the Eucharist reverently.

While the pastor is ultimately responsible for ensuring that "children who have not attained the use of reason," or who "are not sufficiently disposed" (i.e., are not ready to worthily receive) "do not approach Holy Communion,"⁶⁴ it may not be possible for him to meet individually with all of the children preparing to receive the sacrament. In such circumstances, he may delegate the final assessment of their readiness to others (e.g., parochial vicar, deacon, or catechetical leader, in consultation with parents).



Celebration of First Holy Communion

The parish celebration of First Holy Communion is first and foremost a celebration of the Mass. On this occasion, children—duly prepared and deemed ready—take the place of honor within the full assembly of the faithful and participate fully in its celebration of the Paschal Mystery by receiving the Body and Blood of the Lord for the first time. Therefore, the preparation for this liturgy by all ministers should aim to encourage the “active, conscious and authentic participation”⁶⁵ of these children in praying the Mass, while at the same time preserving “proper balance and consideration for the entire assembly.”⁶⁶

Excellent proclamation of the biblical readings by skilled lectors will serve the children (and the adults present) more effectively than “peer ministry by embarrassed or ill-prepared children.”⁶⁷ Even if a child can read in public without stumbling, he or she can only convey an understanding of the scripture appropriate to his or her age. “Consideration for the entire assembly”⁶⁸ favors proclamation of the readings by adults or teens with the requisite maturity and training.

According to the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, the Deacon, acolyte, or lay minister prepares the altar for the Liturgy of the Eucharist and assists the Priest in receiving the gifts and offerings of the faithful.⁶⁹ In light of this, table setting by the first communicants should not occur at Mass, but may be incorporated in a prayer service at another time (for example, to conclude sacramental preparation).

Parish music ministers can encourage the children’s participation in assembly singing by using familiar acclamations, chants with simple antiphons, and songs with refrains (ideally rehearsed in the context of sacramental preparation). The procession of the gifts and the music that accompanies it can involve children,⁷⁰ heightening their sense of the solemnity of the occasion and satisfying their need for movement, especially after sitting quietly for an extended period. The children’s procession to receive Holy Communion should be accompanied by the assembly’s singing and should not be unduly separated from the procession of the rest of the assembly.⁷¹

Unhurried ritual gestures by ministers and adult members of the assembly will allow the children to recognize visual cues and participate in the physical language of liturgy.⁷² Seating the children in the assembly where they can see and hear easily will help them remain attentive and engaged in the Mass.⁷³

The Mass provides numerous opportunities for the active involvement of the first communicants. It is neither necessary, nor permissible, to add non-liturgical features to the Mass for the celebration of First Holy Communion.⁷⁴ (For example, if the parish chooses to present each child with a certificate and/or a small gift, a reception *after* Mass would be a more appropriate venue for doing so.)



The inclusion of symbols or customs associated with certain cultures may, at times, be appropriate; however, care must be taken that the Eucharist, as the universal action of the Lord for His people, and the common ritual of our common faith, does not become overshadowed by an array of activities⁷⁵ (see FAQ #16).

Recognizing the presence of a large number of children, and the significance of the occasion for the children receiving their First Holy Communion, some adaptations suggested in the *Directory for Masses with Children* may be considered and applied for their sake,⁷⁶ and the Mass may be planned “so that it corresponds more closely to the needs of the children.”⁷⁷ For example, the homily, or a portion of it, may be directed to the children “but in such a way that adults may also benefit from it.”⁷⁸ In this case, the homilist should keep his language simple and readily understandable, while avoiding childish speech.⁷⁹ Direct engagement of the children during the homily may include dialogue,⁸⁰ but should in no way resemble a quiz or final examination.

If a selection from the *Lectionary for Mass* seems particularly difficult for children to comprehend, the corresponding reading from the *Lectionary for Masses with Children* may be used in place of it, provided that the celebration of First Holy Communion does not occur on a day when such a substitution is prohibited.⁸¹

As a sacrament of initiation, First Holy Communion is proper to a Sunday in the Easter season⁸² but by no means prohibited outside of it. A child who begins preparation for First Holy Communion but does not complete it in time to receive the sacrament during the Easter season may receive First Holy Communion when he or she is deemed ready by the pastor (in consultation with the parents, catechetical leader, and catechist). It is neither necessary, nor permissible, to delay the child’s First Holy Communion until the next Easter season.⁸³

Catechesis after First Holy Communion

Holy Communion “preserves, increases, and renews the life of grace received at Baptism.”⁸⁴ Disciples of all ages need the spiritual nourishment provided by the Eucharist for continued “growth in Christian life.”⁸⁵ Therefore, regular Mass attendance by the whole family must be understood as essential for the spiritual well-being of all members, and especially for the spiritual growth of children who have received their First Holy Communion. As Blessed John Paul II taught, “For Christian families, the Sunday assembly is one of the most outstanding expressions of their identity and their ‘ministry’ as ‘domestic churches’....”⁸⁶ Family practices that have helped prepare children for First Holy Communion (see Role of Parents and Guardians, paragraph 5, p. 13) will deepen their understanding and appreciation of the Eucharist over time, putting into practice the final words of the Mass, “Go in peace, glorifying the Lord with your life.”⁸⁷



An excellent first step in the ongoing effort to keep families engaged in the life of the parish can be accomplished with a gathering of the families whose children have recently received their First Holy Communion. Such an event might include sharing a meal, viewing a montage of photos, distributing certificates, and introducing resources for home use. The most essential element of such a gathering would be a prayerful reflection on the experience of First Holy Communion that “breaks open” with the children the ritual symbols, gestures, and prayers; the gathering, the Word of God, the sacred meal, and the sending forth. (See online resources for a sample reflection.)

To support families in building the “church of the home”⁸⁸ and maintaining an ongoing connection to the Christian community, the parish should first set forth the expectation that children who have received First Holy Communion will continue to participate in systematic religious education, in the parish, in the home, or in the Catholic school. It should then provide such instruction for children and youth at the parish, as well as positive guidance for parents who undertake the responsibility of instructing their children at home. In this way, children can continue to learn about the Eucharist at an age-appropriate level as they participate in the Sunday Mass from week to week and year to year.

The National Directory for Catechesis states that “catechesis for the Eucharist recognizes it as the heart of Christian life for the whole Church, for the...parishes, and for each individual Christian.”⁸⁹ The diocesan catechetical curriculum, the correlations provided to the diocese by various publishers, and the USCCB Conformity Review can all provide guidance to parishes for the selection of appropriate resources. Published curricula with a “spiral” structure, designed to explore faith topics on an ever-deeper (and age-appropriate) level from year to year, can serve well the need for this ongoing catechesis, provided that the Eucharist holds pride of place among the topics for repeated study.

Beyond providing systematic religious education for children and youth, parishes can build up the “church of the home”⁹⁰ through adult faith formation (offered in a variety of accessible formats), print and online resources designed for home use, and opportunities for family engagement in parish life and mission. Service and outreach activities appropriate for families should be emphasized, reinforcing the link between the Eucharist and serving others that Jesus himself forged when he washed the feet of his disciples at the Last Supper (cf. Jn 13:4-15).

Keeping families involved after children receive their First Holy Communion can be a challenge for parishes. Ongoing, well-organized communication with families, through all available channels, will help them to remain aware of opportunities; but personal invitations, repeated often, will remain, nonetheless, indispensable.



FAQ: Sacrament of First Holy Communion

1. What is the name of the sacrament—“First Eucharist” or “First Holy Communion”?

Since the term “Eucharist” can designate either the Mass (the Eucharistic Sacrifice), or the Body and Blood of Christ (the Eucharistic species), it is more precise to refer to a child’s “First Holy Communion,” or “First Reception of the Eucharist,” rather than to his or her “First Eucharist.” Presumably, a child who has attended Mass since being baptized has participated in the celebration of the Eucharist many times as a member of the assembly. However, by receiving Holy Communion, the child participates in the Mass fully, strengthening his or her “union with” Christ⁹¹ and his Church.⁹²

2. What documentation must be provided to the parish before beginning preparation for First Holy Communion?

An authentic record of the child’s baptism is all that is needed. If the child was baptized in the same parish, his or her name and date of Baptism should appear in the parish baptismal registry. Parents need only inform the catechetical leader or sacrament coordinator that the child’s Baptism took place in the parish. If the child was baptized in another Catholic church, the parents must obtain a baptismal certificate from the parish where the child was baptized. The certificate should include the child’s name; the date of Baptism; and the pastor’s signature and parish seal, both from the parish of Baptism. After the child receives First Holy Communion at his or her present parish, notification will be sent to the parish of Baptism, where the child’s baptismal record will be updated and retained.

Note: Children baptized in non-Catholic Christian churches, who have reached the age of reason, must complete their Christian initiation through the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. (See National Statues for the Catechumenate, no. 30-37 in the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*.)



3. What if a child was baptized on a military base?

Sacraments (Baptism, First Holy Communion, Confirmation) celebrated in military chapels are recorded with the Archdiocese for Military Services. Instructions for accessing the record and obtaining a baptismal certificate are available at www.milarch.org (by clicking on “Offices” and scrolling down to “Sacramental Records Form”).

4. Who decides when a child is ready to receive the sacrament of First Holy Communion?

Parents decide when a child is ready to *begin* formal preparation for the sacrament.

At the conclusion of sacramental formation, the pastor, catechetical leader, and catechists assist the parents in discerning whether the child is ready to *receive* the sacrament. If a child needs more time or additional instruction, the parish can work with the parents to provide it.

While the pastor is ultimately responsible for ensuring that “children who have not attained the use of reason” or “are not sufficiently disposed” (are not ready to worthily receive) “do not approach Holy Communion,”⁹³ it may not be possible for him to meet individually with all of the children preparing to receive the sacrament. In such circumstances, he may delegate the task of assessing their readiness to other ministers (e.g., parochial vicar, deacon, catechetical leader).

5. Should the parish require one year of religious education before beginning preparation for First Holy Communion?

Church law requires that children receiving First Holy Communion “have sufficient knowledge and careful preparation so that they understand the mystery of Christ according to their capacity and are able to receive the body of Christ with faith and devotion.”⁹⁴ A year of systematic religious education (in the parish, the home, or the Catholic school) in advance of “careful preparation” for the sacrament would certainly contribute to their knowledge and understanding, but readiness to *begin* formal preparation for First Holy Communion can be attained by other means. For example, children who attend Mass with their families and experience a Christian home life can meet the criteria for readiness to *begin* preparation (see p. 13), whether or not they have participated in a year of systematic religious education. Parishes may reasonably expect that families with children preparing for first sacraments attend Mass regularly and participate in systematic religious education (in the parish, the home, or the Catholic school) during the concurrent year.



For children whose families have not attended Mass regularly, some remedial catechesis may be appropriate, but this can be offered during the same year that the children are prepared for first sacraments. Parishes should make every effort to meet these families where they are and welcome them into the life of the Christian community, while at the same time helping the parents to recognize and embrace their responsibility as “first teachers in the ways of faith.”⁹⁵ Kindness and flexibility should characterize the words, actions, and attitudes of parish leaders, so that these families on the margins of parish life may be drawn closer to Christ and his Church.

Readiness to *begin* formal preparation for First Holy Communion is not synonymous with readiness to *receive* it. As a child’s sacramental formation for First Holy Communion comes to an end, the pastor, the catechetical leader, and the catechist assist the parents in assessing the child’s readiness to receive the sacrament. If a child needs more time or additional instruction, the parish can work with the parents to provide it.

6. What if an older child has not yet received First Penance and First Holy Communion?

Various circumstances can prevent a child from receiving First Penance and First Holy Communion with his or her peers. In this case, the parish should assist the parents in providing age-appropriate sacramental preparation, as well as basic catechesis, as needed.

For example, in addition to participating in sacramental preparation, a child with some previous formation in the faith could join his or her peers for systematic religious education. If the child needs instruction on a more basic level, he or she could attend sessions with the children of catechetical age who are preparing to receive the sacraments of Christian initiation—Baptism, Confirmation, and First Holy Communion. (However, care must be taken that a baptized Catholic not be confused with a child who was baptized in another Christian denomination, or with an unbaptized child.)

Family catechesis, under the guidance of a parish catechist, can be a useful approach for addressing complex situations.

7. How can parents discern a child’s readiness for First Holy Communion?

Discernment of a child’s readiness for the sacrament occurs in two stages. First, as they interact with their child, both in the home and at Sunday Mass, parents can discern his or her readiness to *begin* preparing for First Holy Communion by considering the following questions:

- Has the child been baptized and reached the age of reason (about seven years)?⁹⁶
- Is the child interested in receiving Holy Communion?
- Does the child have a sense of belonging to the Catholic community?
- Does the child participate in the Sunday liturgy according to his or her ability?
- Does the child pray at home?
- Does the child relate to Jesus as one who loves and cares for him or her?



- Does the child understand that he or she is to care for others?
- Has the child prepared for and had an opportunity to receive the Sacrament of Penance?

Second, after the child has completed sacramental preparation for First Holy Communion, the pastor, catechetical leader, and the catechist assist parents in assessing the child's readiness to receive the sacrament, ensuring that he or she:

- Has been baptized Catholic (as corroborated by the parish's baptismal record or by a baptismal certificate from another Catholic parish).
- Has attained the use of reason.⁹⁷
- Has prepared for and received the Sacrament of Penance.⁹⁸ (The testimony of the parents that that child has participated in the sacrament must suffice, since any other form of proof would compromise the seal of confession.)
- Participates in the Mass.
- Understands and believes that Christ is present in the Eucharist.⁹⁹
- Realizes the difference between the Eucharist and ordinary bread and wine.¹⁰⁰
- Understands the importance of observing the Eucharistic fast.¹⁰¹
- Knows how to receive the Eucharist reverently.

8. Why must a child prepare for and receive First Penance before the reception of First Holy Communion?

According to Church law, the reception of First Penance prior to First Holy Communion is the norm.¹⁰² The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states it clearly: "Children must go to the sacrament of Penance before receiving Holy Communion for the first time."¹⁰³ Indeed, "The age of discretion both for Confession and Holy Communion is the time when a child begins to reason, that is about the seventh year, more or less. From that time on begins the obligation of fulfilling the precept of both Confession and Communion."¹⁰⁴

Readiness to receive Holy Communion requires not only an ability to discern the difference between Eucharist and ordinary bread, but also an appreciation (appropriate to the child's age) that the same Jesus who feeds us also saves us from our sins, asks for our repentance, and forgives us through His body, the Church. The same Savior who offers us the chalice of his blood, "poured out...for the forgiveness of sins,"¹⁰⁵ at Mass, offers us healing and forgiveness through the Sacrament of Penance.

Once a child (through the use of reason) knows the difference between right and wrong, he or she becomes capable of committing personal sin (by deliberately choosing to do wrong). This means that the child, at some point in his or her future, could also commit a grave sin and *need* to receive the Sacrament of Penance before receiving Holy Communion again. Therefore, at the age of reason, the child acquires the *right* to receive the Sacrament of Penance, so that as he or she matures, he or she may always have a *way home*, a means of returning to the Eucharist after committing a grave sin.¹⁰⁶



To ensure that the child is able to exercise this *right*, he or she must complete preparation for First Penance, and receive it, before receiving First Holy Communion. The child cannot, however, be required to *prove* that he or she has received the Sacrament of Penance, since such a requirement would violate the seal of the sacrament.¹⁰⁷

9. Who prepares a child for First Holy Communion—parents or the Church?

A child's preparation for First Holy Communion begins in the home, progresses as the child participates in the Mass with his or her family, and broadens as the family participates in religious education and other activities of parish life. The parish supports the preparation already underway in the family by offering parents the opportunity to deepen their own understanding of the Eucharist and by equipping them to assist with the final phase of their child's preparation to receive Holy Communion. Through a combination of parent-led home learning and a limited number of catechist-led sessions for children, parents, or both, the parish offers sacramental preparation for children that the family can manage along with systematic religious education (in the parish, the home, or the Catholic school). If exceptional circumstances arise during the period of preparation for First Holy Communion, parents should communicate with the parish as soon as possible, so that alternative arrangements can be made.

10. If a child attends a Catholic School, will he or she be prepared to receive First Holy Communion there?

Sacramental catechesis "is intended for all members of the Christian community, takes place within the community, and involves the whole community of faith."¹⁰⁸ Although the child will learn about the Eucharist in the course of his or her religious education at the Catholic school, sacramental preparation for First Holy Communion should take place in the parish where the family regularly attends Mass.

Preparation for First Holy Communion should be offered in the parish in addition to systematic religious education for children, as a separate and distinct program that combines parent-led home learning, with a limited number of catechist-led sessions for children, parents, or both. As such, it should be a manageable commitment for Catholic school families, as well as for those participating in systematic religious education in the parish or in the home.

11. Which prayers should a child learn before receiving First Holy Communion?

The Mass itself should be given first priority, so that the child will be able to participate fully, both in the celebration of First Holy Communion, and in Mass every Sunday. A child's Mass book can ease the process of learning the prayers, responses and acclamations of the people by heart. Incorporating the longer texts (Holy, Holy, Holy; Our Father; Lord, I am not worthy...) into family prayer in the home can further reinforce their weekly repetition at Sunday Mass.



Other prayers (Glory be; Hail Mary; Act of Contrition; Grace before Meals, etc.) are also appropriate.

12. What are the rules about fasting before going to communion?

Church law requires Catholics to fast from food and beverages for one hour before receiving Holy Communion; however, plain water and medicine are always permitted. Elderly persons, those suffering from illness, and their caregivers may receive, even if they have had something to eat or drink in the last hour.¹⁰⁹

13. How should a child receive communion?

When receiving Holy Communion, the child should bow his or her head as a gesture of reverence, and then receive the Body of the Christ from the minister, either on the tongue or in the hand.¹¹⁰ Children wishing to receive the consecrated bread in the hand should approach the minister with hands held out and ready, one hand inside the other with the palms up. When the minister says, “The Body of Christ,” the child should reply, “Amen.” Once the Body of the Lord has been placed in the top hand, the child should bring the bottom hand up to grasp the host and consume it immediately.¹¹¹

To receive the Blood of Christ, the child should stand facing the minister of the chalice and bow as before. When the minister says, “The Blood of Christ,” the child should reply, “Amen,” then grasp the chalice as it is handed to him or her by the minister. He or she should then take a small sip and hand the chalice back to the minister.¹¹²

“Holy Communion has a fuller form as a sign when it takes place under both kinds;”¹¹³ however, “Christ, whole and entire... is received, even under only one species.”¹¹⁴ Thus, even when both the Body and Blood of Christ are offered, a child may choose to receive Holy Communion under one species.

On a practical level, parishes should provide children the opportunity to practice receiving Holy Communion. Such rehearsal should focus on processing, bowing, positioning the tongue or hands to receive the bread, grasping and drinking from the cup, handing the cup back to the minister, and returning to one’s seat, all in a reverent manner. Children should be taught both methods of receiving the consecrated bread (in the hand, on the tongue), so that each child (with his or her parents) may choose his or her method of reception. A child receiving on the tongue may need extra practice to ensure that his or her mouth opening permits the placement of the host on the tongue by the minister.

Reception of the Body and Blood of Christ by intinction is also permissible. In this case, the priest dips the consecrated host in the consecrated wine (held by a deacon or lay minister) and places it on the tongue of the communicant.¹¹⁵ The communicant does not dip the host in the chalice. Only a priest (not a deacon or lay minister) may distribute communion by intinction.



14. How should children behave at Mass?

Children should be encouraged to participate actively in the Mass: in ritual gesture (making the sign of the cross; signing forehead, lips, and heart at the Gospel; bowing; genuflecting), in movement (processing to receive Communion) and in stillness (kneeling, sitting); in spoken prayers, sung acclamations, and silence; in attentive listening and wholehearted response. At Mass, as at other times, children take their cues from the adults around them. For children to learn appropriate behavior at Mass, parents and other family members need to set an example of “full, conscious, and active” participation.¹¹⁶ In addition, sitting in the assembly where children can see and hear easily can help them remain attentive and engaged in the Mass.

15. What liturgical roles are appropriate for children receiving their First Holy Communion at Sunday Mass?

Children receiving their First Holy Communion are first and foremost members of the assembly, participating fully, consciously, and actively in the Mass. This includes singing acclamations, chants, hymns, and songs proper to the assembly; taking part in spoken prayers and responses; and joining in ritual gestures and postures (e.g., making the sign of the cross; signing forehead, lips, and heart at the Gospel; bowing before receiving Holy Communion; standing, kneeling, genuflecting, as appropriate). These actions should be well-rehearsed beforehand, so that the children will remember their First Holy Communion, not merely for special clothing, gifts, or celebration, but for their particular engagement and full participation in the Eucharistic liturgy, as they take part with the new understanding and competence gained through sacramental preparation.

Beyond this primary and essential role, the Procession of Gifts and the music that accompanies it can involve children,¹¹⁷ heightening their sense of the solemnity of the occasion and satisfying their need for movement, especially after sitting quietly for an extended period.

Excellent proclamation by skilled lectors will serve the children (and the adults present) more effectively than “peer ministry by embarrassed or ill-prepared children.”¹¹⁸ Even if a child can read in public without stumbling, he or she can only convey an understanding of the scripture appropriate to his or her age. “Consideration for the entire assembly”¹¹⁹ favors ministry of the word at Sunday Mass by adults or teens with the requisite maturity and training.

According to the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, the Deacon, acolyte, or lay minister prepares the altar for the Liturgy of the Eucharist and assists the Priest in receiving the gifts and offerings of the faithful.¹²⁰ In light of this, table setting by the first communicants should not occur at Mass, but may be incorporated in a prayer service at another time (e.g., to conclude sacramental preparation).



16. Is it permissible to include symbols and rites associated with particular cultures in the celebration of First Holy Communion?

The inclusion of symbols or customs associated with certain cultures may, at times, be appropriate; however, care must be taken that the Eucharist, as the universal action of the Lord for His people, and the common ritual of our common faith, does not become overshadowed by an array of activities.¹²¹

It is customary in some cultures to clothe the children in white dresses or suits and have them carry lit candles in procession, linking the reception of First Holy Communion (a sacrament of initiation) to the first sacrament of initiation, Baptism. This may be done (with due consideration for the economic circumstances of the families involved). The use of anything resembling stoles, even white ones, is not permitted, since stoles signify Holy Orders.

In general, customs that are not part of the tradition of the universal Church should not be included in Mass. Holy Communion is Christ's gift to His whole Body, the Church; anything that might undermine that universality should be avoided.

17. When and where should First Holy Communion be celebrated?

As a sacrament of initiation, First Holy Communion is proper to the Easter season¹²² but by no means prohibited outside of it. A child who begins preparation for First Holy Communion but does not complete it in time to receive the sacrament during the Easter season may receive First Holy Communion when he or she is deemed ready by the pastor (in consultation with the parents, catechetical leader, and catechist). It is neither necessary, nor permissible, to delay the child's First Holy Communion until the next Easter season.¹²³

Normally, a child should receive his or her First Holy Communion at the Sunday Mass (or the Saturday vigil) in the parish that he or she regularly attends. Alternative arrangements may be made in consultation with the pastor.

18. What should children wear for their First Holy Communion?

Like all the faithful at Mass, children receiving First Holy Communion should wear clothing that conveys "respect, solemnity, and joy."¹²⁴ Some families will choose to purchase elaborate outfits designed for First Communion, others may reuse festive garments passed down through the family; still others may favor "Sunday best" or "neat and clean," depending on their economic circumstances. All of these options express respect for the solemnity of the occasion. Parishes should encourage respectful attire, allowing families to make choices based on their cultural customs and financial means.

Note: If a child's outfit includes gloves, these should be removed before receiving the Body of Christ in the hand. The gloves need not be removed to receive on the tongue or to receive the Blood of Christ (though the child should be allowed to practice grasping the chalice with gloved hands).



19. Should children's names be announced or certificates be presented at First Communion Mass?

The celebration of First Holy Communion marks the first time that children, duly prepared and found ready, participate fully in the Sunday Mass. It should not look or sound like some other event (e.g., graduation, award ceremony). Therefore, non-liturgical features (e.g., announcement of names as children come forward to receive communion) or ceremonies (presentations of certificates and/or gifts) should not be added to the Mass for the celebration of First Holy Communion. A reception after Mass or a gathering of families in the weeks following First Holy Communion is a more appropriate venue for these activities.

20. What if the child's parents are not married or not married in the Church?

The grace of the Eucharist should not be withheld from the child due to the irregular marital status of his or her parents. Rather, the sincere desire of the parent or parents that the child receive his or her First Holy Communion should be seen as a gesture of good faith, and perhaps, the beginning of a new relationship to the Church.

Certain marital situations do prevent a Catholic parent from receiving Holy Communion, though he or she may otherwise participate in the Mass. For example, a person who has divorced one living spouse and married another may not receive Holy Communion until the Church has granted an annulment of the previous marriage and witnessed the present one according to the required rite.

Such circumstances do not preclude parents from taking an active role in the child's sacramental formation. Indeed, involvement in the child's preparation may stir in the parents a desire for reconciliation with the Church and motivate them to approach their pastor, another priest, or the diocesan tribunal for assistance in pursuing an annulment.



FAQ: Sacramento de la Primera Comunión

1. ¿Cuál es el nombre de este sacramento?—“Primera Eucaristía” o “Primera Comunión”?

Como el término “eucaristía” puede designar tanto la misa (el sacrificio eucarístico), como el cuerpo y la sangre de Cristo (las especies eucarísticas), es más preciso referirse como la “Primera Comunión” de niños o como la “Primera Recepción de la Eucaristía” en vez de la “Primera Eucaristía.” Presumiblemente, un niño que ha asistido a misa desde que fue bautizado ha participado muchas veces de la celebración de la eucaristía como miembro de la asamblea. Sin embargo, al recibir la sagrada comunión, el niño participa completamente de la misa, y acrecienta su “unión con” Cristo⁹¹ y con su Iglesia.⁹²

2. ¿Qué documentos deben ser presentados a la parroquia antes de comenzar la preparación para la Primera Comunión?

Una prueba autentica del bautizo del niño/a es todo lo que se necesita. Si el niño/a fue bautizado en la misma parroquia, su nombre y fecha de bautismo aparecerá en los registros bautismales de la parroquia. Los padres necesitarán solo informar al líder catequético o al coordinador del sacramento que el niño/a fue bautizado en la parroquia. Si el niño fue bautizado en otra Iglesia católica, los padres deberán obtener una copia del certificado de bautizo en la parroquia que fue bautizado. El certificado deberá contener el nombre del niño/a; fecha de bautismo; la firma del párroco y el sello de la parroquia donde se realizó el bautismo. Después de que el niño ha recibido el sacramento de la primera comunión, la parroquia deberá notificar de dicho sacramento a la Iglesia donde el niño/a fue bautizado para que esa prueba sea anotada en los registros de esa parroquia.

Nota: Los niños que han sido bautizados en Iglesias que no son católicas y han alcanzado la edad del uso de la razón, ellos deberán completar su iniciación cristiana a través del Rito de Iniciación Cristiana para Adultos. (Véase los Estatutos Nacionales del Catecumenado, no. 30-37 en el *Rito de Iniciación Cristiana para Adultos*.)



3. ¿Qué sucede si un niño fue bautizado en una base militar?

Los sacramentos (Bautizo, Primera Comunión, Confirmación) celebrados en las capillas de las bases militares son anotados en la arquidiócesis de los servicios militares. Las instrucciones para acceder a esos datos y obtener certificados bautismales se encuentran disponibles en www.milarch.org (haga clic en “Offices” y seleccione desplazándose hacia abajo hasta encontrar “Sacramental Records Form”).

4. ¿Quién decide cuando un niño/a esta preparado para recibir el sacramento de la Primera Comunión?

Los padres deciden si su niño/a esta preparado para comenzar la preparación formal del sacramento.

A la conclusión de la formación de este sacramento ya sea el párroco, el líder catequético y/o el catequista ayudarán a los padres en el discernimiento para que ellos puedan decidir si su hijo/a esta preparado para recibir dicho sacramento. Si el niño/a necesitase mas tiempo o instrucción adicional, la parroquia puede trabajar con los padres proveyéndole la ayuda necesaria.

Aunque el párroco es últimamente el responsable de asegurarse que los “niños que no han alcanzado el uso de razón o no están suficientemente predisuestos (no están listos para recibir dignamente) “no deberían recibir la primera comunión,”⁹³ puede que no le sea posible entrevistarse con todos los niños que se están preparando para recibir el sacramento. En estas circunstancias, el podrá delegar la tarea de evaluación a otros ministros (Ej. el vicario parroquial, el diácono o el líder catequético).

5. ¿La parroquia deberá requerir un año previo de educación religiosa antes de comenzar la preparación de la Primera Comunión?

La ley de la Iglesia requiere que los niños que recibirán la primera comunión “tengan suficiente conocimiento y hayan recibido una preparación cuidadosa, de manera que entiendan el misterio de Cristo en la medida de su capacidad, y puedan recibir el cuerpo del Señor con fe y devoción.”⁹⁴ Un año previo de educación religiosa sistemática (ya sea en la parroquia, en la casa o en la escuela católica) y de “preparación cuidadosa” ciertamente puede contribuir a su entendimiento y conocimiento, la determinación si están listos para comenzar la preparación formal de la primera comunión se puede obtener a través de otros medios. Por ejemplo, los niños que asisten a misa con sus familias y llevan una vida cristiana en sus hogares, cumplen con los requisitos de estar listos para comenzar su preparación (vea p. 13), aunque antes ellos no hayan participado de una educación religiosa sistemática. Las parroquias de una manera razonable esperan que las familias cuyos niños se están preparando para la recibir los sacramentos, asistan a misa regularmente y participen en una educación religiosa sistemática (ya sea en la parroquia, casa o escuela católica) durante el año concurrente.



Para los niños de familias que no asisten a misa regularmente, será apropiado darles una catequesis adecuada, la misma que puede ser dada en el mismo año que el niño se está preparando para recibir los primeros sacramentos. Las parroquias deberán hacer todo lo posible para acoger a estas familias y darle la bienvenida a la vida de la comunidad cristiana, al mismo tiempo ayudar a los padres a reconocer y aceptar la responsabilidad “como primeros educadores en los caminos de la fe.”⁹⁵ Amabilidad y flexibilidad deberán ser las palabras, acciones y actitudes de los líderes catequéticos, para que así estas familias que se encuentran al margen de la vida parroquiana puedan ser atraídas a Cristo y a la Iglesia.

El estar listo para comenzar una preparación formal para la primera comunión no es sinónimo de estar listo para recibirla. Cuando la formación sacramental del niño/a finaliza, el párroco, el líder catequético y el/la catequista ayudarán a los padres a determinar si el niño/a esta preparado para recibir el sacramento. Si el niño/a necesitase mas tiempo o instrucción adicional, la parroquia puede trabajar con los padres proveyéndole la ayuda necesaria.

6. ¿Qué pasa si un niño con mayor edad no ha recibido el sacramento de la Primera Penitencia ni la Primera Comunión?

Son varias las circunstancias por la cual un niño/a no ha podido recibir la Primera Penitencia ni la Primera Comunión con los niños de su edad. En estos casos, la parroquia ayudará a los padres para que el niño/a sea preparado de acuerdo a su edad en cuanto a la preparación del sacramento, además de recibir una catequesis básica si es que la necesita.

Por ejemplo, si un niño/a tiene una formación catequética previa, el/ella podrá participar de la educación religiosa con los de su edad. Si el niño/a necesita instrucción a un nivel mas básico, el o ella puede asistir a las clases con los niños que están recibiendo instrucción para recibir los sacramentos de iniciación cristiana, Bautismo, Confirmación, Primera Comunión. (Sin embargo, se debe de tener cuidado de no confundirlos con aquellos niños que han sido bautizado en otra religión o que no esta bautizados.)

La catequesis familiar que esta guiada por catequistas parroquiales, pueden ser muy útiles para atender situaciones complejas.

7. ¿Cómo los padres pueden discernir si el niño/a esta preparado para recibir la Primera Comunión?

El discernimiento si un niño/a esta preparado para recibir el sacramento ocurre en dos etapas. Primero, mientras los padres interactúan con sus niños, ya sea en la casa o en misa los domingos, ellos podrán discernir si sus hijos están listos para *comenzar* la preparación de la Primera Comunión, considerando el siguiente cuestionario:

- ¿El niño/a ha sido bautizado y ha llegado al uso de razón (alrededor de los 7 años)?⁹⁶
- ¿El niño/a demuestra interés en recibir la Sagrada Comunión?
- ¿El niño/a siente que pertenece a la comunidad católica?
- ¿El niño/a participa en la liturgia dominical de acuerdo a su capacidad?
- ¿El niño/a ora en casa?



- ¿El niño/a asocia a Jesús como aquel que ama y se preocupa por el o ella?
- ¿El niño/a entiende que el/ella se debe preocupar por otros?
- ¿El niño/a se ha preparado y ha tenido la oportunidad de recibir el Sacramento de la Penitencia?

Segundo, después de que el niño/a ha completado su preparación sacramental para la primera comunión, el párroco, el líder catequético y el catequista ayudaran a los padres a evaluar si su niño/a esta listo para recibir el sacramento, asegurándose de que el o ella:

- Ha sido bautizado/a en la Iglesia católica (corroborado por los registros de la parroquia o el certificado de bautizo, emitido por otra iglesia católica).
- Ha llegado al uso de razón.⁹⁷
- Ha sido preparado y ha recibido el sacramento de la penitencia.⁹⁸ (El testimonio de los padres será suficiente para demostrar que el niño/a ha participado del sacramento, pues otra forma o prueba comprometería el sigilo de la confesión)
- Participa en misa.
- Entiende y cree que Jesús esta presente en la eucaristía.⁹⁹
- Se da cuenta de la diferencia entre la eucaristía y el pan y vino regular.¹⁰⁰
- Entiende la importancia de observar la abstinencia eucarística.¹⁰¹
- Sabe como recibir reverentemente la eucaristía.

8. ¿Por qué el niño/a debe prepararse y recibir la Primera Penitencia antes de recibir la recepción de la Primera Comunión?

De acuerdo con las leyes de la iglesia, la norma es que la recepción de la primera penitencia sea antes que la primera comunión.¹⁰² El catecismo de la Iglesia católica dice claramente: “Los niños deben acceder al sacramento de la penitencia antes de recibir por primera vez la sagrada comunión.”¹⁰³ De hecho, “la edad adecuada para la recibir la confesión y la primera comunión es durante la edad de la discreción esto sucede alrededor de los siete años y es cuando el niño/a comienza a razonar. Desde ese momento comienza la obligación de cumplir con ambos preceptos, confesión y comunión.”¹⁰⁴

El estar preparado para recibir la sagrada comunión requiere no solo de la habilidad de diferenciar entre la eucaristía y un pan ordinario, sino también el reconocimiento (apropiado a la edad del niño/a) de que el mismo Jesús que nos alimenta, es el que nos salva del pecado, busca nuestro arrepentimiento y nos perdona a través de su cuerpo, la Iglesia. El mismo Salvador que nos ofrece el cáliz de su sangre, “derramada... para el perdón de los pecados,”¹⁰⁵ en la misa, nos ofrece la salvación y el perdón a través del sacramento de la penitencia.



Una vez un niño/a (a través del uso de la razón) sabe la diferencia entre lo bueno y lo malo, el/ella es capaz de cometer pecados individuales (al escoger deliberadamente hacer el mal) Esto significa que en algún momento en el futuro puede cometer un pecado grave y necesitará recibir el sacramento de la penitencia antes de recibir la santa comunión. Por lo tanto, a la edad del uso de razón, el niño/a adquiere el derecho de recibir el sacramento de la penitencia, y a medida que va madurando entenderá que hay siempre un camino a casa, un medio que los llevará a la Eucaristía, aun después de haber cometido un pecado grave.¹⁰⁶

Para asegurarse que un niño es capaz de ejercitar su *derecho*, el o ella deberá completar la preparación de la primera penitencia y recibirla antes de recibir la primera comunión. Sin embargo, no se puede requerir prueba alguna de haber recibido el sacramento de la penitencia, pues esto violaría el sigilo sacramental.¹⁰⁷

9. ¿Quién prepara al niño/a para la Primera Comunión – los padres o la Iglesia?

La preparación de un niño/a para la primera comunión comienza en la casa, progresa con la participación del niño/a en la misa con su familia, y se acrecienta a medida que la familia participa en la educación religiosa y otras actividades en la vida parroquial. La parroquia apoya la preparación ya existente en las familias, ofreciéndoles a ellos la oportunidad de profundizar su conocimiento acerca de la eucaristía, dándole las herramientas para que ayuden a sus hijos en la fase final de la preparación para recibir la primera comunión. A través de una combinación de aprendizaje guiado en casa por los padres y con un número limitado de clases para niños, padres o ambos. La parroquia ofrece una preparación sacramental para niños en la cual las familias pueden manejar la educación religiosa sistemática (en las parroquias, en sus casas o en las escuelas católicas). Si surgiesen circunstancias excepcionales durante el periodo de preparación para la primera comunión, los padres deberán comunicarse con la parroquia lo más pronto posible, para que se pueda ofrecer alguna alternativa al caso.

10. ¿Si un niño/a asiste a la escuela católica, el/ella será preparado/a para recibir la Primera Comunión allí?

La catequesis sacramental “está prevista para todos los miembros de la comunidad cristiana, y se lleva a cabo dentro de la comunidad, involucrando a toda la comunidad de fe.”¹⁰⁸ Aunque el niño/a aprenderá acerca de la eucaristía en el curso de su educación religiosa en la escuela católica, la preparación sacramental de la primera comunión, debe llevarse a cabo en la parroquia donde la familia regularmente asiste a misa.

La preparación de la primera comunión deberá ser ofrecida en la parroquia en adhesión a la educación religiosa sistemática para niños, en un programa separado y distinto que estará combinado con el aprendizaje guiado en casa por los padres y con un número limitado de clases para niños, padres o ambos. En este sentido deberá existir un compromiso razonable tanto de parte de las familias que asisten a escuelas católicas así como también para aquellos que participan en una educación religiosa sistemática en las parroquias o en sus casas.



11. ¿Cuáles son las oraciones que un niño/a debe aprender antes de recibir la Primera Comunión?

La misa es la prioridad principal que un niño/a debe aprender, de esta forma el/ella podrá participar activamente tanto en la celebración de la primera comunión como cada domingo en misa. Un libro de la misa puede facilitar el proceso del aprendizaje de las oraciones, las respuestas y las aclamaciones que se hacen de memoria. Incorporando los textos largos como el (Santo, Santo; Padre Nuestro, Señor no soy digno...) en las oraciones en la casa podrá reforzar la repetición semanal durante las misas dominicales.

Otras oraciones como (Gloria; Ave Maria; Acto de contrición; Bendición de los alimentos, etc.) también son apropiadas.

12. ¿Cuáles son las reglas acerca del ayuno antes de la comunión?

La ley de la Iglesia requiere que los católicos se abstengan de tomar cualquier alimento y bebida al menos desde una hora antes de recibir la sagrada comunión, sin embargo el agua y las medicinas son siempre permitidas. Las personas ancianas, los que sufren de alguna enfermedad y los que se encargan de ellos podrán recibirla aún cuando hayan comido o tomado algo a última hora.¹⁰⁹

13. ¿Cómo el niño/a debe recibir la comunión?

Para recibir la sagrada comunión, el niño/a deberá inclinar la cabeza como muestra de reverencia, luego recibirá el cuerpo y la sangre de Cristo del ministro ya sean en la lengua o en la mano.¹¹⁰ Los niños que deseen recibir el pan consagrado en la mano deberán acercarse al ministro con las manos extendidas y listas, una mano encima de la otra con la palma hacia arriba. Cuando el ministro diga el “cuerpo de Cristo” el niño/a deberá responder, “Amén.” Una vez el cuerpo de Cristo es colocado en la mano del niño/a, el/ella deberá tomarlo y consumirlo íntegramente.¹¹¹

Para recibir la sangre de Cristo, el niño/a deberá acercarse al ministro del cáliz y hacer la reverencia que hizo anteriormente. Cuando el ministro le dice “la sangre de Cristo,” el niño/a deberá responder, “Amén,” luego tomará el cáliz que le es entregado por el ministro y deberá tomarlo, llevarlo a la boca, beberá un poco del cáliz, luego lo devuelve al ministro y se retira.¹¹²

“Cuando la sagrada comunión se la hace bajo las dos especies el signo adquiere una forma más plena;”¹¹³ sin embargo, “Cristo, todo e integro... es recibido, aun cuando se recibe bajo una sola de las especies.”¹¹⁴ Por lo tanto, aun cuando el cuerpo y la sangre de Cristo son ofrecidas, el niño/a puede escoger recibir una sola de las especies.



De una manera práctica las parroquias deben ofrecer la oportunidad de practicar como recibir la sagrada comunión. La práctica debe enfocarse, en la procesión, en la reverencia, en como recibir el pan ya sea en la lengua o en la mano, agarrando y tomando el cáliz y devolviéndolo al ministro y volviendo a su asiento, todos de una manera reverente. El niño/a deberá aprender como recibir el pan consagrado ya sea en (la lengua o en la mano). Al final cada niño/a (con la ayuda de sus padres) decidirán cual método de recepción usaran. El niño, que recibe la comunión en la boca necesita practicar lo suficiente para asegurarse que abre su boca lo suficiente para que el sacerdote se la dé.

La recepción del cuerpo y la sangre de Cristo por intinción esta permitida. En este caso, el sacerdote toma la hostia consagrada y moja parte de ella en el cáliz (asistido por el ministro que sostiene el cáliz) y la coloca en la lengua de quien va a comulgar.¹¹⁵ No está permitido que el que va a comulgar moje la hostia en el cáliz. Sólo el sacerdote (ni el diácono ni el laico) puede distribuir la comunión por intinción.

14. ¿Cómo se deben comportar los niños en misa?

Los niños deben ser animados a participar activamente en la misa: en los gestos rituales (haciendo la señal de la cruz en la frente, labios y corazón cuando se va a leer el evangelio; inclinarse; genuflexión), en movimiento (en procesión al ir a recibir la comunión) y cuando se esta quieto (arrodillados, sentados); en oraciones habladas, en aclamaciones cantadas y en silencio; escuchando atentamente y respondiendo de todo corazón. En misa, así como también en otros lugares los niños aprenden de los adultos a su alrededor. Para que los niños aprendan un comportamiento apropiado en misa, los padres y otros miembros de la familia necesitan mostrar el ejemplo de una “participación plena, conciente y activa”.¹¹⁶ Además, el sentarse en la asamblea donde el niño/a pueda ver y oír, puede ayudar a que ellos se mantengan atentos e interesados en la misa.

15. ¿Qué roles litúrgicos son apropiados para los niños que reciben la Primera Comunión durante la misa dominical?

Los niños que están recibiendo su primera comunión son primero y ante todo miembros de la asamblea, que participan totalmente, concientemente y activamente en la misa. Esto incluye cantar las aclamaciones, los cantos, los himnos y las canciones propias de la asamblea; formando parte de las oraciones habladas y de las respuestas; unidos en gestos rituales y posturas (Ej. haciendo la señal de la cruz; persignándose la frente, labios y corazón antes de leer el evangelio; inclinándose antes de recibir la sagrada comunión; parándose, arrodillándose, o haciendo la genuflexión en el momento apropiado). Estas acciones deben ser practicadas con anticipación, de esta manera los niños recordarán su primera comunión, no solamente por la ropa, los regalos o la celebración, pero sobretodo y particularmente por su completa atención y participación en la liturgia eucarística, que formaran parte gracias al conocimiento y competencia ganada durante la preparación sacramental.

Además de este primordial y esencial rol, los niños pueden participar en la procesión durante el ofertorio y la música que acompaña a la celebración.¹¹⁷ Esto realzará sus sentido de solemnidad de la ocasión y satisfecerá las necesidades de movimiento, especialmente después de estar sentado por un periodo extenso.



Una excelente proclamación por buenos lectores (adultos presentes) puede ser mas efectivo para los niños que “sus compañeros que no están preparados o tienen miedo o vergüenza.”¹¹⁸ Aun cuando un niño/a puede leer en publico sin equivocarse, ellos solo pueden transmitir la comprensión de la escritura de acuerdo a su edad. Se debe tener “consideración para la asamblea entera”¹¹⁹ escogiendo ministros de la palabra ya sean jóvenes o adultos que cumplen con los requisitos de madurez y formación.

De acuerdo con la *Instrucción General del Misal Romano*, el Diacono, acólito o el ministro laico prepara el altar para la liturgia de la eucaristía y ayuda al padre a recibir las ofrendas de los fieles.¹²⁰ Teniendo en cuenta lo dicho, la mesa no debe ser preparada por los niños durante la misa, pero puede ser incorporada en algún servicio de oración o en algún otro tiempo (Ej. al concluir la preparación sacramental).

16. ¿Es permitido incluir símbolos y ritos asociados con culturas particulares en la celebración de la Primera Comunión?

La inclusión de símbolos y costumbres asociadas con culturas pueden ser apropiadas en ciertos tiempos; sin embargo, se debe tener cuidado que la eucaristía, como acción universal del Señor para su gente, y el ritual común de nuestra fe común no se vea ensombrecida por la diversidad de actividades.¹²¹

Es costumbre en algunas culturas vestir a los niños/as en trajes blancos y que lleven consigo velas prendidas durante la procesión, conectando la recepción de la primera comunión (sacramento de iniciación) con el primer sacramento de iniciación el bautismo. Esto se puede permitir (siempre y cuando se tenga en consideración la economía y circunstancias de las familias involucradas). El uso de estolas o cualquier otro accesorio que se asemeje a la estola no esta permitido, porque las estolas pertenecen a las ordenes sagradas.

En general, costumbres que no son parte de la tradición universal de la iglesia no deben ser incluidas en la misa. La sagrada comunión es el regalo de Cristo a todo su cuerpo, la Iglesia; cualquier cosa que socave la universalidad deberá ser evitada.

17. ¿Cuándo y donde se debe celebrar la Primera Comunión?

Como sacramento de iniciación, la primera comunión es propia de la temporada de pascua¹²² pero por ningún motivo esta prohibida en otro tiempo. El niño/a que comienza su preparación de la primera comunión pero que no la termina a tiempo para recibir el sacramento durante la temporada de pascua, pueden recibir su primera comunión cuando el párroco (en consulta con los padres, líder catequético y catequistas) considere que el/ella están listos. No está permitido ni es necesario, retrazar la primera comunión de un niño/a hasta la próxima pascua.¹²³

Normalmente, un niño/a deberá recibir su primera comunión el domingo durante la misa (o en la vigilia del sábado) en la parroquia donde el/ella asiste regularmente. Otros arreglos alternativos se pueden dar previa consulta con el párroco.



18. ¿Qué deben vestir los niños/as para su Primera Comunión?

Como todos los fieles en misa, los niños/as que recibirán su primera comunión deberán vestir ropa que demuestre “respeto, solemnidad y gozo.”¹²⁴ Algunos familiares escogerán comprar trajes elaborados y diseñados para la primera comunión, otros rehusarán alguna vestimenta que vienen usando de generación en generación; otros escogerán la “mejor ropa” que usan los domingos “prolijo y limpio,” dependiendo de la economía y las circunstancias. Todos estos aspectos expresan respeto por la solemnidad de la ocasión. Las parroquias deberán animar a que se use ropa que demuestre respeto, permitiendo que las familias puedan escoger basados en sus culturas y sus medios financieros.

Nota: Si el niño/a usa guantes, estos deberán ser removidos antes de recibir el Cuerpo de Cristo en la mano. Los guantes no necesitarán ser removidos si recibirán el cuerpo de Cristo en la lengua o al recibir la sangre de Cristo (de ser así el niño/a deberá practicar recibir el cáliz con los guantes).

19. ¿En la misa de la Primera Comunión se pueden anunciar los nombres de los niños o entregarles sus certificados?

La celebración de la primera comunión marca la primera vez de un niño/a que ha sido debidamente preparado y se encuentra listo para participar totalmente de la misa dominical. Esta celebración no debe ser vista ni debe sonar a cualquier otro evento (Ej. graduación, entrega de premios) Por lo tanto, actos no litúrgicos (Ej. anunciar los nombres de los niños para que pasen en frente a recibir la comunión) o ceremonias (presentación de certificados y/o regalos) no deben ser añadidos a la misa de celebración de la primera comunión. Estas actividades son mas apropiadas si se las hacen en una recepción después de la primera comunión o si las familias se reúnen mas adelante.

20. ¿Qué pasa si los padres del niño/a no están casados por la Iglesia?

No se le puede retener a un niño/a la gracia del sacramento de la comunión debido al estatus irregular del matrimonio de sus padres. Siendo sincero el deseo de los padres que su niño/a reciba sus sacramentos, este gesto debe ser visto de buena fe, probablemente es el comienzo de que están buscando una nueva relación con la Iglesia.

Ciertas situaciones maritales previenen a los padres de familia católica de recibir la sagrada comunión, aunque él o ella participen en la misa. Por ejemplo, una persona divorciada que se volvió a casar con otra, no podrá recibir la sagrada comunión hasta que la Iglesia le otorgue la anulación de su matrimonio previo y sea testigo del nuevo matrimonio de acuerdo al rito requerido.

Estas circunstancias no excluyen a los padres de tomar un rol activo en la formación sacramental de sus hijos. De hecho, la participación en la preparación de sus hijos puede mover en los padres el deseo de reconciliarse con la iglesia y motivarlos a acercarse a su párroco, a otro sacerdote, o al tribunal de la diócesis para pedir ayuda y comenzar el proceso de anulación.

Los números superíndices remiten a las referencias en página 46.



Pastoral Notes for Persons with Disabilities – First Holy Communion

The following insights augment corresponding sections of the Pastoral Directives found on pp. 12-21 of this Instruction. Please read the Pastoral Directives in their entirety.

Role of Parents and Guardians

“The central importance of family members in the lives of all persons with disabilities, regardless of age, must never be underestimated. They lovingly foster the spiritual, mental, and physical development of the disabled person and are the primary teachers of religion and morality.”¹²⁵

The family of a child with a disability knows him or her best. For example, in the case of intellectual disability, parents or siblings can often interpret body language and verbalizations that others cannot easily decipher. Thus, the engagement of family members in the child’s preparation for First Holy Communion is invaluable. Parents of a child with a disability are the “first” and “best” teachers¹²⁶ of their child but should not be expected to be the only teachers. The level of participation of a parent (or other family member) in the sacramental preparation of a child with a disability should be tailored to the specific situation, addressing the needs of the child, and the other children preparing for First Holy Communion, without putting undue stress on the family.¹²⁷

“Parents...and pastors are to see to it that children who have reached the use of reason are correctly prepared and are nourished by the Eucharist as early as possible.”¹²⁸ The connection between a child’s ability to reason and his or her eligibility to receive Holy Communion assumes that some use of reason is required “to distinguish the Body of Christ from ordinary food,”¹²⁹ though in the case of a child with a disability, the evidence of this recognition may be communicated “through manner, gesture or reverential silence, rather than verbally.”¹³⁰

Role of Godparents

Godparents of a child with a disability are his or her first link with the larger Christian community. Thus, they are in a unique position to assist the parents in bringing the child into the catechetical and sacramental life of the parish. For example, they can share the stories of the child’s Baptism, and then join in his or her sacramental preparation, reinforcing the connection between Baptism, First Penance, and First Holy Communion with their presence and participation.



Role of Parish Community and Catholic School

Parish communities known for their “joyful inclusion of all of God’s people around the table of the Lord”¹³¹ put into practice the Gospel of Jesus, whose hospitality embraced those rejected by the world. Children with disabilities are among those “particularly beloved of the Lord”¹³² and are indispensable members of the body of Christ.¹³³ Their involvement in all aspects of parish life, and especially, their presence within the Eucharistic assembly, proclaim the Gospel of Jesus in the midst of God’s people in a profound way.

Persons with disabilities “bring with them a special insight into the meaning of life, for they live...in the shadow of the cross,” and, through their unique experience, “forge virtues such as courage, patience, perseverance, compassion, and sensitivity.”¹³⁴ Thus, their living witness tests the values of the parish community, refines its mission, and enriches its faith.¹³⁵

In light of this, the catechesis of children with disabilities should take place within the mainstream of parish life. To the extent possible, children with disabilities should be included in catechetical programs in the parish, recognizing that some adaptation of program methods and adjustment of learning objectives may be necessary to meet their particular needs.¹³⁶ Even for children whose disabilities make participation in parish catechetical programs difficult, some degree of inclusion should be considered.

To offer a truly pastoral response to the family of a child with a disability, the parish should endeavor to learn about the disability, seeking information and insight from the parents, from the Center for Marriage, Family & Life, and from others with expertise in serving persons with disabilities. Thus informed, the parish can work with the family to develop the best approach for the child’s formation, so that he or she can be heartily welcomed into the catechetical and sacramental life of the community.¹³⁷

The Catholic school can be a resource for nearby parishes seeking information and expertise on the catechesis of children with disabilities. For example, if a child with disabilities attends a Catholic school, the strategies that support that child’s learning in the school context can be shared with the parish catechetical team, and adapted, as appropriate, to sacramental preparation in the parish.

Role of Pastor, Deacons, and Lay Catechists

“In accord with canon 777, no. 4, pastors are responsible to be as inclusive as possible in providing evangelization, catechetical formation, and sacramental preparation for parishioners with disabilities.”¹³⁸ In carrying out this duty, pastors depend on the assistance of others: deacons, catechetical leaders, catechists, and parents. These, in turn, may consult the Center for Marriage, Family & Life for insight on adapting sacramental preparation programs to meet the needs of children with various disabilities. The Center can also help identify persons with relevant expertise, as well as additional resources available in the local area.

Realistically, not every parish can achieve full accessibility and availability of programs for children with disabilities. Hence, parishes in a given area may work together to provide such services.¹³⁹



According to Church law, pastors bear the dual responsibility of inviting children who have reached the use of reason to the table of the Lord (through suitable preparation and celebration of the Sacrament of Penance), while, at the same time, exercising vigilance, so that children who have not reached the use of reason do not come to Communion.¹⁴⁰ This indicates that some use of reason is deemed necessary “to distinguish the Body of Christ from ordinary food.”¹⁴¹ Children with limited use of reason, due to intellectual or other disability, may, through suitable catechesis, come to recognize the special significance of the Eucharist and give evidence of this “through manner, gesture or reverential silence, rather than verbally.”¹⁴² For assistance in interpreting such signs and assessing the child’s readiness to receive Holy Communion with the appropriate recognition and reverence,¹⁴³ pastors and those who assist them with this discernment are encouraged to consult with parents, diocesan personnel from the Center for Marriage, Family & Life, psychologists, religious educators, and others with relevant expertise. “Cases of doubt should be resolved in favor of the right of the baptized person to receive the sacrament.”¹⁴⁴

Catechesis prior to First Holy Communion

The Church believes that every human person “is capable of growth in holiness.”¹⁴⁵ Grace makes this possible, regardless of the limitations imposed by disabilities. In light of this, “All baptized persons with disabilities have a right to adequate catechesis and deserve the means to develop a relationship with God.”¹⁴⁶ Parish efforts on behalf of children with disabilities should aim to uphold that “right” and provide those “means.”

As much as possible, children with disabilities should be included in catechetical programs in the parish, recognizing that some adaptation of program methods may be necessary to meet their particular needs.¹⁴⁷ For example, a parish that regularly prepares children for First Holy Communion through some combination of parent-led home learning, catechist-led instruction for children, formation opportunities for parents, and learning events for children and parents together (family sessions, family retreats), may work with parents to create a unique blend of these learning contexts to serve the particular needs of a child with a disability.

Children who have limited or no speech, or other difficulties with verbal interaction, may benefit from learning with visual story cards. *My Picture Missal*, available in the Adaptive First Eucharist Preparation Kit (Loyola Press), makes use of this adaptive strategy, helping children to pay attention, actively participate, and maintain focus during Mass. The Mass Cards that come with *My Picture Missal* allow children to “actively communicate their understanding” to parents and others with them at Mass, while “maintaining the ability to demonstrate reverence,”¹⁴⁸ that is, without causing disruption. Through the use of repetition and visual story cards children can learn to distinguish the Eucharist from ordinary food and to receive Holy Communion reverently.¹⁴⁹

While parish catechesis before First Holy Communion should normally make use of materials approved by the U.S Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), parishes desiring to use materials adapted for persons with disabilities (not yet included in the USCCB Conformity Listing of Catechetical Texts and Series) may seek approval from the Center for Marriage, Family & Life.



Some adjustment of learning objectives may be appropriate for children with certain disabilities. For example, for children with intellectual disabilities, learning objectives might be simplified, so that their sacramental preparation for First Holy Communion¹⁵⁰ helps them to:

- Make the Sign of the Cross.
- Learn about Jesus, who gives us himself in the Eucharist.
- Feel part of the community that celebrates the Mass.
- Participate in the Mass.
- Learn the difference between Holy Communion and ordinary food.
- Learn to receive Holy Communion reverently.

Under normal circumstances, children preparing for First Holy Communion should participate in systematic religious education for their particular age group. For children with disabilities, the appropriate level of inclusion with peers should be agreed upon by catechetical leaders, catechists, and parents; and adjusted, as needed through ongoing dialogue. Examples of participation adapted to a child's learning needs might include full-time inclusion with peers, with the child accompanied by a learning partner (background-screened, VIRTUS-trained adult or teen, who assists one-on-one in the classroom); part-time inclusion, augmented by at-home tutoring by a catechist or parent; and at-home parent-led instruction of the child.

Readiness for and Celebration of First Holy Communion

“Parish sacramental celebrations should be accessible to persons with disabilities and open to their full, active and conscious participation, according to their capacity.”¹⁵¹

Children with disabilities may benefit from a gradual introduction to the full length of Sunday Mass, taking breaks, as needed, and then returning to the pew. A consistent place in the assembly, chosen with sensitivity to the volume of the music and the nearness of other people, may be particularly important for children with certain disabilities (for example, autism-spectrum disorder). Touching others at the sign of peace may not come easily to some children, so sitting among familiar parishioners, who understand this difficulty, can help these children feel more at ease.

A child's gradual and graceful progress toward full participation in the Mass should not be disrupted by the celebration First Holy Communion. Therefore, children who need to sit in their usual place, far from the center of attention, should be allowed to do so. Similarly, the minister who will serve the child Communion should be known to him or her, and, if possible, be approached to practice with the child before the celebration of First Holy Communion. In this way, the child's needs can be addressed in advance (e.g., for a very small piece of the host, for reception on the tongue), and his or her non-verbal signals can be learned by the minister.



The opportunity to practice with an unconsecrated host and to become accustomed to its taste and texture may be of particular benefit to a child with a disability, so that he or she can learn to receive Holy Communion reverently and consume the Eucharistic species completely.

If a child has used visual story cards during sacramental preparation to overcome verbal difficulties, review of a familiar story board about Holy Communion, just before his or her reception of the sacrament, may serve to remind and reassure the child.

For additional information, contact the Center for Marriage, Family & Life, 804-622-5109.



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- ¹⁴⁸ David Rizzo, Mercedes McBride Rizzo, and Brendan Rizzo, *Helper Guide for Individuals with Autism and Other Special Needs*, Adaptive First Eucharist Preparation Kit, Loyola Press (2012), p.3.
- ¹⁴⁹ Cf. Code of Canon Law, can. 912§2.
- ¹⁵⁰ Cf. Pastoral Directives Regarding First Holy Communion, p. 17; *National Directory for Catechesis*, no. 36, A, 3a, p. 127-128.
- ¹⁵¹ *Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities*, no. 3.

