

The Sacramental Preparation of Children

A few weeks ago we had around 20 families at vigil Mass as part of the sign-up process for this year's combined First Holy Communion and Confirmation preparation programmes. Since the sacramental programmes of the last two years were put on hold due to the pandemic, it's a kind of catch-up combination. Should you consult any list of indicators of readiness for First Holy Communion, a working participatory knowledge of the Mass is on it. Yet last vigil Mass only one young lassie was spied coming into Mass with her grandmother.

This is where our obsession with doing the bare minimum, over a series of many decades, has brought us. How very far that is from loving God with all our hearts, our minds, our wills and our strength! Remember, the foolish virgins who only brought just enough oil for the bridegroom's lamps didn't enter the wedding feast, only those virgins who absolutely didn't want to miss it and made sure they did much more than the expected minimum were admitted to the wedding feast.

Currently in our parish we have this process for each round of preparation for the Sacrament of Confirmation, for the Sacrament of Confirmation and for First Communion: Families are notified that the next round of sacramental preparation is beginning. There is an information night for parents. Generally it isn't too much more than information about filling in the enrolment forms, what is acceptable for the child to wear, and what the rules are for photography and video recording of the event (and hard to get the priest to attend). There's usually a list of dates, times and locations for the four sessions of sacramental preparation, and the parent selects whichever suits their schedule the most.

Parents and children are then expected to attend a weekend Mass where they make a public commitment to enter into the preparation process and drop off their enrolment forms together with the notional fee for workbooks, certificate, and other stuff depending on the sacrament. For example a copy of the New Testament is usually given with Confirmation, and a Mass book for young people is usually given with First Communion. The four sessions then happen, with a parent and child attending together. There is a practice night for Confirmation, and if there's going to be a special First Communion Mass probably a practice night for that too. The sacrament is celebrated, certificates are handed out, and photographs are taken.

Thirty years ago in the same parish the model was different. From what I've heard over the years, the majority of the preparation took place in the religion lessons at the Catholic primary school, but there was also a day retreat led by the parish priest and his helpers, and some one-on-one time with each child and the parish priest where he ascertained whether the child had sufficient readiness for the sacrament.

My own experience was that nuns always taught the class, at that time Year 2, and preparation for the Sacrament of Penance and for First Holy Communion were incorporated into the school routine throughout the year. But it was buttressed with Mass as a family each Sunday. Confirmation preparation was also based in the Year 4 classroom, except for a few videos that parents and children came together to watch in the parish church in the lead up to the sacrament. Mine was the first of the annual Confirmations. Prior to that

Confirmation happened every 3 years, and I recall that it was commonly expected that everyone would be at morning Mass for the three mornings preceding the reception of Confirmation. At that time the bishop made a point of visiting the students to be confirmed in the week leading up to Confirmation to ask them questions, presumably to gauge the level of readiness and preparation.

But even in my own time, the families who buttressed the sacramental preparation with Mass each Sunday were less than half.

The steady decline in the quality of sacramental preparation for children has been going on for a lot longer than 50 years. Possibly the decline began when the advent of local Catholic primary schools enabled both priests and families to delegate their sacramental preparation responsibilities, initiating the transactional nature of sacramental preparation.

I imagine that the gradual creep of doves, pigeons, lambs and cattle into the Jerusalem Temple precinct happened over an even longer time. But when Jesus took the cords and overturned the money changers tables and the animal cages and enclosures, that precinct was returned to its original purpose as an area for prayer and worship.

What does the Code of Canon Law have to say?

Firstly about Confirmation.

Can.879 The sacrament of confirmation strengthens the baptized and obliges them more firmly to be witnesses of Christ by word and deed and to spread and defend the faith. It imprints a character, enriches by the gift of the Holy Spirit the baptized continuing on the path of Christian initiation, and binds them more perfectly to the Church.

Can.889 §1. Every baptized person not yet confirmed and only such a person is capable of receiving confirmation.

§2. To receive confirmation licitly outside the danger of death requires that a person who has the use of reason be suitably instructed, properly disposed, and able to renew the baptismal promises.

Can.890 The faithful are obliged to receive this sacrament at the proper time. Parents and pastors of souls, especially pastors of parishes, are to take care that the faithful are properly instructed to receive the sacrament and come to it at the appropriate time.

Can.891 The sacrament of confirmation is to be conferred on the faithful at about the age of discretion unless the conference of bishops has determined another age, or there is danger of death, or in the judgment of the minister a grave cause suggests otherwise.

And secondly about Holy Communion.

Can.897 The most August sacrament is the Most Holy Eucharist in which Christ the Lord himself is contained, offered, and received and by which the Church continually lives and grows. The eucharistic sacrifice, the memorial of the death and resurrection of the Lord, in which the sacrifice of the cross is perpetuated through the ages is the summit and source of all worship and Christian life, which signifies and effects the unity of the People of God and

brings about the building up of the body of Christ. Indeed, the other sacraments and all the ecclesiastical works of the apostolate are closely connected with the Most Holy Eucharist and ordered to it.

Can.898 The Christian faithful are to hold the Most Holy Eucharist in highest honor, taking an active part in the celebration of the most august sacrifice, receiving this sacrament most devoutly and frequently, and worshiping it with the highest adoration. In explaining the doctrine about this sacrament, pastors of souls are to teach the faithful diligently about this obligation.

Can.912 Any baptized person not prohibited by law can and must be admitted to holy communion.

Can.913 §1. The administration of the Most Holy Eucharist to children requires that they 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.

§2. The Most Holy Eucharist, however, can be administered to children in danger of death if they can distinguish the body of Christ from ordinary food and receive communion reverently.

Can.914 It is primarily the duty of parents and those who take the place of parents, as well as the duty of pastors, to take care that children who have reached the use of reason are prepared properly and, after they have made sacramental confession, are refreshed with this divine food as soon as possible. It is for the pastor to exercise vigilance so that children who have not attained the use of reason or whom he judges are not sufficiently disposed do not approach holy communion.

And lastly about the Sacrament of Penance.

Can.987 To receive the salvific remedy of the sacrament of penance, a member of the Christian faithful must be disposed in such a way that, rejecting sins committed and having a purpose of amendment, the person is turned back to God.

Can.988 §1. A member of the Christian faithful is obliged to confess in kind and number all grave sins committed after baptism and not yet remitted directly through the keys of the Church nor acknowledged in individual confession, of which the person has knowledge after diligent examination of conscience.

§2. It is recommended to the Christian faithful that they also confess venial sins.

Can.989 After having reached the age of discretion, each member of the faithful is obliged to confess faithfully his or her grave sins at least once a year.

It is instructive that schools and catechists are not mentioned at all in the preparation of children to receive the sacraments. Could it be that partnership between priest and families was the original model for sacramental preparation?

What we do know is that current models of sacramental preparation are not working; they are not producing young people who receive Jesus in Holy Communion with faith and

devotion and regularity. They are not producing young people prepared to spread and defend the faith. They are not producing young people with a constant desire to turn back to God and be reconciled to Him.

Our Catholic schools aren't doing that either.

What we are seeing are families showing up to do the sacramental preparation, and receive the sacraments, and then not seeing them at any other time except maybe a biggish family event (baptism, wedding, wedding anniversary or funeral).

How can we possibly keep kidding ourselves that somewhere between 3 and 4 hours of sacramental instruction per sacrament is sufficient to produce the kind of fruit the Code of Canon Law sets out as the norm?

Sadly even those few hours are set up for failure. Why? Because almost all the families are not coming to the sacramental programmes because they want to. Sometimes they are there because they don't want their child to miss out on what their peers are doing. Sometimes they are there because that's the expectations that holy grandparents and holy great-grandparents have set. Sometimes they are there because it is seen as something necessary to give their child a better chance of securing a place at a Catholic high school. It isn't something families have freely chosen to do, and it certainly interferes with regular sporting, social and dance class commitments.

Our families are largely unchurched, and to a big extent it is our fault because we expect them and their children to be ready for catechesis when God is an after thought in their lives. Few have been presented with who Jesus is, why He matters, and the kind of whole-hearted commitment which is the only acceptable response to what He did for us on the Cross. What a huge difference there is between faith being seen as an optional extra or crutch for the weakest instead of the one thing necessary!

At the same time it is true that God has been working in our lives, and in their lives, even if they haven't yet recognised His fingerprints. It is important to respect what God has already done in the lives of the families signing up for sacramental preparation. With the help of God's grace we need to affirm the good that is already present, but also attract and invite them to the more that God has for them without denigrating them. When the father embraced his prodigal son no remarks were made regarding his destitution and stench. We need to do likewise.

But we also have to make it clear that being a socially acceptable 'good person' isn't sufficient; and that the wide gulf between what society thinks is acceptable behaviour and the supernatural virtues necessary for living a life pleasing God can only be bridged with the Sacraments and the power of the Holy Spirit.

We might think we are doing OK, but the Lord God sees things differently.

Ponder these words from the Apocalypse of St Paul a.k.a. the Vision of St Paul, one of many early Christian documents that didn't make it into the canon of Scripture, but are nonetheless valuable:

<https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1017.htm>

“And after these things I saw the Son of God descending from heaven, and a diadem was on His head. And seeing Him those who were placed in punishment exclaimed all with one voice saying: Have pity, Son of the High God! You are He who shows refreshment for all in the heavens and on earth, and on us likewise have pity, for since we have seen You, we have refreshment. And a voice went out from the Son of God through all the punishments saying: And what work have you done that you demand refreshment from Me? My Blood was poured out for your sakes, and not even so did you repent: for your sakes I wore the crown of thorns on My head: for you I received buffets on My cheeks, and not even so did you repent. I asked for water when hanging on the Cross and they gave Me vinegar mixed with gall, with a spear they opened My right side, for My name's sake they slew My prophets and just men, and in all these things I gave you a place of repentance and you would not.”

Whenever a child is not properly disposed and prepared for receiving the Sacraments – we do great harm to the child, to the family, to the parish, to the volunteers and to the Church.

Each Sacrament, Confirmation, Penance, Eucharist, is supposed to signal a deeper ongoing committed relationship to Jesus Christ and His Church. They are sacraments which initiate the recipient into a deeper relationship with God. Hopefully you would think it very strange if someone got up and exchanged marriage vows before witnesses and then lived as though the newly wedded spouse didn't exist. Yet that is exactly what happens when a First Communion becomes an Only Communion. Every time we let that happen, we damage the Body of Christ and we deeply offend our Redeemer.

It is similar when we let children treat the sacraments lightly, and when we let them approach the sacraments in a jovial and disrespectful manner. Each Sacrament bears the price tag of the Blood and Wounds of Jesus.

Many good and generous people give of their time and talent to assist parents and families to prepare for the Sacraments. With prayers, diligence and good-will they work and see very little fruit. Occasionally a parent will decide to go to the Sacrament of Penance. Even rarer a sacramental catechist will see the family at Mass in the week or so following the Sacrament. What has to happen eventually? Those good and generous people experience burn-out, find that in good conscience they cannot continue in such a ministry, and shy off volunteering for anything else. Been there. Done that. Continuing to permit the wasting of time, talent and the good will of volunteers on service that bears no fruit is wrong in itself, and wrong because it prevents those good and generous people from finding a work of service that will bear good fruit.

There is such a huge disconnect between the concepts the sacramental catechist needs to impart and the lack of basic religious glossary that children and families have. As much as the sacramental catechist tries to dumb it down and simplify the concepts, it is still for our children and families like speaking a foreign language, and the children exhibit boredom. Only once did a young lassie coming with her grandmother address this situation in tears. She wanted to understand; but didn't have a clue what the words I was using meant. At least she was honest, the rest just seem to endure the hour and escape with all haste at the end of it.

And what kind of damage gets done to the consciences of priests who admit youngsters to Holy Communion without doing any personal enquiry as to their level of preparation and understanding? Ditto for those amazing sacramental preparation co-ordinators who deal patiently with all the administrative issues and constant questions, and who then are required to say publicly before the bishop at Confirmation, 'these children are well prepared' when nothing could be further from the truth. Even if you do provide the best preparation possible in the time allotted, often it doesn't sink in. Despite many times going through even the most basic things, like the Amen and And With Your Spirit responses for the rite of Confirmation, often the children forget what they are supposed to respond. Leaving a sacramental catechist wondering if those basics didn't sink in, did anything sink in?

And yet we continue with these charades. Is it not madness to continue doing something that isn't working, and hasn't worked in many decades, in the forlorn hope that next time it will work? At some point God's judgment must fall upon us for the bishop accepting the lie that the children are well prepared, for the sacramental co-ordinator saying that untruth publicly, for the pastor of the parish standing present in mute agreement, and in the presence of the children, their parents and families who know full well just how shallow and half-hearted their preparation has been. Is it any wonder that these children and their parents have no respect for the Church after experiences like these? It is patent hypocrisy.

We can see the incalculable damage done to the Church through these practices in the missing generations at Mass. Last year at vigil Mass there was a show of hands survey conducted. Only 5% of those present were aged less than 75 years.

There are glimmers of hope of the horizon.

The first one was Fr James Mallon admitting in his book Divine Renovation that he wanted to yell out, 'NO, they are not well prepared!' at that place in the rite of Confirmation. He and his parish teams have been working on inviting the parents to go through a programme designed to evangelise prior to beginning sacramental catechesis, and that has been bearing good fruit.

In recent times two webinars from the Divine Renovation team UK have become available, one on First Holy Communion and the other on Confirmation. Both of them are around an hour long and well worth watching.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=efCGmdsH6Og> First Holy Communion

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2faeBfPiQDI> Confirmation

Instead of a transactional list of things that must be done (Information night, Sign-up Mass, 4 sessions, Practice night, Sacramental Event) some parishes are moving to an ongoing model of accompaniment and support for families as they and their children progress towards readiness for the sacraments. Parents are given a list of signs of readiness. Then there is a monthly event for families which involves Mass, socializing over morning tea, and separate input for parents and children, supported by monthly ideas to help make faith an ordinary part of life, and a monthly parents-only zoom session to talk about how things are going, mutual encouragement and a chance to get specific questions answered. Then

children receive the Sacraments when both child and family recognise readiness, however long that takes.

Here is a sample list of the signs of readiness for First Communion:

Readiness to Begin Preparation for First Holy Communion

Has the child been baptized Catholic (as corroborated by the parish's baptismal record or by a baptismal certificate from another Catholic parish)?

Has the child reached the age of reason (about seven years) i.e. he or she understands the difference between good actions and bad actions?

Is the child interested in receiving Holy Communion?

Have they manifested an unwavering desire?

Does the child have a sense of belonging to the Catholic community?

Does the child participate in the Sunday Mass (singing, joining in the responses, listening to the readings and the homily, standing, sitting, kneeling with the community, attentive during the Eucharistic prayer) according to his or her ability?

Does the child pray at home, and have a regular routine of prayer?

Does the child relate to Jesus as One who loves and cares for him or her, and Who will forgive and pardon sins if he or she seeks forgiveness for having done them?

Does the child understand that he or she is to care for others because that is how we show God that we love Him?

Has the child prepared for and had an opportunity to receive the Sacrament of Penance?

Many parishes provide a certificate as the child exits the confessional, if there have been several children making their first confession at the same time.

Readiness to Celebrate First Holy Communion

The child is a baptized Catholic and has reached the age of reason (about seven years), as requested above.

The celebration of First Penance is a pre-requisite for the celebration of First Holy Communion.

Preparation for both these sacraments can occur simultaneously, but usually they are prepared for separately.

Does the child participate in the Sunday Mass according to his or her ability?

Does the child understand and believe that Jesus Christ is present in the Eucharist?

Does the child realize the difference between the Eucharist and ordinary bread and wine?

Does the child understand the importance of observing the Eucharistic fast?

Does the child know how to receive the Eucharist reverently?

Does the child know that receiving Holy Communion is a special time of communicating with Jesus heart to heart?

Has the child participated in the worship of the Eucharist outside of the Mass, i.e. visits to the Blessed Sacrament, Benediction and Eucharistic Adoration?

Does the child understand how to make a spiritual communion in preparation for sacramental communion, and can he or she explain the difference?

Does the child understand that the aim is to receive sacramental communion with a heart as free from sin as possible?

Does the child understand that if he or she has committed any serious sins, he or she must refrain from sacramental communion until those sins have been forgiven in the sacrament of penance?

For those areas where Confirmation happens in the teenage years, a different model is being experimented with. In some areas this includes putting together a quarterly retreat day, with Mass, engaging evangelistic speakers, small group discussions, and opportunities for different types of prayer, including Eucharistic Adoration, as well as some fun and games. The aim being to provide an environment where an encounter with Jesus can take place. Supporting these quarterly retreat days are regular social get togethers at non-church locations, occasional outings that commence after Sunday morning Mass, and regular small group discussions and regular one-on-one mentoring sessions. During the one-on-one mentoring sessions, often over a hot chocolate drink, an opportunity is given to discuss how their relationship with God is going, what next steps they think are needed to move towards making a formal public commitment to Jesus and asking the Holy Spirit to empower them for mission. Only when the desire and the capacity to fulfil such a commitment is present is a place at the next Confirmation session reserved. Teenagers who have been through this kind of preparation are showing the desire to keep on growing in faith. To answer this desire an ongoing post Confirmation formation in discipleship to Jesus in one UK parish is being offered via a 3 year Ascent youth programme. <https://www.theascentuk.co.uk/>

However it will take teamwork and many generous people to provide an atmosphere of faith that outweighs the levels of unbelief present in the families and children.

It is noteworthy that the parishes beginning the foray into new models of sacramental preparation have had a few years of regular evangelistic programmes in their parishes which have built up the numbers of adults ready and willing to participate in sacramental teams like these. Changing models requires a full stop to existing models and a complete overhaul of other areas of parish life; it is something that cannot be done incrementally.

I suspect that is why the group of parents and children, often 6 parent-child duos, meeting with a sacramental catechist for 4 sessions doesn't work. One catechist is insufficient to balance 6 parent-child duos who aren't really sure if God exists and if God's existence matters. When I had to do catch-up lessons, usually in their home, it always went much better. Although it was usually painful to return the conversation from wherever it had gone, back to the mandatory subject matter.

Those one-on-two experiences in the sacramental programme are cause for hope that if such meetings are regular and ongoing, and if the parent and child sets the pace with the questions they are actually interested in, it would be far more fruitful in the long term even if it took many more weeks to attain to sacramental readiness. Seeking to go from zero to hero in four sessions is far from reasonable, but 14 or more sessions at their pace could be reasonable if a true desire for the sacraments exists.

Perhaps if you are willing to pull the band-aid off the wound part of the way, it is worthwhile considering pulling it off all the way? Are our Catholic schools producing students who are regularly participating in the sacraments by personal choice 10 years after graduation?

Or are their lives indistinguishable from atheists and agnostics 10 years after graduation? To be truly called a Catholic school, shouldn't a school be producing 90% of such students?

If there is no good fruit, isn't it time to question whether 'Catholic' schools deserve Catholic funding and Catholic nomenclature?

There is a post-pandemic opportunity to move away from brick and mortar schools and to move towards online learning at home supported by dedicated teams of faith-filled teachers. Doing this would decrease the annual school fees for Catholic schools which have to include building maintenance, insurance, and provision for improvements. Doing this would enable more mothers to return from paid-employment to the home, and thereby enable family relationships and at-home learning to flourish.

School properties that are owned by parishes and dioceses could be leased back to private school entities that don't carry the name of Catholic, even should such entities be owned and run by collectives of teachers who taught at the previously 'Catholic' schools.

Even if this doesn't happen, one thing that does need to happen is to remove the selection criteria for 'Catholic' schools which indicate that preference will be given to prospective students who have received all the Sacraments of initiation. Let's recognise what these schools are, Catholic in name only, living out a veneer of culturally acceptable Catholicism that doesn't ask much of anyone, schools that are moving towards being completely secular schools at a rapid rate anyway. Already those families who want to bring their children up in a faith supportive atmosphere have been choosing to home-school for two reasons. Firstly because what the school was teaching was undermining the faith development going on in the home. Secondly because there was no longer sufficient support from other families to protest when error was being taught and to protest when expected levels of faith-supportive events diminished (e.g. lower numbers of school and class Masses per term, a room set aside for a chapel reallocated as a classroom).

If families are no longer seeking the sacraments for their children as a golden ticket to get them a place in a private school, we should start seeing families seek the sacraments for their children for the right reasons. There may be far fewer of them, but at least parish sacramental teams would be working with families that are actively choosing to be involved rather than families feeling coerced to be involved.

The current models of sacramental preparation for children are not working. When the transactional period of sacramental preparation is over and the sacrament celebrated, we see neither families nor children again – until maybe the next transactional period of sacramental preparation begins. This is unacceptable. It sells God short. It sells the Church short. It sells families short. It sells children short. It makes a mockery of the sacraments purchased by the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus. It wastes the good will, time and talent of parishioners and colludes them in the collective hypocrisy. Stop this madness.

Models that support families as they gradually work towards the readiness of their children to receive the sacraments of initiation seem to be the way forward, and have been observably producing good fruit in the faith development of both families and children.