

## **CELEBRATING FIRST COMMUNION**

a guide compiled by the Liturgical Commission of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee

The statements in italics are excerpted from the 1996 edition of the *Sacramental Guidelines* for the Archdiocese of Milwaukee.

### ***Preparing for First Communion***

Full, conscious and active participation (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, #14) at Sunday Eucharist week after week is the most powerful and most significant means parents have for preparing their child to receive communion for the first time.

*If there is a school [in the parish] there should be one program both for parents of school children and parents of children who attend religious education classes.*

### **Preparing the Liturgy**

Parents of first communicants often express a strong interest in preparing the First Communion liturgy. The desire to be supportive of their child at this important time and to create memories that nourish their child for many years is to be commended. When working together with parents who may not have experience preparing liturgy or who are unfamiliar with the liturgical documents and principles for good liturgical celebrations, pastoral ministers will need to take extra care to direct their enthusiasm toward the primary symbols and actions of the celebration. For a child, the day is naturally special. Special classes, rehearsals, and perhaps the purchase of new clothes precede the day. Friends and relatives will gather afterwards. There will most likely be presents. For a seven or eight year old, this can be overwhelming. Asking the children to do, remember, or perform more than the liturgy calls for may simply be too much.

As always, good Sunday habits provide the foundation for a vibrant celebration of First Communion. Specific parental involvement might include attention to the following elements:

- (a) Hospitality issues: Many family members and friends who may be members of other churches or non-church goers often attend the First Communion liturgy. How can the parish best provide hospitality to these people? How can we be aware of the special needs of children who might come from divorced, blended or interfaith families? This event can be a critical time of evangelization and outreach.
- (b) At home prior to the celebration, parents can be encouraged to read and discuss with their children the Scriptures that will be proclaimed at the First Communion liturgy.
- (c) Parents or other family members who are trained and actively practicing liturgical ministers might serve in this capacity (i.e., as eucharistic ministers,

acolytes, lectors, ministers of hospitality) during the celebration itself. In keeping with good Sunday habits, every parish should have a policy that calls for the use of only trained and actively practicing ministers at all their celebrations. See related comments under "The First Communion Liturgy."

(d) Music is a central part of the First Communion liturgy. Early communication with the person or persons who select the music allows for the possibility that the music used at the First Communion liturgy can be sung regularly during both the children's preparation classes and at parent meetings. See related comments under "The First Communion Liturgy."

(e) *Appropriate instruction on the Eucharistic fast is to be provided for the children.* Generally the fast requires abstinence from food and drink, except water and medicine, for one hour before the reception of the Eucharist. The purpose of fasting is to help focus our attention on the mystery we will celebrate before we even leave our home - much like preparation of the readings begins to focus us. It is a sign of special respect for the Eucharist.

(f) *The sign of Communion is more complete when given under both kinds, since in that form the sign of the Eucharistic meal appears more clearly.* Parents often have questions about the reception of communion under both kinds; encourage them to verbalize their concerns. It can be helpful for parents to offer their child a sip of wine at home before the first communion day so that the child's attention can remain focused on the meaning of communion rather than on the external elements.

(g) Catechesis on the meaning of the dismissal rite which sends the community out to serve others might lead to the suggestion that the children set aside a portion of the gifts they receive to be used for the poor. Either the class as a whole could discuss and chose one group or cause toward which the everyone who wishes might contribute or individual families could chose a charity that has special meaning for them. Parents can take an active role in researching and discussing the specific charity to which their child may wish to donate. This is excellent preparation developing an awareness that Eucharist requires the community "to go in peace to love and serve the Lord."

### Additional Preparation Rituals

Parents and teachers should be encouraged to bless the children throughout the preparation process. Such blessings might include a birthday blessing, a blessing at the beginning of the school year, blessings during catechetical sessions, a blessing in time of difficulty, or a bedtime blessing. The children, in turn, can be encouraged to bless both their parents and their younger brothers and sisters. (See the *Book of Blessings* or *Catholic Household Blessings and Prayers* for ideas.)

Just as the rites of initiation provide several liturgical rituals before an adult is baptized or received into the Catholic Church, parishes might consider scheduling a blessing ritual at a Sunday liturgy at which parishioners would acknowledge the presence in their midst of the children who are preparing for First Communion that year. This blessing should take place well in advance of the actual First Communion celebration. The period of Ordinary Time between the end of the Christmas season and the beginning of Lent might be appropriate. Care should be taken that the language used for naming any such ritual not be confused with that used for the adult initiation rites.

### Role of the Godparents

Although there is no specific liturgical role for godparents in the celebration of First Communion they can be an important part of the preparation process. Godparents should be encouraged to pray for their godchild and to let the godchild know they are doing so. Certainly, they might talk to their godchild about the day of his or her baptism and the importance of that sacrament. Each year on the anniversary of the baptism, godparents might remember their godchild with a note, phone call or by planning a special activity together. Just as with the child's parents, full participation at the Sunday liturgy each week is the best example godparents can provide for their godchildren.

### Simple Attire

*First Communion celebrations should be prayerful and simple. The focus is welcoming children to the Lord's Table. Excessive attention to external elements such as clothes, decorations and material gifts is to be de-emphasized. 'Bodily demeanor (gestures, clothing) ought to convey the respect, solemnity, and joy of this moment when Christ becomes our guest.'*

While the wearing of white clothing can, with careful catechesis, be a reminder to all of the white garment given to the child at the time of his/her baptism, it needs to be noted that the wearing of a white dress and veil, or white slacks is not in any way necessary. Options should be made clear to parents. Sensitivity to families who choose attire for their children different from that worn by a majority of their peers may include making them aware of options for celebrating the sacrament at different times.

### Documenting Baptism Early in the Process

Those responsible for preparation for First Communion need to obtain copies of the children's baptismal records at the beginning of the preparation process. These records must be thoroughly checked immediately upon receipt, to make certain the baptism is both valid and licit. In this way, if it is discovered that a child was not baptized or was baptized in another Christian tradition, the child's preparation may be directed toward the appropriate Christian Initiation process, and last-minute surprises before the First Communion celebration can be avoided.

### Unbaptized children

Unbaptized children of catechetical age (approximately seven years old) who wish to prepare to receive First Communion first need to be prepared to be baptized. Parents and other family members are an intimate part of this process. Often, these baptisms are celebrated at the Easter Vigil on the Saturday evening before Easter. It should be noted that when children this age are baptized, they are to be confirmed and receive their First Communion at the same liturgy. This three-fold reception of the sacraments is explained in more detail during the time of preparation.

## ***The First Communion Liturgy***

### Time and Place of Celebration for First Communion

*Since Eucharist is one of the three sacraments of Christian initiation, the Easter season is the most appropriate liturgical time for celebrating First Communion.*

*A child's celebration of First Communion is to take place at a Sunday Liturgy in the parish church which provides the context of the worshipping community. The celebration is to involve the parish community. First Communion celebrations are not to be celebrated during the season of Lent.*

*There should not be two separate celebrations of First Communion, one for children attending Catholic School and one for those who do not.*

### Scheduling and the Sunday Assembly

The scheduling of First Communion during regular Sunday Eucharist times emphasizes the centrality of the regular Sunday worship cycle.

*Within the community setting, a variety of options can be provided by each parish. Common options include:*

- (1) family-centered celebrations at a Sunday liturgy which help emphasize that it is in the family that children find nourishment in Christian life;*
- (2) parish group celebrations at a Sunday liturgy which witness to the communal nature of the Eucharist.*

In light of the current priest shortage, scheduling additional celebrations also becomes problematic. If a parish has a very large number of communicants, perhaps one additional afternoon liturgy might be offered as an option *in addition to* the normal Sunday Eucharist times. Scheduling First Communion liturgies on more than one Sunday is another option.

### Questions to Consider

As with any other eucharist, whenever First Communion is celebrated, the following questions need to be asked: Are the postures and gestures used by the ministers reverent and graceful? Is the music assembly-friendly? Are ministers of hospitality attentive to the presence of visitors? Are our symbols strong enough to entice us into the mystery?

When First Communion is scheduled during the Easter season, that too must be taken into account in preparing the liturgy. How is this faith community marking the Fifty Days

of Easter? The pattern of ritual and music should closely resemble a “normal” Easter liturgy. After all, it is that pattern of prayer into which the children are being welcomed.

### Liturgical Ministers

Some young children have been well-trained and do an excellent job of proclaiming the Scriptures and the intercessions or acting as cantors, especially at liturgies celebrated at school or during religious education programs. It is important to remember, however, that scheduling children to serve as liturgical ministers on their First Communion day shifts the emphasis from what is central to the day's celebration. It can be very difficult for the assembly to focus their attention on the challenging words of the Scriptures when the reader is seven years old. It is the entire community that welcomes these children to the Lord's table and it is the regular ministers of that community that best symbolize that welcome. Selecting individual children to serve as readers or cantors may also put undue stress on the child and his or her parents. Given the “good Sunday habits” cited above, no parish should even consider asking children to perform these ministries if they are not trained, experienced, and regularly practicing liturgical ministers. The purpose of liturgical ministry is to serve the liturgical prayer of the community, not to put the minister on display or to be seen as a reward or honor.

### Music

The music used at First Communion liturgies should not differ greatly from the music used at a regular Sunday liturgy. First Communion liturgies are first and foremost celebrations of the entire parish community; to use much music that is unknown to the parish community is to deprive them of their right to full participation in the celebration. In addition, because First Communion is an initiation, as it were, into weekly participation in the reception of communion as part of the Sunday assembly, the music used on this occasion should embody the regular practice of the parish's Sunday celebrations. Finally, since sacramental celebrations are closely linked to the liturgical season in which they occur, the music needs to reflect the liturgical season during which it takes place.

### Shaping the Liturgy

#### *Gathering Rite*

Immediate assembly preparation: A short rehearsal before Mass of both new or even familiar music begins is often quite effective. Not only does it allow the those gathered, especially visitors and family guests, to learn any music with which they might be unfamiliar, it also sends a strong message that their participation is expected. All ministers and the first communicants too should be part of this rehearsal so that the assembly might more readily “find its voice.”

Especially during the Easter season, the sprinkling rite highlights the connection between the sacrament of baptism and First Communion. A simple renewal of baptismal

promises is also appropriate at this time, and would further emphasize the connection between these two sacraments of initiation.

### *Liturgy of the Word*

Although it may seem like the obvious choice, the *Lectionary for Masses with Children* is not necessarily the automatic choice. (See *Introduction to the Lectionary for Masses with Children*, #12-13.) Careful attention must be given to balance the needs of the entire assembly with those of the first communicants. Again, the need for families to discuss the readings at home and for well-prepared readers is highlighted. The day's Scriptures should be taken into account when setting the date for First Communion.

The psalm is an integral part of the liturgy of the word and should normally be sung. One of the seasonal psalms might be used to facilitate participation.

### *The Liturgy of the Eucharist*

**Preparation of the Gifts:** Avoid the temptation of cluttering up this simple rite with additional symbols or objects. It is the simple gifts of bread and wine, "the work of human hands," that will be transformed into the body and blood of Christ. The addition of unrelated items changes the meaning of this action. Be sure the bread and wine are abundant and clearly visible and that they are brought forward in dignified vessels. However, gifts for the needs of the church and of the poor may also be brought to the altar at this time. This is a strong option that rarely receives attention.

**The Eucharistic Prayer:** Special attention should be given to the Eucharistic Prayer. Which text will be chosen? One of the *Eucharistic Prayers for Masses With Children* may be appropriate. Will additional acclamations be incorporated? How will the presider's rhythm and pace draw the assembly more deeply into the prayer?

The manner in which children come forward to receive communion can express what we believe about what we are doing. Having all the first communicants receive communion before anyone else is not a good sign. When children receive communion with their parents and immediate family members, it reinforces their role in the midst of the community and more closely conforms to the normal Sunday pattern. Assuming that additional communion stations are available, other members of the assembly should not be asked to wait until all the first communicants have received communion. before they can receive. Not only can this practice unduly lengthen the communion rite, it serves no liturgical purpose. Sometimes parents prefer that their child receive communion from a priest rather than a lay minister, even if the priest has not been present for the entire liturgy. The reasons for this preference need to be uncovered and appropriate catechesis given. The focus needs to be on the body and blood of Christ and not on the minister.

The practice of having first communicants sing a special song during the liturgy may

have unanticipated drawbacks. If the children cannot be heard throughout the church, the song has little meaning. But even more serious, the practice often becomes simply a photo opportunity with light bulbs flashing and video cameras whirring. Not only is the prayer interrupted, but the communion ritual is disturbed. Guidelines regarding picture-taking should be discussed at parent meetings before the event and published in the Order of Worship used at the celebration.

### *The Sending Forth*

Members of the assembly might be invited to extend both their hands in blessing over the children during the final blessing. This practice may find parallels in other parish sacramental celebrations, such as when parents receive a special blessing at the baptism of their children.



## Resources

“Celebrating First Communion”

Ron Lewinski

*Liturgy 90*, January 1991

“First Communion Liturgy”

Lawrence E. Mick

*1995 Sourcebook for Sundays and Seasons*, p. xii-xv

“First Communion Masses: Let’s Get the Emphasis Right”

*Today’s Parish*, March 1998

Lawrence E. Mick

“Initiation: First Communion Celebrations”

Kathy Luty

*Prayer & Worship*, Winter 1993

*Meaningful First Communion Liturgies*

Nick Wagner

Resource Publications, Inc.

San Jose, CA

“Planning Principles for Celebrating First Communion”

Nick Wagner

*Modern Liturgy*, April 1997

“Rethinking a First Communion Practice”

Randall G. Donner

*Liturgy 90*, April 1996

“Rethinking First Communion”

Michael Marchal and Rosemary Conrad

*Modern Liturgy*, March 1987

*Sacramental Guidelines for the Archdiocese of Milwaukee*

Revised, 1996

“Ten Commandments for Presiding at Masses with Children”

Lawrence E. Mick

*Liturgy 90*, May/June 1995