

## **DIOCESAN GUIDELINES FOR FIRST PENANCE AND FIRST EUCHARIST CATECHESSES**

*Catechesis prior to First Penance and First Eucharist*  
*Catechesis for Persons with Disabilities*  
*Catechesis for those who attend Catholic School*

“A fully Christian life is inconceivable without participation in the liturgical services in which the faithful, gathered into a single assembly, celebrate the paschal mystery. Therefore, the religious initiation of children must be in harmony with this purpose. The Church baptizes children and therefore, relying on the gifts conferred by this sacrament, it must be concerned that once baptized they grow in communion with Christ and each other. The sign and pledge of that communion is participation in the eucharistic table, for which children are being prepared or led to a deeper realization of its meaning. This liturgical and eucharistic formation may not be separated from their general education, both human and Christian; indeed it would be harmful if their liturgical formation lacked such a basis.” (Directory for Masses with Children, n.8)

### **Parents’ Role in the Catechesis of Their Children**

#### **Canon 226 §2**

Since they have given life to their children, parents have a most grave obligation and enjoy the right to educate them. Therefore, it is for Christian parents particularly to take care of the Christian education of their children according to the doctrine handed on by the Church. (For home catechizing parents, please confer policy on home catechesis)

### **Canons Pertinent to First Eucharist and First Penance Catecheses**

#### **Canon 777**

Attentive to the norms established by the diocesan bishop, a pastor is to take care in a special way:

- 1° that suitable catechesis is imparted for the celebration of the sacraments;
- 2° that through catechetical instruction imparted for an appropriate period of time children are prepared properly for the first reception of the sacraments of penance and the Most Holy Eucharist and for the sacrament of confirmation;
- 3° that having received First Communion, these children are enriched more fully and deeply through catechetical formation;
- 4° that catechetical instruction is given also to those who are physically or mentally handicapped, insofar as their condition permits;
- 5° that the faith of youth and adults is strengthened, enlightened, and developed through various means and endeavors.

***Knowledge and Preparation for Holy Eucharist***

**Canon 913**

§1. The administration of the Most Holy Eucharist to children requires that they have sufficient knowledge and 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.

***Minimum Age – Seven.***

***Sacramental Confession before First Eucharist***

**Canon 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.

## **DIOCESAN GUIDELINES FOR FIRST PENANCE**

“Our Savior Jesus Christ, when he gave to his apostles and their successors the power to forgive sins, instituted in his Church the sacrament of penance. Its purpose is that the faithful who fall into sin after baptism may be reconciled with God through the restoration of grace.” (The Rite of Penance, n.2 §3)

1. Children must be instructed in the Rite of Penance as decreed by the Congregation for Divine Worship (December 2, 1973). Catechetical materials should reflect this Rite.
2. The primary age child is to be provided with an appropriate catechesis for the sacrament of Penance distinct from the catechesis for the reception of First Eucharist since each sacrament is a special encounter with Christ (CIC 777 n.2).
3. Parents and those who have a parental role have the duty to seeing that their children are properly prepared for First Penance. In order to facilitate this involvement, each parish is to provide parents with learning opportunities concerning the Sacrament of Penance as they (the parents or guardians) catechize their children. These opportunities should provide parents with a renewed understanding of the sacrament which would then enable them to prepare their children for First Penance. (CIC 226 §2)
4. The pastor determines the readiness of the child in the reception of the Sacrament of Penance.
5. The decision on the actual reception of First Penance by an individual child must be arrived at through consultation by parents and the pastor (and/or his designee).
6. Teaching on the Sacrament of Penance should be continued after the first reception of the sacrament in order for children to be more deeply instructed. Parental involvement should be encouraged in the continuing faith formation of their children (CIC 777 n.3)
7. The celebration of First Penance should be separated from First Eucharist by a period of at least two months with sacramental confession preceding First Communion.

### **Critical Outcomes:**

#### The child

- a. is able to distinguish between accidental and deliberate wrong.
- b. is aware of the need for forgiveness and the child’s trust in the forgiving love of Jesus.
- c. is able to express wrongdoing and sorrow in his/her own words.
- d. freely desires to receive the sacrament.
- e. understands that the priest and the Church have a special role in bringing us God’s forgiveness.
- f. has completed a year of formal catechesis prior to the reception of First Penance.

## DIOCESAN GUIDELINES FOR FIRST HOLY EUCHARIST

... all who have a part in the formation of children should consult and work together toward one objective: that even if children already have some feeling for God and the things of God, they may also experience in proportion to their age and personal development the human values that are present in the eucharistic celebration. These values include the community activity, exchange of greetings, capacity to listen and to seek, and grant pardon, expression of gratitude, experience of symbolic actions, a meal of friendship, and festive celebration.” (Directory for Masses with Children, n. 9)

1. Children must be instructed in the Mass including the options and manner of receiving the Eucharist. These options are under one or both species; and the manner may be in the hand or on the tongue. (Appendix to the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal for the Dioceses of the United States of America*, n.240 and n.242).
2. The individual readiness of the child must be respected as a determining factor in the reception of the sacrament of First Eucharist (CIC 913 §1).
3. In order to facilitate the full involvement of parents or of those who take the place of parents, each parish is to provide access to an understanding of the celebration of the Eucharist so that they (parents or those responsible for the child) may renew and deepen their own belief in the real presence of Jesus in the sacrament of the Eucharist (CIC 777 n.1, n.5).
4. Children are to continue to be instructed through catechetical instruction and formation after the reception of First Communion (CIC 777 n.3).
5. Parents are to be supported in their own faith journey and in their role as the primary religious educators of their children after the celebration of their child’s First Eucharist (CIC 777 n.5).

### **Critical Outcomes:**

The child:

- a. has sufficient knowledge to understand the mystery of Christ according to his/her capacity (CIC 913 §1).
- b. is able to distinguish the body and blood of Christ from ordinary food (CIC 913).
- c. has a desire to receive the Lord Jesus reverently in Holy Communion with faith and devotion (CIC 913 §1).
- d. has at least two years of catechesis prior to the reception of First Eucharist.

**GUIDELINES FOR  
THE CELEBRATION OF THE SACRAMENTS  
OF PENANCE AND EUCHARIST  
FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES**

“In accord with canon 777, n.4, pastors are responsible to be as inclusive as possible in providing evangelization, catechetical formation, and sacramental preparation for parishioners with disabilities. Persons with disabilities, their advocates and their families, as well as those knowledgeable in serving disabled persons can make a most valuable contribution to these programs. Parish catechetical and sacramental preparation programs may need to be adapted for some parishioners with disabilities. Further, parishes should encourage persons with disabilities to participate in all levels of pastoral ministry (e.g., as care ministers, catechists, etc.). Dioceses are encouraged to establish appropriate support services for pastors to facilitate the evangelization, catechetical formation, and sacramental preparation for parishioners with disabilities.” (*Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities, United States Bishops Conference, Washington: 1995 n. 5*)

**Sacrament of Reconciliation**

- “Only those who have the use of reason are capable of committing serious sin. Nevertheless, even young persons with mental disabilities often are conscious of committing acts that are sinful to some degree and may experience a sense of guilt and sorrow. As long as the individual is capable of having a sense of contrition for having committed sin, even if he or she cannot describe the sin precisely in words, the person may receive sacramental absolution. Those with profound mental disabilities, who cannot experience even minimal contrition, may be invited to participate in penitential services with the rest of the community to the extent of their ability.” (Ibid. n. 23)
- “Catholics who are deaf should have the opportunity to confess to a priest able to communicate with them in sign language, if sign language is their primary means of communication. They may also confess through an approved sign language interpreter of their choice (CIC 990). The interpreter is strictly bound to respect the seal of confession (983, §2 and 1388, §2). When no priest with signing skills is available, nor sign language interpreter requested, Catholics who are deaf should be permitted to make their confession in writing. The written materials are to be returned to the penitent or otherwise properly destroyed.” (Ibid. n. 24)
- “In the case of individuals with poor communications skills, sorrow for sin is to be accepted even if this repentance is expressed through some gesture rather than verbally. In posing questions and in the assignment of penances the confessor is to proceed with prudence and discretion, mindful that he is at once judge and healer, minister of justice as well as of mercy.” (CIC 978, §1; 979; and 981). (Ibid. n. 25)

## Sacrament of Eucharist

- “The criterion for reception of holy communion is the same for persons with developmental and mental disabilities as for all persons, namely, that the person be able to distinguish the Body of Christ from ordinary food, even if this recognition is evidenced through manner, gesture, or reverential silence rather than verbally.” (*Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities, United States Bishops Conference, Washington: 1995 n. 20.*)
- “Pastors are encouraged to consult parents, those who take the place of parents, diocesan personnel involved with disability issues, psychologists, religious educators, and other experts in making their judgment. If it is determined that a parishioner who is disabled is not ready to receive the sacrament, great care is to be taken in explaining the reasons for this decision. Cases of doubt should be resolved in favor of the right of the baptized person to receive the sacrament. The existence of a disability is not considered in and of itself as disqualifying a person from receiving the Eucharist.” (Ibid.)
- “Eucharistic celebrations are often enhanced by the exercise of the diverse forms of ministry open to the laity. In choosing those who will be invited to use their gifts in service to the parish community, the parish pastoral staff should be mindful of extending Christ’s welcoming invitation to qualified parishioners with disabilities.” (Ibid. n. 21)

## GUIDELINES FOR THOSE WHO ATTEND CATHOLIC SCHOOL

“The parish is, without doubt, the most important *locus* in which the Christian community is formed and expressed” (General Directory for Catechesis, 256). Therefore the context for sacramental catechesis is the parish community which means that those who are receiving religious education in the parish faith formation program, the Catholic school, or the home, nevertheless come together for sacramental preparation.

Catholic School students receive academic preparation for the sacraments through Religion classes in Catholic Schools.

However, the spiritual and liturgical preparation (retreats, workshops, rites, parent meetings, sacramental preparation sessions and rehearsals) occurs immediately prior to the celebration of the sacrament. This proximate preparation takes place at the individual student’s parish, which is the setting for the sacramental celebration.

**Therefore, it is imperative that parents of Catholic School students register their children in the sacramental programs offered at their parish with the understanding that the final phase of preparation does not occur at school.** Parents should contact the Parish Catechetical Leader or the Sacramental Coordinator of their parish to register for the appropriate sacramental program.

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The Most Reverend William G. Curlin  
Bishop of Charlotte  
April 15 2001