

Archdiocese of Kingston

Sacrament Preparation of School Aged Children

The Role of Families, Parishes and Catholic Schools

The Teaching of Pope Francis in the context of Vatican II

In his Encyclical Letter *Evangelium Gaudium*, Pope Francis reminds all Catholics of the call to a constant growth in faith: after receiving an initial proclamation of Christ, the faithful are to deepen their relationship to God daily. (*Evangelium Gaudium*, 160-166). Catechesis, which “has the twofold objective of maturing the initial faith and of educating the true disciple of Christ by means of a deeper and more systematic knowledge of the person and the message of Our Lord Jesus Christ,” (John Paul II, *Catechesi Tradendae*, 19) plays a central role in this growth.

To live a fully Christian life is to participate in the life of the Church. This is because the Church is, as the Scriptures tell us, the Body of Christ: He is the Head, we are the members of this Body (see 1 Cor 12:12-31; Col 1:18; 2:18-20; Eph. 1:22-23; 3:19; 4:13).

Since Vatican II, the Church has sought to frame catechesis in a way that addresses the unique challenges of each age without ever compromising the content of the Church’s teaching. This teaching is Christ and his gospel of salvation. It is in this spirit that the Holy Father has promulgated the third Directory of Catechesis since Vatican II. This rich development of catechetical reflection over the past 50 years has shaped the Archdiocesan policy for the preparation for sacraments.¹ As this policy is presented, it will be beneficial to keep in mind several guiding principles.

Family, Parish, School

Children are naturally spiritual beings and this spiritual life thrives in them when they see their parents, their educators and their fellow parishioners practicing the Faith. These mutually affirming links between the home and the parish, supported by their school, help form children in the values of the Gospel, not only in theory but witnessed in the lives of those closest to them.

The family, parish and Catholic school are three traditional places of Catholic life highlighted for this policy, each of which has its own autonomy and importance. Reference will be made to these places in the policy understanding that holiness of life will be the mark that ensures that each will be a herald of peace and joy for the children and young adults of the Archdiocese.

This policy is also intended to assist families and the parishes of children who are educated at home or in the public system.

¹ General Catechetical Directory, 18 March 1971 (approved by St. Paul VI)
Apostolic Exhortation *Catechesi Tradendae*, 16 October 1979 (St. John Paul II)
General Directory for Catechesis, 15 August 1997 (approved St. John Paul II)
Directory for Catechesis, 23 March 2020 (Pope Francis)

I. The Role of the Family

In the Catechism of the Catholic Church, we are reminded that in the evangelization and catechesis of children parents play the principal part (CCC, nos 2221-2226). **The family is a domestic church, that is, a community where faith, hope and love are taught and lived by word and example in union with the larger family of the parish.** It is where the values of the Gospel together with the worship of God are taught by example.

In today's changing world, it has become clear that there is a need to strengthen and affirm the role of parents and families in the sacramental and religious life of children.

The parental role includes preparation for the celebration of the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist (First Communion), which are the Sacraments of Initiation, initiating children into the life of the Church as disciples of Jesus and sharing His mission of being witnesses to the new life He has given us.

In bringing their child for baptism, parents promise to raise their child in the faith, taking the time to pray with them each day, especially when they are young. This involves catechesis for the sacraments. Sacramental preparation is important, requiring a great deal of commitment by parents and children, and those who support them in this task (*cf.* 1 Cor. 9:27). The parish and its catechists are committed to offering this support.

The Sacraments of Initiation (Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist) and the sacrament of Reconciliation are meant to assist and nourish children as they become faithful disciples of Christ. The Eucharist is central to our Catholic faith and is the "source and summit of the Christian life" (*Lumen Gentium*, #11). Participation in the Sunday Eucharist is a gift and a privilege for us, as Catholics, and all those who are baptized in the Church. The Sunday Eucharist strengthens and assists parents in the task of raising their children in the Faith. Children learn to be comfortable with the celebration of the Eucharist by attending from a young age. By taking an active role in their child's preparation for the sacraments, parents also have the opportunity to guide them into living as adult members of the Church.

Through our participation in the life of the Church, we support one another as, together, we seek to grow in faith through frequent reception of the sacraments, growth in knowledge of God's Word and of the teachings of the Church, through serving the poor, in leading a moral life and fostering an active prayer life.

II. The Role of Pastors and Parishes

The parish is a family of families and it is the place where God calls us to assemble as the Body of Christ and a Community of faith. It is where we gather to give thanks and praise to God, to witness to the risen life of Christ and to continue the work of evangelisation and outreach.

a) Catechetical Instruction

The Code of Canon law states that both the pastor and all members of the Church have the duty to ensure that there is proper catechetical instruction for children:

Can. 528 §1 The parish priest has the obligation of ensuring that the word of God is proclaimed in its entirety to those living in the parish. He is therefore to see to it that the lay members of Christ's faithful are instructed in the truths of faith, especially by means of the homily on Sundays and holy days of obligation and by catechetical formation. He is to foster works which promote the spirit of the Gospel, including its relevance to social justice. He is

to have a special care for the catholic education of children and young people. With the collaboration of the faithful, he is to make every effort to bring the gospel message to those also who have given up religious practice or who do not profess the true faith.

Can. 843 §2 According to their respective offices in the Church, both pastors of souls and all other members of Christ's faithful have a duty to ensure that those who ask for the sacraments are prepared for their reception. This should be done through proper evangelization and catechetical instruction, in accordance with the norms laid down by the competent authority.

The Church recognizes that many parents need assistance in preparing their children for full initiation into the Body of Christ. Therefore, each parish in the Archdiocese of Kingston is responsible for offering sacramental preparation programs. Pastors and catechists are to assist parents in their role as the primary educators of their children, providing resources, support and direction for parents and children. Children with special needs can rightly expect that the pastor and parish will adapt the program and provide the necessary accommodations for them to participate in the sacramental life of the Church.

- b) “The role of a Catholic Catechist is to catechize the Faith of the Catholic Church, both by word and example. A Catechist is someone who lets the word of God echo through their life. Catechists do more than simply teaching the faith. A Catechist shares their faith and guides others to learn how to apply and live their faith, as well.”

c) Location of Sacramental Preparation

As the place where the sacraments are celebrated, sacramental preparation is to take place in the context of the parish.

The parish is, without a doubt, the most important locus in which the Christian community is formed and expressed. This is called to be a fraternal and welcoming family where Christians become aware of being the people of God. In the parish, all human differences melt away and are absorbed into the universality of the Church. The parish is also the usual place in which the faith is born and in which it grows. It constitutes, therefore, a very adequate community space for the realization of the ministry of the word at once as teaching, education and life experience. (*General Directory for Catechesis* #257).

d) Parish Enrollment

Though some confusion has arisen in past years, the proper place for catechesis and preparation for the reception of sacraments is the local parish. “The parish, founded on the pillars of the word of God, the sacraments and charity” allows for the proper growth of all Catholics in the life of Christ. For this reason, parents are asked to present their children and young adults to the parish for enrollment in the catechetical formation prior to the reception of the sacraments.

Parents should contact the parish in which they reside when their children are ready to begin a program for sacramental preparation. Parishes will provide for a registration and enrollment process.

e) Expectations and Readiness for Sacraments

In consultation with parents, it is the responsibility of the pastor to assess the readiness of children for admission to the sacraments. An individual is ready for admission to the sacraments when they made a decision, proper to their age, to believe in the Lord, to live according to His

teachings, and to participate in the life of the Church. This same commitment is expected from the parents of children preparing to receive the sacraments, to ensure that they will be supported in their faith journey.

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III. The Role of Catholic Schools

Religious instruction, in the mind of the Church, is usually the proper domain of educational institutions such as the Catholic schools in Ontario. In this environment, according to the expectations of local government and school administration, religious instruction is provided to students, both catholic and non-Catholic, according to the subject matter of catholic teaching.²

“The teaching of Catholic religion has undergone substantial changes over time. Its relationship with catechesis is one of distinction in complementarity. Where the distinction is not clear, there is the danger that both may lose their identity.” (Directory, 313)

Catholic schools should not have to assume the role of the parish in organizing and planning the celebration of these sacraments. Catholic educators can encourage and support parents, in the task of forming children in the Faith. Consistent with previous teaching Catholic schools are able to play a supportive role in the preparation of your children for the sacraments. In addition to religious instruction, Catholic educators are able to demonstrate their Catholic faith to their students who are preparing for the sacraments. In this sense, Catholic educators share in the responsibility for a child's sacramental preparation. Catholic educators are therefore able to be an important model of adult faith for the candidate seeking the sacraments - through prayer, participation in parish liturgical celebrations, faith sharing and religious education.

Other Situations

Unbaptized children who approach the Church for First Communion or Confirmation follow a different program of preparation. Since they are capable of responding to the invitation of Jesus Christ for themselves, their baptism follows the provisions of the Rites of Christian Initiation of Children of Catechetical Age.

² *Growing in Faith, Growing in Christ*. The Religious Education Program of the Catholic Bishops of Ontario, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and the Northwest Territories.