

First Communion and First Reconciliation

Diocesan Policy



Introduction

The pastoral situation regarding the Sacraments of Christian Initiation has been changing for some years now. Those in parish ministry have been trying to adapt and to respond as creatively and constructively as they can.

It is now time to gather together this experience, in order to articulate a diocesan policy. This document concerns **First Communion** and **First Reconciliation**. The policy is built on what has been learned so far, and on best practice as it has evolved in response to the new situation.

The policy articulates:

- The goal we wish to work towards as a diocese and the direction in which we wish to move over the coming years.
- The steps that need to be taken in order to put in place best practice across the diocese.
- The situation regarding who is eligible for First Communion (*page 4*).

Permeating the whole policy is that future generations would share the joy of knowing Jesus, the joy of belonging to Christ and his Church. In this, the policy enacts the vision of *Share the Good News*, the Irish Episcopal Conference's pastoral plan for the Irish Church.

Where do we want to go ?

In preparing children for First Communion and First Reconciliation, there are three partners; the home, the school and the parish. Responding to the new pastoral situation has made for a new configuration between them. This policy pivots on the respective roles the diocese sees them assuming in the future.

Traditionally our Catholic schools prepared children for these sacraments. They built on the foundation of children's experience of faith in the home and the parish. With changing times that foundation can no longer be presumed, and the schools find themselves in a role far beyond what was previously expected. The response and contribution has been immense, from both Catholic schools and schools outside our tradition. At the same time a new balance is needed.

The policy of the diocese is to work towards a situation where:

- **The parish community takes a more prominent role in the preparation for and celebration of First Communion and First Reconciliation.**
- **The parents are affirmed as the main agents inviting and accompanying their children on the faith journey.**
- **The school continues to be the main resource assisting family and parish.**

This policy is informed by the understanding of sacraments as events

in the life of the Christian community, and not just in the life of the individual. First Communion and First Reconciliation are moments in the child's initiation into the community of faith. Therefore, they are also moments in the life of that community, moments in the community's ongoing initiation into its own calling. They are events that happen to the community and not just in the community.

The parish community is seen here as a family of families. It is made up largely of families, living in different circumstances and situations. Each of these is a 'domestic church'. In other words, each is meant to be a precious and intimate experience of what 'church' is all about.

Family is where prayer is first shared. In its experiences of reconciliation and of shared meals, it anticipates the sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist. Family is where the seed of faith begins to grow. It is where children come into contact with the God in Jesus Christ.

The parish is the bigger family where faith continues to grow. It is called to be a place of welcome, where families feel they belong, where they feel affirmed, where they appreciate nourishment and support.

The school is understood here as a further experience of Christian family and community. It is called to partner home and parish in the child's journey of initiation. It contributes an indispensable dimension through its commitment, expertise and resources.

How do we get there ?

Step 1

Consultation and planning between the parish team and school staff on the programme of preparation.*

Step 2

A meeting early in the school year between parents, teachers and parish team, to initiate the parents into their role in the programme for First Communion and First Reconciliation. Baptismal Certificates to be presented at this stage.

September

Step 3

Formation of a First Communion and First Reconciliation Team, including members of the parish team and parents.

September

Step 4

An enrolment Sunday, where the parents formally present their children and commit to the programme.

September/October

Step 5

Structured classroom visits from members of the Sacramental Team, as agreed at Step 1.**

Through the year

Step 6

A programme of Sunday Masses through the year, organised by the Team, especially focused on the children and their parents. Here the 'Do this in Memory' programme has proved itself an invaluable resource. Part of the focus here is on initiating the parish community into its part in the process.

Through the year

Step 7

A special parents' meeting ahead of the celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. This could include offering parents a positive theology of the sacrament and encouraging them to experience it themselves on the occasion of their child's First Reconciliation.

January/February

Step 8

Celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation in the parish church, including an invitation to families to fully participate.

February/March

Step 9

Approaching the time of First Communion, a further meeting with parents, possibly incorporating a preparatory class ritual.***

April/May

Step 10

Celebration of First Communion at the parish Sunday Eucharist (spread across the different weekend Masses). Experience indicates that this is best introduced gently and gradually, with good consultation with all three partners.

May

Step 11

A concerted effort, in parish, Pastoral Area and diocese, to build on and follow up on the year's experience (beginning with the final 'Do this in Memory' session for Corpus Christi). This would include the development of a weekly Family Mass in the Parish, so as to encourage the continued participation of the families.

Ongoing

Steps in the Process

The steps constitute a template of best practice, to which each parish is expected to approximate.

The key to moving in this direction lies in facilitating each of the three partners to enter into their newly-defined roles;

- For **parents**, experiencing a sense of welcome and encouragement, where they accept the invitation to assume their responsibility in the process;
- For **parish**, it means a catechetical journey, with a view to the community taking ownership of the process as part of its life;
- For **school**, it means making its vital contribution in the context of a new kind of partnership with the home and the parish.

For parents and parish, best practice so far indicates that the following moments are key in forwarding our goal;

- Introducing the families to the community, commitment to the programme, assuming responsibility;
- Participation in the parish Sunday Eucharist, which includes celebrations throughout the year specially focused on First Communion and First Reconciliation;
- Celebration of First Communion as part of the parish Sunday Eucharist.

* The parish-based 'Do This in Memory' should normally be part of this programme. The formal school-based preparation programme for First Communion and First Reconciliation is over two years (Alive-O, 3 and 4). The full programme is to be covered in all cases.

** All Diocesan activities involving children are conducted in accordance with the requirements of: Archdiocese of Dublin, Child Safeguarding and Protection; Policy and Procedures.

*** Some of the practical aspects that school and parish can work together on include (a) encouraging parents to dress their children simply (thereby removing unnecessary financial pressure), and (b) instructing the children on receiving communion reverently.

A note on who is eligible for First Communion

First Communion is a further step towards Full Initiation, after Baptism, for children in the Latin Rite / Roman Catholic Church. Full Initiation is completed with Confirmation.

First Communion applies therefore only to children baptised in the Latin / Roman Catholic Church.

Eastern Rite Catholic children are already fully initiated at the time of Baptism, when they also receive Communion and Confirmation.

Parishes, therefore, need to establish at the earliest opportunity the status of each child in relation to the Roman Catholic Church, so as to respond appropriately to each child and their parents, and to avoid any last-minute crisis and upset.

The only easy way this can be done is through the presentation of a Baptismal Certificate which shows that the child in question is baptised in the Latin / Roman Catholic Church. Such certificates must be presented by the 30th September of the Year preceding First Communion. No candidate will be allowed to proceed after that date without it being certain by means of a certificate that they are eligible for the next stage of Initiation.

Children of the Orthodox Church are fully initiated at Baptism.

While there is mutual recognition of Baptism among Christian Churches (**Orthodox, Anglican, Reformed**), children who have received Baptism in these Christian traditions are not admitted to First Holy Communion in the Catholic Church; their initiation takes place according to the respective procedures of their own tradition.

'It is always important to make Christian families part of the process of initiation. Receiving Baptism, Confirmation and First Holy Communion are key moments, not only for the individuals receiving them, but also for the entire family, which should be supported in its educational role by the various elements of the ecclesial community.'

(Benedict XVI)

'When Jesus was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.

Then their eyes were opened and they recognised him...

They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?"'

(Luke 24:30-32)





Archdiocese of Dublin

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