

FIRST COMMUNION SACRAMENTAL GUIDELINES

FOR
CHILDREN
OF
APPROPRIATE
CATECHETICAL AGE



IN
THE DIOCESE OF BIRMINGHAM IN ALABAMA

GENERAL GUIDELINES

“Pastors of souls...have the duty to take care that those who seek the sacraments are prepared to receive them by proper evangelization and catechetical instruction, attentive to the norms issued by competent authority.” (canon 843§2)

A pastor may delay the reception of any sacrament, to provide time for sacramental preparation.

“Just as Baptism is the source of responsibilities and duties, the baptized person also enjoys rights within the Church: To receive the sacraments, to be nourished with the word of God, and to be sustained by other spiritual helps of the Church.” (CCC 1269)

The right to receive each sacrament is balanced by the responsibility of being properly prepared to receive it. Pastors should provide every available resource to teach a child of the appropriate age what he or she needs to know in order to worthily receive each sacrament. In many cases, this will mean formal classroom instruction of some kind, though in some circumstances it may be best to appoint a sponsor or godparent who will work with a child individually, outside of regular classroom time.

Students who are attending **regional Catholic Schools**, not attached to their Parish, have the option of receiving the Sacraments of First Penance, First Holy Communion and Confirmation either along with their Catholic School class or along with their Parish School of Religion class.

Students who are **Home-Schooled** need to receive the Sacraments of First Penance, First Holy Communion and Confirmation along with their Parish School of Religion class at their Parish. It is essential that **Parents** keep their Pastor advised of the Sacramental Plans they have for their children, as every Pastor is responsible for insuring that each student is properly catechized in the faith.

Following the tradition of the Church, and the norms defined by the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, canon law supports the unity of the initiatory sacraments: “The sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and the Most Holy Eucharist are so interrelated that they are required for full Christian initiation (§842.2). Just as with adults, the parish priest is authorized to confirm children who are no longer infants (§883.2) and the candidate for Confirmation should be at about the age of discretion: (seven or eight years old) (§891). Canon law supports a pastoral practice in which children of catechetical age are initiated into the Catholic Church through the preparation for and celebration of the unified Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist.

PREPARATION FOR FIRST RECONCILIATION

General Guidelines

Instruction for and reception of the Sacrament of Reconciliation is to precede First Communion.

An understanding of oneself as a sinner, of the different kinds of sin, and of the conditions requisite for a serious sin are necessary preliminaries in catechesis for this sacrament.

Catechetical Guidelines

- Catechists should take this opportunity to instruct the parents of the children by planning and holding parent meetings.
- Children should be taught the beginnings of conscience formation, the Ten Commandments, and the understanding of what it means to be forgiven and to forgive.
- Children should be taught to have sorrow for sin, and to see Christ's suffering and death as the way we are redeemed from sin.
- Children should be taught to make a full, honest and humble confession. Catechists should train them to confess the kind and number of sins.
- An *Act of Contrition*, one of the three proposed by the Church should be memorized, two of these prayers are printed in the appendix of prayers in the Diocese of Birmingham Religion Curriculum Guidelines.

Ritual Guidelines

- Children should be made familiar with the Confessional or Reconciliation room. They should be offered the opportunity to confess their sins either anonymously behind a screen or face-to-face with their confessor. (Cf. canon 964§2 and BLS §103)
- The celebration of First Penance should be solemn and short.

PREPARATION FOR FIRST COMMUNION

General Guidelines

Instruction for First Communion should be conducted separately from instruction for the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Each sacrament deserves its own concentrated preparation. Those who receive Eucharist are united more closely to Christ. Through Holy Communion, Christ unites the faithful into one body: the Church. Holy Communion renews, strengthens, and deepens this incorporation, which is already achieved by Baptism. (CCC 1396)

Priests, parents, and catechists are responsible for making sure children are correctly prepared to receive First Communion. (Cf. canon 914)

It is not mandatory to send notification of the reception of First Eucharist to the church of Baptism.

Catechetical Guidelines

- Children should know in faith that the consecrated Host is very different from ordinary bread or from an unconsecrated host, and they should know that the Precious Blood is very different from ordinary wine.
- Children should be taught that the Holy Eucharist is the real body and blood of Christ; that what appears to be bread and wine is actually his living body, (NCD 122)
- Children should know in faith that Jesus is fully present under both forms; that they receive the Real Presence of Jesus whether they receive the host or partake of the chalice.
- Children should be taught that one must fast from all food and drink for one hour before receiving Holy Communion. Only water and medicine do not break the fast. (canon 919§1)
- Children should be taught to make a proper prayer of Thanksgiving after receiving Holy Communion.

Ritual Guidelines

- Children should be given the option of receiving the Holy Eucharist either on their tongue or in their hand.
- Children should practice the proper gestures and postures expected during Mass. They should be taught how to genuflect, and the proper times during Mass to sit, to stand, and to kneel.
- Children should be taught to make an act of reverence before receiving Holy Communion. A profound bow is the preferred gesture. (Prot. NO. 1381/01/L; adaptation for the dioceses of the United States of America to IGMR 160 paragraph 2)
- The appropriate dress for the first communicants would be their “Sunday best” (sport coats and ties for boys and white dresses for girls) but should allow for culture and economic status.
- Parents may give their children a traditional prayer book, rosary, or scapular set.

It is my hope that these guidelines will enable pastors, catechists, and parents to more completely fulfill their graced responsibility to educate our children in the faith, leading them into the fullness of sacramental life, while keeping before their eyes the salvation of souls, which is always the supreme law of the Church (1752).

In Christ's love,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "+ Robert J. Baker". The signature is written in a cursive style with a cross at the beginning.

Most Reverend Robert J. Baker, S.T.D.
Bishop of Birmingham in Alabama