

Sacramental Preparation: Best Practice

The catechetical documents of the Universal Church, with her 2,000 years of experience, give us all that we need. The principles and guidance from these documents are rarely brought together and so best practice might not look very familiar!

The Church has a single purpose: that all might share the redeeming life of Christ in this world in order to be with the Father in eternal bliss. If we share the same aim as the Church, then the Holy Spirit will be with us to follow the Church's guidance.

Let us take the **Sacrament of Confirmation** as an example.

CCC1295 'This seal of the Holy Spirit marks our total belonging to Christ, our enrolment in his service for ever, as well as the promise of divine protection in the great eschatological trial.'

CCC1309 'Preparation for Confirmation should aim at leading the Christian towards a more intimate union with Christ and a more lively familiarity with the Holy Spirit... in order to be more capable of assuming the apostolic responsibilities of Christian life...'

CCC1319 'A candidate for Confirmation ... must: profess the faith, be in a state of grace, have the intention of receiving the sacrament, be prepared to assume the role of disciple and witness to Christ..'

And so for best practice the Church says:

- **Catechesis of parents** is a duty of the Church for the sacramental preparation of children as their primary educators in the faith & catechesis of adults is to be a priority in the parish (GDC 20, 59)
- **Catechesis is to follow the pedagogy of God** (GDC139): This means it is to be Christocentric, Trinitarian, have the Primacy of grace, be Scriptural & Liturgical, oriented to conversion, for salvation etc.
- **Catechesis is to follow RCIA as its model** (4 stages): pre-catechumenate, catechumenate, period of enlightenment, mystagogia.

- **Catechesis is to be a ‘school of the faith’** in the 4 dimensions of the Christian life: Faith known, celebrated liturgically, lived in Christ, and prayed (CCC13-17).

A model for parishes - especially for 1st Rec’n, 1st HE & Confirmation. (Confirmation is used here for an example). The model includes the 4 essentials listed above. Parents and parishioners are important from the very start. This is a moment for kerygma and encouragement!

1. Pre-catechumenate stage: no fixed time – a period for ‘evangelisation and signs of conversion’ - starts with an initial meeting for the enquiring parent(s) to introduce them to the kerygma (see GDC 58), to the 4 dimensions of the Christian life and the parish process.

This is a period of evangelisation and building up the habit of weekly Sunday Mass for the whole family. Families who do not attend regularly need a lot of help and encouragement at this vital stage. The strap line of this stage can be something along the lines of: **‘The programme starts on Sunday’**.

- Faith known - kerygma presented to the parents and a book (suggestions available given to parents to read with their children and for children alone (family will need a bible).
- Faith celebrated in liturgy – parents encouraged to build a habit of Sunday Mass.
- Faith lived – an individual parish welcomer is (trained and) chosen for each family that doesn’t attend Mass regularly, to provide Sunday support/friendship. Families also encouraged to attend family catechesis days at intervals during the year.
- Faith prayed – family prayer box/pack given to the parent for the whole family for daily prayer and for the child (suggestions available).

2. Catechumenate stage: A set number of sessions – starts (for example) in Advent each year. Depending on the programme, weekly or monthly meetings for parents & (separately) for children. Every session is important and so is mandatory before reception of the sacrament, so the process can take either 1 year or 2, or more if necessary until every session has been attended.

- Faith known – using a good sacramental programme (suggestions available)
- Faith celebrated - building a habit of Sunday Mass continues
- Faith lived – parish welcomer continues + learning spiritual and corporal works of mercy
- Faith prayed – family prayers supplemented with prayers/family practices for liturgical

year and the saints

3. Purification & Enlightenment stage: Every Passiontide

- Faith known – a meeting to explain Holy week & a family retreat day
- Faith celebrated – Sacrament of reconciliation & Triduum encouraged for everyone.
- Faith lived – learning & practicing fasting & almsgiving
- Faith prayed – family prayers supplemented with examination of conscience, stations of the cross.

4. Reception of the Sacrament of Confirmation: as set by the bishop

5. Mystagogia: After reception of the grace of the sacrament, a short period of clarification, deepening of the mystery and its implications for life. 1 – 4 meetings – depending on time of year and length of preparation programme.

- Faith known – mystagogia catechesis (suggestions available)
- Faith celebrated – Look at liturgical year to encourage attendance at a solemnity/feast day (e.g. Corpus Christi, special Sunday, Marian feast day or relevant saint's feast day etc.
- Faith lived – Encourage ongoing attendance at family days (and, if necessary, completion of the programme in the year ahead). Encourage outreach, service/ministry in the parish
- Faith prayed – family prayers & practices supplemented, novenas, rosary, pilgrimage etc.

Parishioner training

Parishioners volunteers make the big difference here for this vital preliminary stage. They need to attend Mass weekly and be convinced of the importance of Sunday Mass every week for everyone.

- It is good for this to include (in 4 training sessions – content available separately):
 1. the kerygma of Jesus Christ & 4 dimensions of the Christian life.
the 4 stages of the RCIA process + new sacrament programme RCIA model
 2. the liturgical year & the sacramental economy
what a priest is and the powers of Holy Orders
 3. the meaning and the parts of the Mass
Intro, Liturgy of word, Liturgy of Eucharist and concluding rites
 4. the spiritual and corporal works of mercy
the 7 petitions of the Our Father
- They need to be aware that some parents may be indifferent, alienated or annoyed at first. For this they need to be sympathetic to the parent(s); they do not need to give answers but to constantly encourage.

- They need to be welcoming, non-critical, attentive – wait at the door of the Church each Sunday to welcome the family, sit with them to explain what to do where necessary – say that they will be there the following Sunday to welcome them and help them back into a rhythm of Sunday Mass (Mass books may be lent by the parish).
- They need to commit to praying for their ‘family’.
- They need to do their best to attend the necessary meetings for themselves and for some of the retreat day, stations of the cross,
- They need to observe how well their ‘family’ is trying to come regularly, or not; hear their comments, questions, or complaints, advise them about meetings to which they can bring their questions.

Catechist training

- Catechists need to be willing to try and to support the new process.
- They need to attend Mass weekly themselves and be convinced of the importance of Sunday Mass for the families.
- Catechists need to commit themselves to formation and/or CPD
- Catechists are likely to need further formation in:
 - i. The chosen resource & its specific requirements.
 - ii. using CCC, Scripture and liturgical rites as essential reference texts,
 - iii. Pedagogy of God & an ecclesial method (not the current ‘praxis model’)