



Policy for the Sacramental Initiation of Children in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Pembroke

Pentecost 2009



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Dear Faithful People in Christ,

I am pleased to present to you a *Diocesan Policy on the Sacramental Initiation of Children*. This work is the culmination of many years of reflection, dialogue and research which began with the Faith Formation Symposium in the autumn of 2005.

This policy is intended especially for parents and parishes as they become more directly involved in the sacramental initiation of children. It is the intention of the Diocese of Pembroke that this policy be integrated into the life of the parish in the coming year.

I wish to thank all of those who have contributed to the process leading up to the completion of this Policy. May this document be a means to advance a unified and common approach to sacramental initiation in the Diocese of Pembroke and may it also lead to a profound awareness of the many ways our Lord Jesus Christ reveals Himself to us through the sacraments of the Church.

Yours in Christ,

†Most Reverend Michael Mulhall
Bishop of Pembroke

I. Responsibility of Parents in Sacramental Preparation

1. Parents as the Primary Educators in Their Children's Faith

- 1.1 Parents are their children's primary educators in matters of faith. Therefore, they are responsible for the sacramental preparation of their children. In the *Rite of Baptism for Children*, the celebrant speaks to the parents of the child with the following words:

You have asked to have your children baptized. In doing so you are accepting the responsibility of training them in the practice of the faith. It will be your duty to bring them up to keep God's commandments as Christ taught us, by loving God and our neighbor. Do you clearly understand what you are undertaking? (*Rite of Baptism for Children*, CCCB, p. 94)

- 1.2 The promise to be the primary educators of the faith by parents for their children may go back even farther if the parents have a sacramental marriage (married in the Roman Catholic Church). In the *Rite of Marriage*, before the Declaration of Consent, or vows, comes the Statement of Intentions and the couple is asked a series of questions. The third question is the following:

Will you accept children lovingly from God and bring them up according to the law of Christ and his Church? (*Rite of Marriage*, CCCB, p. 52)

When a couple answers "yes" to this question, they agree to take on the awesome responsibility of being the first faith formers for any children they are blessed with.

- 1.3 *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* also highlights parents' important role as primary educators of their children in matters of faith:

The role of parents in education is of such importance that it is almost impossible to provide an adequate substitute. (#2221)

Parents have the first responsibility for the education for their children...
Parents have grave responsibility to give good example to their children. (#2223)

Education in the faith by the parents should begin in the child's earliest years...
Family catechesis precedes, accompanies and enriches other forms of instruction in the faith. Parents have the mission of teaching their children to pray and to discover their vocation as children of God. (#2226)

2. Commitment to Sacramental Participation Journey and Membership in the Church

- 2.1 Parents and their children must understand the level of commitment needed for the journey of sacramental preparation and full membership in the Church. The Sacraments

of Initiation (Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist) and the Sacrament of Reconciliation prepare candidates to become life-long, active members of the Church in the parish community. Receiving the sacraments are never a kind of “graduation” from the Church.

- 2.2 One cannot live a fully Christian life without participating in the life of the worshipping Church community. 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*). This means that to separate oneself from the Church is to distance oneself from Christ, the Head of the Church.
- 2.3 Parents have been entrusted by Christ and His Church with the task of teaching their children how to live the Christian life. They are called to do this by word and example. Concretely, this means:
 - attending and participating in weekly Sunday Mass with their children,
 - frequent reception of the sacrament of reconciliation,
 - growth in knowledge of God’s Word and of the teachings of the Church,
 - serving the poor,
 - leading a moral life,
 - fostering an active prayer life.
- 2.4 The Church expects fully initiated members to gather weekly for Sunday Eucharist in their parish and to involve themselves in other facets of parish life. The Eucharist is central to our Catholic faith and is referred to as the “source and summit of the Christian life” (*Lumen Gentium*, #11). By such participation in the life of the Church, Christians support one another as together we seek to grow in faith. This is especially important in our present culture which has many positive characteristics however, some societal values are at odds with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

3. The Sacraments and Commitment to the Christian Life

- 3.1 The celebration of the sacraments initiates us into the life of the Church and strengthens us for the challenges of Christian living. Some members of our parish communities have grown accustomed to bringing their children to Church only when it is time to celebrate Baptism, First Reconciliation, First Communion or Confirmation. Unfortunately, they and their children have little or no regular participation in weekly Sunday Mass or in the life of the parish. This practice does not make sense for persons who have become – through Baptism – members of the believing community.
- 3.2 Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist are the three Sacraments of Initiation, through which one becomes a member of the Church. They draw the recipient into union with Christ and the other members of the Church. They endow him or her with the gifts and strength needed to live as a disciple of the Lord. Therefore, these sacraments are

properly celebrated when the one receiving them has made a decision, proper to his or her age, to:

- believe in the Lord,
- live according to His teachings, and
- participate in the life of the Church.

3.3 Parents and guardians are expected to make the same commitments since their child will need their support to live a vibrant life in the Catholic Church.

3.4 Sacraments should not be viewed as “rites of passage” with no relationship to the rest of one’s life. Rather, they insert one into the Church’s life of faith, which gives meaning and direction to every aspect of who we are as members of the baptized. The sacraments, therefore, presuppose a commitment on the part of the recipient to live as a member of the Church.

4. Active Participation in Children’s Preparation for Sacramental Life

4.1 Parents have a leading and major role in the sacramental preparation of their children. It is parents’ responsibility and task to catechize (instruct in the faith) their children at home. They should take time to pray with their children each day, especially when they are young, and make a serious commitment to being involved in their children’s sacramental preparation in the parish setting. This includes attending with their children, all meetings and catechetical sessions related to children’s preparation for receiving the sacraments. For their part, the parish and its catechists will provide support to parents as needed. They will be in regular contact with parents during the year to verify that the children understand the important elements of their catechetical programs.

4.2 Parents’ most important task in preparing their children for full initiation into the Catholic faith through the Sacrament of Eucharist is to bring them to the weekly celebration of Sunday Eucharist. Children learn to be comfortable with the celebration of the Eucharist by attending from a young age. By taking an ongoing active role in their children’s preparation for the sacraments, parents are also guiding them to live as adult members of the Church.

4.3 Families are expected to attend weekly Sunday Mass and be involved in the life of the faith community on an ongoing basis, and not just during the time of preparation and formation for the sacraments.

4.4 Catechetical sessions will be organized at each parish for parents and children to attend. Parents are expected to make a serious commitment to see that their children attend each scheduled session and that they, themselves, attend any sessions for parents. If an unforeseen situation occurs and sessions must be missed, parents are to:

- contact the parish before sessions to explain the situation and,
- contact the catechist to ensure they and their child can keep up-to-date with the program.

II. Responsibility of the Parish in Sacramental Preparation

1. Catechetical Instruction

- 1.1 The Church recognizes that many parents need assistance in preparing their children for initiation into the Church. Thus, each parish in the Diocese of Pembroke is responsible for offering sacramental preparation programs. Pastors and catechists will assist parents in their role as primary educator of their child. Parish sacramental preparation programs may be offered in partnership with a local Catholic school (Province of Ontario) depending on the agreement between the parish and the local school. Church Law (commonly called 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 as outlined in the following references from the *Code of Canon Law*:

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.

2. Location of Sacramental Preparation

- 2.1 Immediate sacramental preparation will take place at the parish since it is the spiritual home of all the baptized and the place where the sacraments are celebrated. This ensures ongoing opportunities for candidates to become more familiar with and comfortable in their parish. The Church's *General Directory for Catechesis* recognizes the parish as the proper setting for catechesis:

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. (#257).

3. Parish Enrollment

- 3.1 Normally, families residing within the geographical limits of a parish are members of that parish. Therefore, parents who intend to have their children participate in the sacramental preparation during a given year should make their intention known to the pastor and/or to the Parish Sacramental Preparation Committee by completing a registration form supplied by the parish.

4. Expectations and Readiness for Sacraments

- 4.1 It is the responsibility of the parish, in consultation with parents, to assess the readiness of children for admission to the sacraments. Admission to the sacraments should not be granted without some clear indications that the one seeking to receive them is committed to following Christ through participation in the life of the worshipping Catholic community. The same commitment is expected from parents of children preparing to receive the sacraments, to ensure that children will be supported in their faith journey.
- 4.2 The ultimate responsibility for discerning whether a child is ready for admission to the sacraments has been entrusted to our parish priests. They will follow objective and measurable criteria, which will give them a good indication of a child's readiness for a particular sacrament. Such criteria include full participation in a catechetical program, adequate knowledge of the faith and attendance at the weekly parish celebration of Sunday Mass.

III The Responsibility of Schools in Sacramental Preparation

1. Role of Catholic Schools

- 1.1 In many parts of the Diocese of Pembroke, publicly funded Catholic schools exist. Catholic schools can play a supportive role in parental and parish preparation of students for the sacraments. Each teacher in the Catholic school is called to be a witness to the Catholic faith through his or her regular contact with student candidates for the sacraments. In this sense, each Catholic school teacher, especially the classroom teacher, shares responsibility for the child's sacramental preparation. The Catholic school teacher is therefore an important model of adult faith for the candidate seeking the sacraments - through prayer, participation in parish liturgical celebrations, faith sharing and religious education.

2. Other Situations

- 2.1 For children attending public schools, sacramental preparation is the entire responsibility of parents and parishes. (see II, 3)
- 2.2 For children who are home-schooled, sacramental preparation is the entire responsibility of parents and parishes. (see II, 2)

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