

## Formation for the reception of Holy Communion

We can imagine that the sacraments are “things” that we collect during our lives in order to gain spiritual rewards. The danger with this view is that we make sacraments about us and our wants, rather than about God and his desire for us to share in his life.

Sacraments are the sure and certain ways by which we encounter Jesus. The life of grace that flows through them deepens our relationship with Jesus; gives us the courage to live as more faithful disciples; renews our sense of mission. Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in the sacrament of the Eucharist.

Every Sunday, the crucified and Risen Christ waits for us to gather as a community in this sacred place. Though we arrive as many members, He transforms us into one body by feeding us with his living word through the Sacred Scriptures and nourishing us with His Body and His Blood in Holy Communion. For this great gift, we praise and thank Him. In this way, we become more like him and are strengthened “to go in peace, to love and to serve the Lord” in our daily lives.

It is for this reason that the preparation for the reception of Holy Communion is the responsibility of the whole parish community and takes place within it because it is here that our children will take their place alongside us at the table of the Eucharist. It is within this community that their discipleship will be nurtured and fortified by God.

Jesus says to us, “I do not call you servants any longer...but I have called you friends” Preparation of our children for the reception of Holy Communion will bear little lasting spiritual fruits unless we help them to see that Jesus, the Son of the Living God, wants to be their friend.

To encourage this, the formation for the reception of the sacrament of Holy Communion will now take the form of six sessions lasting no longer than one hour each. The aim of these sessions will be to provide the space for our children and their families to come to know Jesus a little better, to love him and to know that he is truly present in Holy Communion, the sacrament of his sacrificial love for us.

Over the coming months, those involved in the formation of our children will tailor the content of these six sessions in ways that will hopefully prove engaging and inspiring.

Once the formation begins, other resources will be made available to those parents who may wish to further enrich their child's relationship with Jesus in the home setting.

To respond to that call to friendship requires a certain maturity. This is because it is not about preparation for a "special day" but rather something more fundamental: formation for a lifetime of discipleship.

The age for formation for the reception of Holy Communion will now be raised from Year 3 to Year 4. The difference in maturity between a 7/8 year old and an 8/9 year old provides a better opportunity for our children to forge a more personal friendship with Jesus before receiving His Body and Blood as a member of our Eucharistic community.

At the same time, we are very aware that the Covid pandemic has meant that for many of our children and their families there was an extended break of many months, even years, from participating in the Eucharist. As in so many other areas of our lives, Covid has had an impact on our spiritual lives. Raising the age for the reception of this sacrament allows families to restore their practice of Sunday Mass and thus lay the essential foundations for a true relationship with Jesus.

If we want our children to respond to Jesus in a mature fashion, then their parents and families must also be treated in an adult and respectful manner as it is they who are called to be "the first and best teachers of their children in the ways of faith." (Rite of Baptism)

There will be no registers, no homework and no Zoom meetings for parents. The dates for the First Holy Communion Masses will be made available to families at the very beginning of the time of formation.

For those parents who have drifted away from the practice of their faith, I make this simple appeal: Come back. Come back to Sunday Mass. Come back to Christ. Rebuild your relationship with him. Do not be a stranger to the parish family. We want you and your children with us.

For those parents who are practising their faith and doing their very best to help their children to grow in love of Jesus, thank you. I do not underestimate the challenges, demands and busyness of your lives; that you have given priority to your family's relationship with Christ speaks of your commitment to your Catholic Faith, your love of Christ and His Church. Thank you for your powerful witness.

The care, generosity and witness of our catechists who have helped to prepare our children in the past is appreciated by the whole community. But this is now a very small group and we need to ensure that there are women and men volunteers who will guide, encourage and support our children and their families in the future. Please consider volunteering.

At the beginning of July 2024, parents in the parish whose children will be going into Year 4 in September of that year will be invited to register their child for the reception of the sacraments of Holy Communion and Penance. At that point, more practical information will be provided to those parents.

What happens in the meantime? The formation for discipleship is not something for next year, but happens now by us committing to that weekly encounter with Jesus at Sunday Mass; by punctuating our daily lives with prayer; by a real care for the weakest and the poorest; by each one of us, young and old, contributing to our parish family. The friendship that Christ offers us demands a personal response, a "yes" that alone gives our lives a meaning, a peace that the world cannot give and the promise of future glory.

Fr Martin Boland 18/10/ 2023