

PART I

Introduction

THERE ARE MANY VERSIONS OF THE OLD JOKE THAT THE GREATEST DISTANCE IN ANY PARISH IS THE DIVIDE BETWEEN ONE MINISTRY OFFICE AND ANOTHER. People are often surprised at the disconnect—or outright divide—between the parish school, religious education, liturgical ministries, and so forth. Many of our parishes have long histories of compartmentalization that organically developed over many decades and impact our current practices and programs.

This resource tries to blend together the sometimes separate worlds of liturgical ministry and sacramental preparation. We feel it is critical that liturgical catechesis be an integral part of sacramental preparation, particularly for those preparing to receive their First Communion. By incorporating liturgical catechesis, parish communities have an opportunity to not only provide more effective and lasting faith formation, but to evangelize families and increase engagement and participation in the full life of the parish community.

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The Faith Experience of Young People and Their Families

There are numerous studies that confirm the same reality: young people are increasingly distanced from religious identity. The number of “nones,” those who claim no religious affiliation, is growing with each generation. Most notably, the Gallup Organization found in their 2021 survey that—for the first time since they began studying the religious landscape of the United States—fewer than 50% of American adults indicated they belong to a church, synagogue, or mosque. Compare the 47% of adults who claim religious affiliation today with 70% of adults in 1999; the drop-off feels exponential.

As a result, the cultural context in which children and young people grow up is becoming less inclusive of religious expression, meaning that young people are not growing up with the same reinforcement of ideas and practices that previous generations experienced. An increase in the number of adults who do not identify with a religious tradition means an increase in the number of non-religious (or non-observant) parents who, it follows, raise non-religious children. The touchstones of religious expression—attendance at communal worship, personal prayer, family faith practices like prayer before meals, etc.—fall by the wayside as not only do fewer families observe them but an increasing number of children never learn, experience, or even see them. This is what James Emery White calls “functional atheism,” the reality that current generations aren’t rejecting God; they aren’t thinking about God or religion at all. After all, it’s difficult to think about something you aren’t aware of or with which you aren’t familiar.

We can all provide anecdotes from our own communi-

ties that support these trends. However, these data do not paint a full picture. Other studies confirm that Millennials and Generation Z, those who are parenting school-age children, crave a sense of life-purpose, are open to spiritual and ethical questions, believe deeply in social justice and the common good, and are open to the ideas of faith and God.

So, the lack of religious formation and experience in the lives of many children, parents, and families presents to those of us in ministry a tremendous opportunity for evangelization. While we cannot assume that the children and families we serve come to sacramental preparation with the same type of prior knowledge or experience of the faith as some previous generations did, we also must not assume the children and their parents are not open to learning about, or experiencing, what faith communities have to offer. Our efforts must be authentic and must meet participants where they are.

The Need for Liturgical Catechesis in Sacramental Preparation

Given what we know about the often-limited liturgical formation of children and their families, we believe it is critical that parishes and school communities do everything they can to help provide understanding of, and experiences with, liturgical prayer whenever possible. The Church's liturgical prayer traditions have been shaped over centuries. These ancient structures of prayer connect us across boundaries of time and place, and the patterns and structures of the liturgy both form and express Catholic identity. Praying in these ways also connects us across borders to the universal Church, gathered throughout the world.

The problem we observe is that current faith formation

practice is still rooted in the false assumption that students and families who participate have a consistent practice of regular Mass attendance. As a result, we don't teach what we assume is already a regular part of weekly family life. We assume children and parents know how to sing the parts of the Mass because we think they've been attending Mass all their lives. In reality, this may not be true. As a result, we have children preparing to receive First Communion who are unfamiliar with the Mass itself. This kind of distance and disconnect undermines an understanding of the sacrament and can contribute to the distancing between families on the edge of parish participation and the community itself.

If children and parents are not regularly attending Mass, First Communion preparation programs can provide powerful connections to the liturgical life of your community. Catechists can help children and their parents learn the patterns and structures they are missing, building familiarity with liturgical prayer practice, and increasing participation at Mass. In short, First Communion programs that incorporate liturgical catechesis must re-introduce (or introduce) children and their families to the liturgy. This is an essential opportunity for evangelization and the Church's best chance at confronting the changing landscape of religious affiliation in the United States.

About This Resource

This resource is designed as a supplement to your parish's current sacramental curriculum and liturgical resources. It is not intended to replace your current materials. Instead, look for ways that the content here complements your current program and identify how you might bring the following information into your existing lessons and practices.

This leader's guide provides an overview of concepts designed to help bridge the gap between sacramental preparation and liturgical life. Part Two of this guide examines the call for full, conscious, and active participation in our liturgies and extends this call to our home life, providing a template for connecting what we do at Mass with what we do around our family table. Part Three provides an overview of the components of the Liturgy of the Eucharist, examining what takes place during each component, how the assembly is called to participate, and how we can reflect upon the words and actions. Part Four looks specifically at communal singing, specifically the sung acclamations and responses during the Liturgy of the Eucharist and how best to encourage sung participation. The Appendix provides a First Communion preparation checklist, designed to help ensure cooperative preparation for the liturgical celebration, as well as further reading and additional resources for you to consult and consider.

In addition to this leader's guide we have developed an accompanying home guide for children and their families. This home guide functions primarily as an at-home prayer booklet. It includes carefully designed meal prayers that reflect the rhythms and structures of the Church's common liturgical prayer—namely, the Sunday Eucharist. It also includes nighttime prayers modeled on the Church's ancient practice of the Liturgy of the Hours. These prayers are meant to be prayed by the whole family together and rely on the responses and participation of all involved. It is our hope that by praying this way, we gradually form each other to be ready for the way we pray at the Sunday Eucharist.

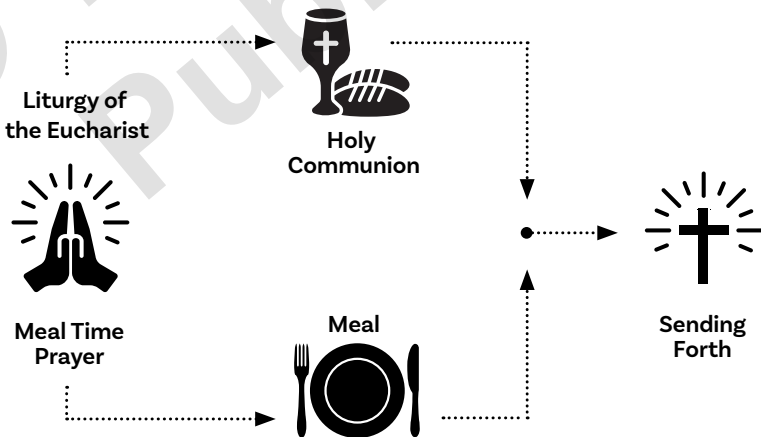
Praying with the At-Home Guide

MEALTIME PRAYERS

While the full significance of the Last Supper and the Eucharist may be out of reach for children preparing to make their First Communion, there are practices we can adopt to promote the understanding of this ritual in our homes. Introducing the fundamentals of our role and actions during the Liturgy of the Eucharist creates fertile ground for future formation, growth, and curiosity.

The act of gathering for a meal—its conventions, its traditions, its expectations—functions as an effective canvas for teaching about the practice of ritual and symbolism. Just like liturgy, the repetition of these traditions and actions gradually forms us over time and contributes to a sense of identity that is not only personal but communal.

In its simplest explanation, the Liturgy of the Eucharist is a structured, communal way of “saying grace” before a meal. Praying together as a family at mealtime reflects the progression we experience at liturgy when we move from prayer to meal to thanksgiving to sending forth.



This graphic is not meant to suggest that our at-home mealtime is a substitute for experiencing the Liturgy of the Eucharist at Mass, nor is it a way to “practice” Communion at home. This graphic illustrates how the components of prayer and mealtime at home can help to introduce and explain the structure of ritual we experience at Mass.

Prayer

AT MASS we celebrate the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The various postures/gestures, spoken prayers, and sung acclamations are carefully arranged for the worshipping community to offer thanks and praise for the gifts of bread and wine and to celebrate the Paschal Mystery (the mystery of Jesus’ dying and rising) as the bread and wine are transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ.

AT HOME we gather for prayer prior to sharing a meal. This prayer unites and honors those who have gathered. Together we offer thanks and praise to God for the blessing of the meal, for the work of those who produced the food, and for any other intentions offered by those gathered.

Sharing the Meal

AT MASS when we receive Holy Communion, we enter in a communal experience where all are fed the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. It is as the body of Christ that we receive Body of Christ. The Catechism states that the Eucharist is the “source and summit of the Christian life” (1324).

AT HOME when we dine together, we share in a meal someone has prepared or acquired for us. Beyond the act of

cooking the food or picking it up, we should remember that this food is a gift of someone's labor. From harvest to store to kitchen to table, this meal required the work and love of many people. Providing nourishment for others is a eucharistic giving of oneself.

Sending Forth

AT MASS The *Catechism* states that the Eucharist is the "source and summit of the Christian life" (1324). Once we receive the Eucharist, it immediately acts as source, sending us forth as missionary disciples. Strengthened by the Eucharist, we are sent forth to share the good news of the gospel.

AT HOME Time spent with family and friends forms us. Shared mealtime is about more than physical sustenance; we share stories, we learn our history, it cultivates our identity. This time shapes us individually and collectively. We hope that these things travel with us when we leave the table and return to our lives.

Mealtime Prayer

This resource seeks to assist families with engaging in a kind of mealtime prayer that helps a child preparing for First Communion understand the structure of the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

These prayers are not substitutes or practice scripts for celebrating Mass; rather, they are ways we can pray together at home that introduce children to the rhythm, structure,

and purpose of the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

For families who may be new to mealtime prayer, the prayers offered here are a great way to start. For families with a regular prayer routine, these prayers can offer a new way of praying together, a way that offers new insights into our faith and opportunities for curiosity.

These prayers require the full, active, and conscious participation of all involved. This is best accomplished if all involved are given their own booklet to follow along.

Nighttime Prayer

Bedtime is another good time for families to gather in prayer. In fact, due to the rigorous demands on daily schedules, it might be a better option for many households. Bedtime prayers are often very personal, usually done alone, often in silence. There is nothing wrong with this, and if a child has a good routine of this it should not be supplanted. However, as you work toward introducing your child to the rhythm and experience of communal prayer, you might consider introducing or adding this component as well.

The Liturgy of the Hours is an ancient practice of prayer, arranged according to the time of day. Additionally, the Liturgy of the Hours is the official daily liturgical prayer of the Church. The patterns and structures of these prayers both form and express our Catholic identity. Praying in this way connects us across time and border to the universal Church and also to the Sunday Eucharist.

The benefits of nighttime prayer are most realized when done consistently, as part of an established routine. Additionally, like the mealtime prayers, these prayers require the participation of all involved. This is best accomplished if everyone has their own booklet to follow along.

For the purposes of these prayers, the at-home guide uses a simplified structure of Night Prayer as its template. The responses and psalm texts have been adapted for use with young children. The guide also contains a variety of several psalms and readings you can substitute to vary the prayers from night to night.

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