



PREPARATION FOR FIRST HOLY COMMUNION

GUIDELINES FOR THE DIOCESE OF EAST ANGLIA

1 Introduction to the Sacrament

“At the Last Supper, on the night he was betrayed, our Saviour instituted the Eucharistic sacrifice of his Body and Blood. This he did in order to perpetuate the sacrifice of the Cross throughout the ages until he should come again, and so to entrust to his beloved Spouse, the Church, a memorial of his death and resurrection: a sacrament of love, a sign of unity, a bond of charity, a Paschal banquet ‘in which Christ is consumed, the mind is filled with grace, and a pledge of future glory is given to us.’” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 47)

The Sacrament of the Eucharist is for the Church the ‘source and summit of the Christian life’. The word Eucharist comes from the Greek word *eucharisteo* meaning ‘give thanks’, which recollects the words of Jesus at the Last Supper: ‘he took bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and gave it to them’. The Sacrament of the Eucharist is also commonly known as Holy Mass.

The Mass is a mystical reality in which the original, saving sacrifice of Christ on the Cross is renewed; when we take part in the Mass we are spiritually present at the foot of the Cross on Calvary. During the Mass, bread and wine, by the words of Jesus and the invocation of the Holy Spirit, become the Body and Blood of Christ Himself, to be received by His people. Jesus Christ is truly present on the altar; this is the doctrine of the Real Presence.

The Mass is also a memorial - the Church's way of fulfilling Christ's command, at the Last Supper, to “Do this in remembrance of Me” - and a sacred banquet, in which we take part through our role in the liturgy and our reception of Holy Communion: the Body and Blood of Christ.

The Sacrament of the Eucharist is not a creation of the Church, but a part of God's plan of salvation from the very beginning. It is prefigured in the Old Testament: in the offerings of Melchizedek, priest king of Jerusalem associated with Abraham, who offers a sacrifice of bread and wine; and in the Passover Lamb sacrificed as God frees His people from the tyranny of Pharaoh. It is also revealed by the prophetic action of Jesus, in feeding the multitude, before He feeds the Church with the gift of His own body and blood.

A summary of teaching in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, and of the requirements of Canon Law, is given in Appendix 1.

2 Guidelines for the First Holy Communion class

Pre-requisites for enrolment

Children should have reached the 'age of reason', or around the age of 7. It is diocesan policy that preparation for First Holy Communion should generally take place in school Year 3 (the year in which the child turns 8 years old).

Children should be baptised Catholics, and have a copy of their baptism certificate. (Children of the age of reason who are not baptised will need an extended period of baptismal preparation, not just a one-off class.)

Parents or guardians should be able to commit:

- to their children attending all the scheduled First Holy Communion classes;
- to the family attending Sunday Mass every week;
- to themselves attending a minimum of two separate sessions of parental catechesis.

What the class needs to teach

A child is ready to receive First Holy Communion when the parish priest, assisted by the catechist, has discerned that the child according to his/her capacity:

1. Participates actively and consciously in Sunday Mass on a regular basis (NB see Appendix 3 on 'active participation' below).
2. Understands that the Holy Eucharist is truly the Body and Blood of Christ under the appearance of bread and wine.
3. Understands that the Eucharist is the memorial of Christ's sacrifice for our salvation, and a commemoration of Christ's last meal with his disciples.
4. Understands that after receiving First Communion, they are now full members of the Body of Christ, and now share in His table and in the community of their brothers and sisters in Christ.
5. Has been prepared for and received First Confession (the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation) prior to First Communion.
6. Is capable of receiving the Body and Blood of Christ in an informed and reverent manner; and understands the significance of receiving the Eucharist under both species of bread and wine - including the fuller form of Holy Communion when distributed under both kinds, and the freedom of the child to receive the Host alone, Christ being fully present under either species.

Course Materials

There are a variety of First Holy Communion courses available. The Diocese particularly recommends *Jesus Comes to Me* (Dora Nash, 2010). No one course is complete and self-sufficient; different parishes will have different needs, and their catechists will have different experiences of what works best.

Whichever course is chosen will need to be adapted and supplemented to ensure that the six key points of the Diocesan guidelines outlined above are met; and to ensure that children are properly prepared for first Confession, have experience of Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, and are introduced to the Saints and Catholic culture of East Anglia.

Preparing for first Confession

Children must have prepared for and received the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation before receiving Holy Communion for the first time (Canon 914, CCC 1457).

This sacrament is, for good reasons, given a variety of names in the Catechism. However the normal English usage is 'going to Confession', and in order to foster frequent reception of the sacrament, children should be encouraged to use the simple term 'Confession'.

Preparation for first Confession must include an understanding of the four essential actions of the sacrament: Contrition (or Repentance), Confession, Penance and Absolution.

Catechists should emphasise the personal encounter with Jesus in the Confessional: that, as Pope Francis tells us, 'Jesus awaits you in the Sacrament of Penance'. 'Jesus is there... Be courageous and go to Confession!'

Catechists should also ensure that children understand and can apply the Church's teaching on Confession and the reception of Holy Communion: 'Anyone who is conscious of grave sin may not celebrate Mass or receive the Body of the Lord without previously having been to sacramental confession' (Canon 916).

Care should always be taken to avoid giving the impression that Confession is merely a step taken on the journey to First Holy Communion, and not a separate sacrament where we may regularly encounter Jesus Himself.

Eucharistic Adoration.

Every course of First Communion classes should introduce children to Eucharistic Adoration. Adoration can include hymns and songs, readings from Scripture and guided prayer, but should always include a period of silent adoration.

East Anglian identity

East Anglia is a land of saints, with a proud Catholic history and a vibrant Catholic present. Catechists are encouraged to introduce children to the East Anglian Saints - Our Lady of Walsingham, St Edmund, St Etheldreda, St Felix and St Furse - and to find ways of incorporating their lives and examples into First Holy Communion classes. The feast days of the East Anglian saints should be marked during the course of preparation:

St Furse - January 16th

Our Lady of Walsingham - September 24th

St Felix - March 8th

St Edmund - November 20th

St Etheldreda - June 23rd

First Holy Communion classes are expected to attend, if at all possible, the Diocesan Children's pilgrimage to Walsingham (usually scheduled towards the end of May).

Role of the wider parish

Preparation for First Holy Communion is an opportunity for the entire parish to evangelise and deepen its faith. The whole parish shares in the responsibility for sacramental preparation, assisting the parents, clergy and catechists in the formation of the children. Each parish is encouraged to establish a team of catechists and helpers to assist in carrying that responsibility. It is important to encourage parishioners to pray for the children preparing for First Holy Communion and for their families. Children can be allotted parish prayer sponsors to pray regularly for them (with due regard to safeguarding, ie not making public full names of children). Developing a group of prayer sponsors may for example be a good way of involving the housebound in preparing for First Holy Communion. A buddy system can also be helpful, whereby a family of a child from a previous year's class is introduced to a family from the current year's class, and the two families are encouraged to attend Mass together. Liturgical celebrations such as a Mass of Inscription can help to ensure that the First Communion group remains well-rooted within the wider parish community.

3 Preparation for parents & families

Preparation for First Communion is a unique opportunity for parents to discover or renew their own faith. Parents should be encouraged to:

- participate every week in Sunday Mass with their child.
- be committed to help their child meet the attendance and formation requirements for the Sacrament of First Holy Communion.
- model a Christian commitment of prayer and service to the parish community.
- pray for, and with, their child.

Classes with parents should highlight and affirm the role and importance of the family whilst encouraging the parents' understanding of the Sacrament of the Eucharist.

Classes for parents should include:

Basic theological instruction: understanding the presence of Jesus in the Eucharistic Elements, in the Word of the Sacred Scripture, in the priest who celebrates the liturgy, and in the assembly of the people.

Basic liturgical instruction: about the ritual, symbols, and structure of the Mass - including when to sit, stand and kneel during the Mass, and how to receive Holy Communion reverently.

Basic pastoral instruction, which will include examples of living as a Eucharistic people; how the parish lives and thrives, and how parents can contribute to the life of the parish.

Encouragement in catechesis: how the parents can assist the children in their learning.

If possible, a time of retreat should be set apart for the parents and children to reflect as a group together on the Sacrament of Eucharist prior to receiving First Holy Communion. This may include a time of Eucharistic Adoration.

Non-practising families

Non-practising families, and parents in irregular unions, can present challenges but also special opportunities. They will need patience and encouragement; but the greater involvement of the child in the life of the Church can be often be a prompt to change in the parent. The teaching of the Church should be presented tactfully, but never ignored or 'swept under the carpet'. It is not simply a set of restrictive prohibitions, but rather a positive and beautiful vision of life. Care should be taken always to present the Church's teaching in a positive light: a useful rule in evangelisation is 'don't just oppose, propose'.

4 Liturgical Guidelines for the First Holy Communion Mass

Liturgical guidelines for the First Holy Communion Mass are being drafted and will be issued later this year.

5 After First Communion

First Holy Communion is a joyful occasion for the entire parish, and it is appropriate to mark the occasion with a party, ideally after the Mass itself, to which the entire parish is invited. This can also be an opportunity for special songs or performances given by the children themselves.

Children who have already received their First Communion should not thereafter be leaving the Mass in order to attend a Children's Liturgy group. The purpose of First Communion classes is to enable children to take their place alongside their brothers and sisters in Christ for the entirety of the Eucharistic celebration.

Parents and families should be particularly encouraged to assist in First Communion Classes for the subsequent year, perhaps through a 'buddy' system. In this case it is helpful to make clear at the start of the year's programme the expectation that parents will help the parish in the following year.

6 Support for Catechists

Parish priests have the first responsibility to support their parish catechists. The Diocese assists parish priests by offering opportunities for catechist training and formation.

Pope Francis has specifically asked bishops and priests to support catechists: 'I ask your bishops and priests to support you with a doctrinal, spiritual and pastoral formation capable of making you ever more effective in your outreach.'

The Diocese collaborates with the School of the Annunciation, Buckfast in the formation of catechists. Every parish should have at least one catechist who is studying for the Diocesan Catechetical Certificate offered by the School of the Annunciation.

The Catechesis Commission has a diocesan responsibility to support parish catechists, and can be contacted at the Diocese with any questions. The current chair of the Commission is Deacon Andrew Eburne Andrew.Eburne@rcdea.org.uk.

Appendix 1 The Eucharist in the Catechism and in Canon Law

The Catechism of the Catholic Church gives the teaching of the Church on the sacrament of the Eucharist in paragraphs 1322-1419

IN BRIEF (*summary of the teaching of the Church*)

1406 Jesus said: "I am the living bread that came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever; . . . he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life and . . . abides in me, and I in him" (Jn 6:51, 54, 56).

1407 The Eucharist is the heart and the summit of the Church's life, for in it Christ associates his Church and all her members with his sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving offered once for all on the cross to his Father; by this sacrifice he pours out the graces of salvation on his Body which is the Church.

1408 The Eucharistic celebration always includes: the proclamation of the Word of God; thanksgiving to God the Father for all his benefits, above all the gift of his Son; the consecration of bread and wine; and participation in the liturgical banquet by receiving the Lord's body and blood. These elements constitute one single act of worship.

1409 The Eucharist is the memorial of Christ's Passover, that is, of the work of salvation accomplished by the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, a work made present by the liturgical action.

1410 It is Christ himself, the eternal high priest of the New Covenant who, acting through the ministry of the priests, offers the Eucharistic sacrifice. And it is the same Christ, really present under the species of bread and wine, who is the offering of the Eucharistic sacrifice.

1411 Only validly ordained priests can preside at the Eucharist and consecrate the bread and the wine so that they become the Body and Blood of the Lord.

1412 The essential signs of the Eucharistic sacrament are wheat bread and grape wine, on which the blessing of the Holy Spirit is invoked and the priest pronounces the words of consecration spoken by Jesus during the Last Supper: "This is my body which will be given up for you. . . . This is the cup of my blood. . . ."

1413 By the consecration the transubstantiation of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ is brought about. Under the consecrated species of bread and wine Christ himself, living and glorious, is present in a true, real, and substantial manner: his Body and his Blood, with his soul and his divinity (cf. Council of Trent: DS 1640; 1651).

1414 As sacrifice, the Eucharist is also offered in reparation for the sins of the living and the dead and to obtain spiritual or temporal benefits from God.

1415 Anyone who desires to receive Christ in Eucharistic communion must be in the state of grace. Anyone aware of having sinned mortally must not receive communion without having received absolution in the sacrament of penance.

1416 Communion with the Body and Blood of Christ increases the communicant's union with the Lord, forgives his venial sins, and preserves him from grave sins. Since receiving this sacrament strengthens the bonds of charity between the communicant and Christ, it also reinforces the unity of the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ.

1417 The Church warmly recommends that the faithful receive Holy Communion when they participate in the celebration of the Eucharist; she obliges them to do so at least once a year.

1418 Because Christ himself is present in the sacrament of the altar, he is to be honoured with the worship of adoration. "To visit the Blessed Sacrament is . . . a proof of gratitude, an expression of love, and a duty of adoration toward Christ our Lord"

1419 Having passed from this world to the Father, Christ gives us in the Eucharist the pledge of glory with him. Participation in the Holy Sacrifice identifies us with his Heart, sustains our strength along the pilgrimage of this life, makes us long for eternal life, and unites us even now to the Church in heaven, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and all the saints.

The Eucharist in Canon Law

Canon Law is the body of laws and regulations that govern the Catholic Church and all its members.

Can. 777 In a special way, the parish priest is to ensure, in accordance with the norms laid down by the diocesan Bishop, that... children are properly prepared for first confession and first holy communion, and for the sacrament of confirmation, by means of catechetical formation over an appropriate period of time
Can. 913 §1 For holy communion to be administered to children, it is required that they have sufficient knowledge and be accurately prepared, so that according to their capacity they understand what the mystery of Christ means, and are able to receive the Body of the Lord with faith and devotion.

Can. 914 It is primarily the duty of parents and of those who take their place, as it is the duty of the parish priest, to ensure that children who have reached the use of reason are properly prepared and, having made their sacramental confession, are nourished by this divine food as soon as possible. It is also the duty of the parish priest to see that children who have not reached the use of reason, or whom he has judged to be insufficiently disposed, do not come to holy communion.

Can. 916 Anyone who is conscious of grave sin may not celebrate Mass or receive the Body of the Lord without previously having been to sacramental confession, unless there is a grave reason and there is no opportunity to confess; in this case the person is to remember the obligation to make an act of perfect contrition, which includes the resolve to go to confession as soon as possible.



Appendix 2: Active Participation in the Mass

The phrase 'active participation' was coined by Pope St Pius X, who defined it as follows:

‘If you wish to participate in the Mass actively, you must follow with your eye, heart and mouth all that happens on the altar. Further, you must pray with the Priest the holy words said by him in the Name of Christ and which Christ says by him. You have to associate your heart with the holy feelings which are contained in these words and in this manner you ought to follow all that happens at the altar.’

Pope St Pius X's recommendation was taken up and renewed by the Vatican Council, which in its Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, stated:

‘Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to that fully conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy... To promote active participation, the people should be encouraged to take part by means of acclamations, responses, psalmody, antiphons, and songs, as well as by actions, gestures, and bodily attitudes. And at the proper times all should observe a reverent silence... That more perfect form of participation in the Mass whereby the faithful, after the priest's communion, receive the Lord's body from the same sacrifice, is strongly commended.’

This teaching of Vatican II was clarified by Pope Benedict in his Apostolic Exhortation on the Eucharist, *Sacramentum Caritatis*:

‘The Second Vatican Council rightly emphasized the active, full and fruitful participation of the entire People of God in the eucharistic celebration... Yet we must not overlook the fact that some misunderstanding has occasionally arisen concerning the precise meaning of this participation. It should be made clear that the word "participation" does not refer to mere external activity during the celebration... Active participation is not *per se* equivalent to the exercise of a specific ministry... Full participation in the Eucharist takes place when the faithful approach the altar in person to receive communion.’

For the Church, therefore, 'active participation' means firstly the interior participation of all the powers of the individual soul in the mystery of Christ's Sacrificial Love; so that the mind and heart are awake, alert and engaged throughout the Mass. Secondly, this participation involves exterior action: saying and doing things, in particular the bodily gestures and sacred signs we use during the course of the liturgy: the Sign of the Cross, kneeling and genuflecting, the Sign of Peace. Finally, active participation is fulfilled in our reception of Holy Communion at Mass.