

DIOCESE OF MAITLAND-NEWCASTLE

BECOMING DISCIPLES

COMMENTARY DOCUMENT



Foreward

The journey of the Christian disciple begins with the celebration of their baptism. In that celebration, the new Christian is grafted on to the Body of Christ that is the Church, and drawn into a permanent relationship with God. The journey does not end with the celebration of baptism. Baptism is not an endpoint but a beginning, a beginning of a whole of life journey for the Christian as they constantly seek to grow in their understanding and experience of their relationship with God and with God's People.

For those Christians who are baptised as infants, the journey of Christian discipleship has already started but also needs to be lived and nourished as it unfolds across their lifetime. The journey of Christian Initiation for those children comes to a point of fruition as they complete their sacramental initiation through the celebration of Confirmation and through admission to the reception of Communion for the first time. These are the next steps along their life long journey of discipleship, and are step that are celebrated in the context of the community of faith in the places where they have their home.

The Church of Maitland-Newcastle has developed a policy on the sacramental initiation of children entitled *Becoming Disciples* as a means to assist the parents and carers of those children baptised as infants, and those children who are baptised in the early years of their lives, to complete the celebration of Christian Initiation.

This current document provides a commentary on the Diocesan Policy and its implementation, assisting parents, carers, and parish communities to understand the requirements of the sacramental journey of initiation of their children. From that understanding, parents and carers can better understand their responsibilities as the first teachers of their children in the ways of faith. From that understanding, parish communities can put in place the opportunities for a joyous and fruitful celebration of this stage in the Christian journey of their children. From that understanding, everyone can contribute to the development of the life of discipleship for those who are still in the early stages of the Christian journey.

I commend the Diocesan Policy, *Becoming Disciples*, and this Commentary, to all the members of the Church of Maitland-Newcastle, and particularly to those who will play a significant role in the development of the Christian life of discipleship for the children of our Church.

Vicar General

Andrew Doohan

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Preface

The diocesan policy, *Becoming Disciples*, is the result of broad consultation across the diocese prior to its introduction in 2015. The Diocesan Pastoral Council carried out a review of the previous policy in 2002 to gauge its pastoral impact during the six years since its implementation. The current publication is a response to the many requests for a comprehensive document containing the policy and background reading, to promote a greater understanding of the policy and the reasons for the adoption of a family-centred and parish-based process of initiation that is supported by catechists in Government Schools and teachers in Catholic Schools. Feedback on the current policy highlighted the need for practical strategies for implementing these three principles.

Reading of relevant Church documents relating to initiation e.g. *The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA)*, *the Introductions to the Rites of Baptism and Confirmation*, *The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)*, *Children: Close to the Mystery of God (CESA Stimulus Paper)*, *Lumen Fidei* and *Amoris Laetitia* will offer a fuller understanding of the Church's teaching and practice.

The Commentary is a revision of the original document published in 1996 and revised in 2003. It is important to acknowledge the amount of work done by the initial Diocesan Support Team for the Implementation of the Sacraments of Initiation Policy in writing the original document. It is also important to recognise all those who contributed to the writing of the revision through the sharing of their experiences. We acknowledge, too, the many insights that we received from reading the policies of other Australian dioceses, particularly the Archdiocese of Brisbane and Perth and the Diocese of Broken Bay. Our thanks go to those who read the draft copies of the revision and offered suggestions about its content and style.

It is important to note that, at this point in time, the Australian Church is on a journey towards the Plenary Council and we are planning for a Diocesan Synod. Bearing this in mind, we anticipate that this commentary and indeed the policy it accompanies will likely be reviewed after 2020.

Working Party

2003 Helen Bourne, Kathy Gracz, Ellen Shanahan rsj and Maureen Salmon rsj.

2015 – 18 John Donnelly, Jeannine French rsj, Bernadette Gibson, Samantha Hill, Loretta Heffernan, Brian Lacey, Jennie Nolan, Liza Ruitenbach, Fr Paul O'Neill, Helene O'Neill, Zoë Marr, Anne Millard-Daugherty, Fr Peter Street, Benita Tait.

Introduction

God

Christians believe in and worship a triune God, a community of three persons – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – in one love relationship; a bit like a number of human beings in the one family relationship. We know that this God loves us all unconditionally. This knowledge produces an awareness which shapes the whole of who we are. God's love becomes the basis of our lives so that we might live in union with God and at peace with our neighbours.

Christians also believe that God the Son became a truly human person, Jesus, who lived among us to show us how to live this way of love. After he died, was raised and returned to his Father, he sent us the gift of God's Holy Spirit to be with us and help us along our life's journey.

Community of the Church

The group of believers, who gather to worship this triune God and to support each other through daily life, form the community of the Church. As Christians we recognise and accept that God is revealed to us in the person of Jesus, the Christ. Recognition of Jesus is more than an intellectual exercise. It is about recognising that Jesus is present to us in the people and events of our ordinary lives. It is becoming one with Jesus in his mission of bringing his Father's desire for the world to fulfilment in each one of us – a reign of love, justice and peace.

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." Matthew 29: 18- 20

Pope Francis builds on this commissioning to issue the challenge anew.

The Church which "goes forth" is a community of missionary disciples who take the first step, who are involved and supportive, who bear fruit and rejoice. Evangelii Gaudium (EG) 24

The way of life of a missionary disciple

A "missionary disciple" is both a disciple and a missionary—disciple being a follower of Jesus Christ and a missionary being one who goes out into the world on a mission.

Source: <https://leadersthatfollow.com/what-it-means-to-be-a-missionary-disciple/>

It is a new way of living which:

- ▶ is nurtured through common worship of God our Father;
- ▶ has the way of Jesus Christ as its focus
- ▶ has the Holy Spirit as its support and inspiration;
- ▶ is shared with others;
- ▶ values justice as being fundamental for the transformation of the world;
- ▶ involves a willingness to grow and let go of what does not reflect the new life we are all offered in Jesus Christ.

Sacraments and the Sacramentality of Life

In the Catholic Church, we understand the word *sacrament* on a number of levels. Firstly, there is the sacramentality of all of life. Sacraments abound in our world. Michel Quoist once said that if we knew how to look at life, all life would reveal God to us. (cf *Prayers of Life*) Sacraments are signs that point to some deeper reality. The might and beauty of nature, the people that we meet daily and the events that make up our lives, can all reveal God to us, if we have the ability to see more than the present reality. As such, these everyday happenings can be sacramental.

We come to further understandings of sacraments when we ponder the following.

- ▶ Jesus is the sacrament of God because in seeing Jesus, we can come to know his Father
- ▶ The Church as the community of believers is the sacrament of Christ present in the world.
- ▶ Each baptised person has the mission to reveal the presence of Jesus. With the inspiration of the Holy Spirit we, too, are sacraments.





Catholics are a sacramental people in another meaning of the word. We mark the significant moments of life through the celebration of the sacraments of the Church. As actions of Christ and of the Church, they are signs and means by which faith is expressed and strengthened, worship is offered to God and our sanctification is brought about (cf Canon 840). As well as the three sacraments of Christian Initiation (Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist), there are the two sacraments of healing (Penance and Anointing of the Sick) and the sacraments at the service of the community and the mission of the faithful (Marriage and Ordination). In celebrating the sacraments, our lives are linked to Jesus Christ and to one another. Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC), 950

Initiation

Initiation into the Church is not the privilege of a select few, but a possibility for all who desire to respond to God's love in Jesus Christ, a love which is offered to all of us. Initiation is God's work; instituted by Jesus and inspired and made holy by God's Spirit. (Acts 2:1-13) Others involved in sacramental initiation are God's ministers, preparing the way through encouragement, support and the example of a committed, faithful living as the following statement aptly says:

It is the deep belief of the Church that no one comes to faith, to the Church, to the sacraments or even to God without their being called by God. This is God's work, not ours. God initiates, God calls, God converts. We co-operate with the initiatives of God. We respond. What is being celebrated is that God is indeed calling a person into the life of the Church and the sacraments as initiation into life. (Terry Wade (Ed) The Parish Companion to the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, 42.)

We are social beings who have a need to relate to others, to belong and be accepted in our communities. Initiation is the process of becoming a disciple. Initiation is about taking on the values of the group, learning about its stories, its traditions and being committed to its aims and objectives.

Christian initiation is about becoming a member of the faith community that follows Jesus, the Christian Church. It involves becoming familiar with its stories, its rituals and being committed to its mission. It is about entering into a relationship with our Christian God - the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and being welcomed and incorporated into the community of people who believe in and worship this God. It is about becoming part of the Body of Christ and being engaged as a missionary disciple.

¹ The legal term 'parent/guardian' is used in the policy document whereas 'parent/carer' is used in the pastoral context.

Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist are the three sacraments that constitute the one single process of Christian initiation. The *Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults* (RCIA) states that initiation “is a gradual process that takes place within the community of the faithful.” *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA)* No. 4. What is true for the initiation of adults is also true for children. Children are initiated into the faith of their families and into the faith of the community in their local Catholic parish.

As the children travel along this path of initiation they come to experience God the Father, Jesus and the Holy Spirit as their heavenly creator, friend and guide, as they learn what it means to be members of the community of disciples who believe in and follow Jesus as ‘the way, the truth and the life’. (John 14:6)

The ideal within the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle is for a family-centred, parish-based and school-supported program, which recognises the primary role of parents/guardians¹ in the faith formation of the child. This faith formation has joyful discipleship as its goal. The community welcomes another disciple of Jesus, who seeks to live the joy of the Gospel and share it with the world. (EG 5)

Initiation is a Journey

“From the time of the Apostles, becoming a Christian has been accomplished by a journey and initiation in several stages.” (cf CCC, 1229) “The rites for these stages are found in the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*.” (cf CCC, 1232) This rite forms the basis of our approach today to the initiation of children as well as adults. While adaptations have to be made where the initiation of children is concerned, there are features that are common to both the initiation of children and adults.

The journey of each individual will vary depending on their own story and particular needs. There is no ‘one size fits all’ process to be followed. The local parish usually provides a process by which a family can prepare a child or children for the sacraments of initiation. Generally, for adults the process of Christian Initiation has four stages: a time of enquiry, a time of nurturing and growth, and a time of purification and enlightenment and a time of deepening faith. We are encouraged to use this model with children as well.

<https://www.mn.catholic.org.au/church-mission/catholic-life/becoming-a-catholic/stages-of-rcia/>

Some parishes choose to introduce parent/carers into the entire process of initiation at the Baptism or Confirmation of their child. This is followed by a period of discernment and a public commitment ceremony.

Becoming Disciples

Diocesan Policy - Sacraments of the Initiation for Children

This policy is available at

https://diocesemn.azurewebsites.net/media/7298/dio_becoming_disciples_dl_brochure_dec-2024.pdf



Family Centred

‘Parents are the primary educators in the faith.’ *General Directory for Catechesis* (GDC) 255 Parent/carers are the first and the irreplaceable source of faith. The family is the basic unit of the faith community, the domestic church. The parents/carers’ role in fostering a child’s life of faith is so crucial that there is almost nothing that can take its place (cf *Familiaris Consortio* #36). Therefore, any parish program set up to facilitate the process of initiation has to not only nurture and support the faith of the child, but also that of the whole family. The role of grandparents is of growing importance in the family’s catechesis of the child.



The Significance of Baptism

The preparation process must be welcoming to all, encouraging all families to present their children for sacramental initiation. When parent/carers join the preparation, they are making a statement about their desire to have their child initiated into the life of the Church. The challenge for parishes is how best to foster this understanding which sees Baptism as the beginning of the initiation process. The preparation is the formal time of responding to the action of God's grace. This begins when the parent/carers ask for Baptism for their child. At this stage it is important to assist the parents to understand that

- ▶ the process of initiation is on-going.
- ▶ it will place certain expectations on them over a number of years.
- ▶ it will reach its fulfilment in the reception of First Communion.
- ▶ they will be asked to make a personal commitment and renew their own Baptismal vow.

Parishes are encouraged to use a pre-Baptism program to assist parents in preparing for the first step in initiation, a process that will continue on through reception of all three sacraments of initiation. It must be remembered that once a child is baptised, the Church community is obliged to provide opportunities for them to complete the process of Christian initiation.



GodStart - Supporting parishes to develop children's faith

GodStart is a faith development program that provides resources for parents to help teach their children about the love of God. Parishes purchase and distribute GodStart resources to young families in their community to help them develop their children's faith from an early age.

Rights and Responsibilities

Parents/carers strive to bring up their children to be decent human beings; respectful, caring, unselfish, honest and happy. In doing so, they are laying the foundations of a thoroughly Christian life. Just as parent/carers attend to their children's personal development so too, they have a responsibility for their spiritual development. Parent/carers therefore, have the right and obligation to present their children for the sacraments. Some families are well equipped to bring their children to the practice of the faith for it is in the home that children learn to pray, to believe, to live as a disciple and experience community. However, others feel inadequate in this area. The preparation process aims to be the means whereby the parish community assists the parent/carers to carry out this responsibility.

They do this by

- ▶ helping the parent/carers in their faith life.
- ▶ assisting the parent/carers to choose the best time for their children's first experience of the sacramental life of the Church.
- ▶ guide parent/carers about their motivation for desiring the sacraments for their child.²
- ▶ Many parishes have noticed an increase in parent/carers' reluctance and inability to form their children in the Catholic faith. It can no longer be assumed that all families are able to fulfil their responsibilities without considerable support from the parish and its schools.

Children, seeing their parent/carers' interest and buoyed by the support of God's people, will be led into the mystery of Catholic communal life, through their sharing in rituals, prayer and life. The amount of knowledge a child needs to have varies according to the capacity of the child. Some knowledge about the sacraments soon to be received is important, but not nearly as important as the faith experience of the person within the family and the parish community.

Pastoral experience has shown that the family-based sacramental preparation can in itself be a powerful tool of evangelisation. As children prepare for the sacraments, there is a moment of grace for the whole family. The preparation seeks to create an environment where people can discover the meaning of their child's initiation. Parent/carers are enabled to deepen, at times even rediscover, their own faith through sharing about the faith. Parent/carers' participation in the preparation for sacraments and their persevering efforts to guide their children in the faith, speak volumes about their readiness. While it is important to emphasise the family's participation in the worship of the faith community

² Reception of sacraments is not a formal condition of enrolment in Catholic Schools
see <https://www.mn.catholic.edu.au/enrolment/do-you-need-to-be-catholic-to-enrol-in-a-catholic-school/>



during the preparation period, there is need to recognise the different situations and circumstances of parents. The process must therefore be flexible enough to accommodate these differences.

Many parishes find creative ways to acknowledge and affirm children within Sunday Eucharist during this time preparation for the sacraments; for example the presentation of babies to the community before Baptism and the presentation of the *Lord's Prayer* and the *Creed* to those preparing for Confirmation. It is important that these activities are in keeping with the appropriate celebration of the Eucharist.

The program from Diocese of Broken Bay facilitates parent/carer preparation of their child(ren). Archdiocese of Brisbane has preparation which can be completed in the home.

Deferral

There are inevitably some families who are not yet ready for such a commitment and some recognise this for themselves. While the parish cannot make decisions for them, it can continue to reach out and encourage them. There are no urgent time constraints and people often need more time for such life-turning decisions. Pastoral experience shows the importance of continuing to reach out to families. Many

parent/carers who were initially unwilling or felt incompetent are later grateful for the encouragement they received to renew their own faith-life.

When a pastoral decision is made to defer a sacrament, the hope is that the child will receive the sacraments fruitfully at a later age. The preparation may then need to be extended over a longer period. This is not a refusal; it is a deferment and care must be taken that it is seen as such. Any hint of rejection must be avoided at all cost. Obviously pastoral sensitivity must be exercised in all this weighing up and discerning of readiness.

Open communication and acceptance are vital in order to serve families well. Some parent/carers choose to have all their children baptised on one occasion for family reasons, others may do the preparation in one parish and celebrate the sacrament in their 'home' parish, even overseas.

Education in the faith can be adapted to each child, using symbols, actions and stories. Parents desirous of nurturing the faith of their children are sensitive to their patterns of growth.

"It is essential that children actually see that, for their parents, prayer is something truly important."

Amoris Laetitia (AL) 288

Parish Based

Parish Partnership with Families

The local parish community is the face of the Church and has the privilege of seeking out, inviting and welcoming new members into its midst, handing on the faith to the next generation, and companioning children in the sacramental life of the Church. There is a role for all in the parish: parents, parishioners and leaders. While catechists have special responsibilities, it is the vocation of all members of the faith community to share with children how to live as followers of Jesus, by participating in his mission as his disciples. They do this whenever they meet children in daily life and at parish events including times of worship. Children will come to know the kind, just and loving Father Jesus spoke about, if they see the people around them living as missionary disciples.

Baptism to Full Initiation

Some of a child's most formative learnings, including their images of God, take place in the early childhood years before the beginning of school. During this time following Baptism, the parish community

- ▶ welcomes them into the worshipping community;
- ▶ models the attitudes, values and behaviours of Christian life;
- ▶ keeps in contact with the families of newly baptised children;
- ▶ offers assistance in practical ways;
- ▶ suggests ideas about developing family rituals and prayer
- ▶ demonstrates the actions of disciples on mission in the world

Such experiences lay the foundation for further understandings about God and the faith community as the child grows and moves towards full initiation through celebrating the sacraments of Confirmation and Eucharist.

Sacraments of Initiation Team

Some members of the parish community take on a formal role in the initiation process. The Sacraments of Initiation Team (Team) is composed of parishioners dedicated to helping the community with the privilege of handing on the faith

(Catechists). This process includes everyone involved in the sacramental preparation of children; priest, parents/carers, catechists and teachers from the local parish school as well as interested parishioners. The process is twofold, addressing parent/carers as well as children, so it is helpful if the Team includes people who recognise the needs of both parents and children.

The formation and membership of the Team is determined at the local parish level and has become increasingly difficult to maintain. Some parishes are exploring new catechetical models. The primary function is the empowering the families and the parish community by giving them the support needed to carry out their responsibilities. (see <http://flameoffaith.org.au/>)

Many parishes invite families to an information session to allow time for discernment. This is followed by a ritual of commitment to the process of initiation for the child(ren). This commitment typically takes place at a Sunday Mass before the entire community. Such a process highlights the rights and responsibilities of the parent/carers as well as the whole faith community.

Further along the journey of initiation prayer partners or mentors may be engaged to support the child and their family with prayers and guidance.

Annual reviews and evaluations are encouraged to measure the effectiveness of the methods and procedures used during the preparation time and its integration with other parts of the faith journey of individuals and the community as a whole.

Preparation Process

The preparation has two emphases

- ▶ The first is providing for the child's experiences of the parish community. These include the stories of believers down through the ages and the prayers and rituals of the Catholic Church especially the celebrations of the liturgical year.
- ▶ The second is helping the parents and sponsors to grow in their faith and to deepen their understanding of the teachings and sacramental life of the Church, so that they may more confidently share them with their children.

The team takes great care to plan an appropriate preparation

process that offers practical guidelines, is flexible and accommodates the different needs of people, especially parents/carers and that encourages an active and meaningful participation in the rituals of the Church.

<https://garrattpublishing.com.au/product/9780829438772/>

Involvement

It is important to remember that the policy anticipates communal support for the parents and child, beginning from the moment parents present their child for Baptism until and beyond the child's full initiation. The period from Baptism to Confirmation and First Communion calls for particular attention.

At every stage, catechesis and faith experiences are provided not only for the children but also for the families and the community. It is important that the parish process encourages child, family and community involvement from the very earliest days.

In the initiation process part of their faith journey, children need to experience:

- ▶ prayer and ritual within the family whereby members share their faith stories
- ▶ acknowledgement and affirmation within small groups to which they belong
- ▶ within worship of the faith community at the Sunday Eucharist, the community has the chance to be involved through:
 - a. warm welcome of children and their families
 - b. assisting with preparation groups
 - c. children's Liturgy of the Word
 - d. prayer partnering
 - e. modelling the Christian life

The emphasis, during this preparation time, is on experiencing the parish community and the sacraments. Appropriate learning is necessary, and this will continue to grow with further catechesis and shared celebration. The Children's Liturgy of the Word at Sunday Eucharist presents a faith experience as well as a catechetical opportunity that is helpful during the preparation process. Continued attendance at the Children's Liturgy of the Word during the next few years encourages participation in the Sunday Eucharist and so contributes to the children's greater understanding of their participation in the parish community.





School Supported

Catechists and Teachers

Within the parish context, the catechists and teachers in schools support the families and the parish community in the initiation process. Catechists in Government primary schools can present Catholic programs that complement the preparation for the sacraments. Catholic school teachers are part of an environment permeated with Gospel values, a systematic approach to teaching the knowledge of the faith as well as offering prayer and liturgical experiences to the students and their parents. It is to everyone's advantage if the units/modules on the sacraments of initiation are taught in school concurrently with the parish sacramental preparation.

See Diocesan RE and SRE Syllabus
<https://www.mn.catholic.edu.au/media/2726/re-curriculum-k-12.pdf>
<https://www.iccoreis.asn.au/teaching-sre/sre-curriculum/>

Each person's understanding of the sacraments and all other aspects of their faith will deepen and develop over time. The formal education given is in keeping with the age and ability of the children. It is important to recognise and celebrate the process of initiation in the child's faith life. Formation in the faith, being a lifelong process, will continue beyond the child's school life and throughout adulthood. It involves many experiences including formal learning, mentoring by family and sponsors, prayer and liturgy, and most importantly personal reflection.

Mentoring/Companioning/Partnering

The *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (RCIA) recommends that a sponsor accompany each person through the initiation process. The mentor could be an active parishioner or an older student who is able to witness to their faith. They simply need to be a friendly and supportive presence. Children preparing for the sacraments and their families would also benefit from someone who would take a friendly interest in the child and their family. A mentor could be especially relevant where a child showed a strong desire to be part of the initiation process but the family was not actively involved in the parish community. If the parents welcomed and permitted such support, this person could accompany the child to Mass and other activities as companions in faith.

Note: Screening and training of mentors and catechists
<https://www.mn.catholic.org.au/media/3680/reporting-concerns-for-children-policy-procedures-32.pdf>

Prayer Partners are another way of engaging parish/school members in the faith journey of children. Photos and names used with the appropriate permission could help focus communal prayer.

Displays of students' art and bookwork can also serve to keep these communities mindful.



Church Teaching

The Revised Order

The Church quite clearly indicates its preference for this order, “The faithful already marked with the sacred seal of baptism and confirmation, are through the reception of the Eucharist fully joined to the Body of Christ.” (Vatican II, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 5) *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* emphasises that those who have been baptised and confirmed can participate with the whole community in the Lord’s Eucharist. (cf CCC, 1322)

The RCIA provides the model for the process of initiation for children, a single process that sees the young people renew their baptismal vows be sealed with the gift of the Spirit through Confirmation, and be introduced to the Eucharistic Table. For children not baptised in infancy who have come to catechetical age, the Church has the *Christian Initiation of Children Who Have Reached Catechetical Age* (242- 306). This rite states that the three sacraments are received in the one celebration, as for adults. (281)

Confirmation

Confirmation is the second moment in the process of initiation between Baptism and First Communion. (*Sacraments of Initiation for Children 2003*). When Confirmation is celebrated separately, it is appropriate that it be conferred within a Liturgy of the Word. (cf Rite of Confirmation, #13).

See Diocesan Liturgy *Guidelines for the Celebration of Confirmation*.

https://www.mn.catholic.org.au/media/3058/13514-diocese_confirmation-guidelines_resources_final_1706_web.pdf

Parishes are encouraged to provide opportunities, within their liturgical celebrations, for adolescents to participate in appropriate rituals marking a more mature commitment to the faith and a readiness to work for the spread of God’s Kingdom. (cf CCC, 1285)

Significance of the Easter Season

The Paschal season is the time when the faith community relives more intensely its life in Christ. It has long been our tradition for the bishop to initiate candidates into full membership in this holy season. However, as this ideal is not always possible, the sacraments of initiation may be celebrated outside the Easter season. When this happens it is preferable to celebrate the sacraments on a Sunday, the day of the Lord’s resurrection. Some parishes choose a Sunday near the Feast of Corpus Christi.

Inclusion of Children Living with Disabilities

Children who have disabilities are integrated, wherever and however it is possible, into the parish preparation. It is important that any experience provided is sensitive to their situation and meets their needs. The parish needs to reflect clearly the love of Jesus for all people seen in many gospel stories.

The Australian Catholic Bishop’s Conference has published *Celebrating the Sacramental Life from Birth to Death*.



<https://www.catholic.org.au/acbc-media/downloads/all-downloads/organisations-1/national-network-for-disability-and-spirituality-1/celebrating-the-sacramental-life-from-birth-to-death/2083-acbc->



Age of Reason

It has been a long tradition upheld by Canon Law that initiation is completed at the age of reason that is about seven years of age (Canon 914). This practice gives parent/carers the right to decide on their child's readiness for the completion of sacramental initiation, so it is possible that the age may vary from child to child.

The completion of initiation is not therefore tied to any particular class at school but primarily to the readiness of the parents and hence the child to embrace the faith.

Sacrament of Penance

In the past there have been variations in the placement of the sacrament of Penance in the initiation of children. Church law states that children are to be properly prepared and make their sacramental confession before their First Communion, (cf *Canon* 914) yet another canon only requires Catholics to confess grave sin (cf *Canon* 989). The sacrament of Penance is not a sacrament of initiation, but rather a sacrament of healing that restores a person to a right relationship with God and the community. Having preparation for the sacrament of Penance associated with initiation seems to interrupt the process where Baptism flows on to Confirmation and then to First Eucharist.

Archdiocese of Brisbane video <http://flameoffaith.org.au/>

The present situation needs to be taken into account when introducing children to the sacrament of Penance. Sufficient time should elapse between a child's first celebration of the sacrament of Penance and First Communion, so as not to give the child the impression that Penance is necessary before Eucharist nor that Penance is only to be seen as an introduction to First Communion. It is hoped that children will experience this sacrament, in the company of their family and parish, a number of times before reception of First Communion.

It is appropriate for children to experience the sacrament through the Second Rite of Reconciliation, a communal rite that is simple, joyful and sensitive to their tender age. Through listening to the scripture readings and homily and being guided by the general examination of conscience the children come to understand that their choices and actions have consequences that often hurt others. They will learn the need to ask forgiveness of God and of the people hurt by their actions. The practice of this sacrament needs to be sensitive to the signs of our times, especially the First Rite.

Many parishes choose to celebrate Confirmation in the Easter Season generally around Pentecost in order to highlight the connection with the Holy Spirit and the making of disciples. There is also a powerful link to Baptism in the story of the Coming of the Holy Spirit.

Because the person is being initiated into the Universal Church via the parish community, it is most appropriate that the sacraments be celebrated at a major gathering of the community in the child's own parish at Sunday worship. (cf CCC, 1193)

Retreat experiences are a good means of consolidating the journey of initiation for children. These also have the ability to unify the children as a group and highlight the significance of the sacramental milestones they are celebrating. Weekends and school holidays are often convenient times for these experiences.

Role of the Bishop

The presence of the bishop is important in the western tradition as he makes visible the important link to the wider Church of the diocese and to the universal Church and the direct link with Christ through his Apostles. Confirmation is the sacrament most commonly celebrated by the bishop.

The ordinary minister of Confirmation is the bishop. However, the bishop can commission the Vicar General, Chancellor or a Parish Priest to administer Confirmation if required (cf *Rite of Confirmation* No.8). Ideally Confirmation is celebrated in communion with the Bishop and in the presence of the faith community on a Sunday. This is not always logistically possible in the diocese therefore options need to be considered. One such option is for some parishes to have the celebration outside the Easter season in order to have the Bishop preside. Another option is for the bishop to preside on a weekday instead of the Sunday. It is the responsibility of each parish to make wise decisions, balancing all the different elements and discerning what is pastorally most appropriate for the parish at the particular time.

Conclusion

The family based process of initiation involves the parents/ carers of the children being prepared, the Sacraments of Initiation catechists, the parish leaders, the parishioners, the catechists and the teachers in the parish schools. For an effective preparation process all these people need to work co-operatively, offering support, encouragement and resources as required. An evaluation by all those involved in the process each year is recommended. It is important that leaders are alert to the need for parishes not only to maintain contact but also to offer possibilities for social activities, involvement in parish life and liturgical participation to the families whose children have been fully initiated.

The completion of Christian Initiation marks a beginning rather than an ending, the beginning of a life-long journey of faith,

in being disciples of Jesus within the Church. The following quote provides a fitting conclusion:

“Faith is a personal act — the free response of the human person to the initiative of God who reveals [Godself] himself. But faith is not an isolated act. No one can believe alone, just as no one can live alone. You have not given yourself faith as you have not given yourself life. The believer has received faith from others and should hand it on to others. Our love for Jesus and for our neighbour impels us to speak to others about our faith. Each believer is thus a link in the great chain of believers. I cannot believe without being carried by the faith of others, and by my faith I help support others in the faith.” (CCC, 166)

Resources

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