

# **IRISH EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE**

## **Liturgical Guidelines for the celebration of First Eucharist.**

*These guidelines were approved at the December 2010 General Meeting of the Irish Episcopal Conference.*

## **Liturgical Guidelines**

### **for the celebration of**

### **First Eucharist.**

*In Ireland the preparation of children for the reception of First Eucharist is a joint school/home/parish privilege and responsibility. It is important, therefore, to ensure that the home, the sponsors and the parish, in partnership with the school, participate in the lead up to and in the celebration of the First Communion Mass.*

*The document comprises (1) a foundational theological introduction and (2) guidelines for good liturgical practice.*

#### **THEOLOGICAL UNDERPINNING**

The Eucharist is the great sacrament or sign of unity, uniting us with God and with one another. At the Last Supper, when Jesus instituted the Eucharist, he did so in order to ensure the Church would have a memorial of his sacrifice on the Cross and Resurrection, the event that made us one body, one people united in him. It is no surprise that in the Acts of the Apostles we read that from the very beginning the first Christians devoted themselves to the Mass. St. Paul emphasized how, though many, we are one through the Eucharist. St. Justin, writing around 155, gives us an amazing account of the Mass with all the basic lines of the celebration that brought Christians together just as it still does today. Such was their commitment to the Eucharist that Christians were prepared to face martyrdom rather than to give up on the Mass. "We can't live without Sunday" was their cry. It is clear why they felt like this: Christ is truly, really and substantially present in the Eucharist, nourishing us, forming us into a community, preparing for us eternal life and pouring the Holy Spirit into our hearts. As an ancient Eucharistic hymn of the *Didache* puts it, "As grain, once scattered on the hillsides, was in this broken bread made one, so from all lands your Church is gathered into your kingdom by your Son."

If, therefore, Holy Communion is such a sacrament of unity, it is logical that there has to be a united effort in the preparation for the celebration of First Communion. The family is sometimes called "the domestic church", a microcosm of the Church, where children come to know more about

and live out the Gospel in everyday life, recite prayers and learn the heart of Christianity: mutual love. The parish is the portion of the larger family of the Church of Christ that we come to know through our local parishes. Here children become familiar with a larger portion of the Church that revolves around communion in the Word of God, communion with our brothers and sisters and especially communion in the celebration of the Eucharist and the other sacraments that build up the whole people of God united in each diocese around the bishop. Priests in parishes and teachers in parish schools play a pivotal role in introducing children to this larger community of faith. The “domestic church”, the sponsors and the parish church community, comprising the parish school, work together in preparing children to enter into a new relationship with Jesus in the Eucharist who wants to unite us more deeply not only individually with God but also as a community with one another.

## GUIDELINES

The following is a series of guidelines offered to those who are involved in the organisation of the First Communion celebration. They are offered in order to facilitate cooperation between home, school and parish in preparing for the celebration and in order to emphasise the liturgical and sacramental aspects of the occasion. These guidelines may need to be adapted in order to facilitate local practice.

- Organise a meeting with parents/guardians, sponsors, teachers, parish personnel in order to plan for the celebration.
- You might consider holding an ‘Enrolment Ceremony’ in the Church for those children who will be celebrating First Communion and First Penance. This ceremony is usually celebrated during the first term of second class/primary four.
- Ensure that the children who intend receiving First Eucharist are baptised.
- It is a matter of pastoral and ecumenical sensitivity when children of parents of another Christian denomination wish to receive First Eucharist in the Catholic Church. Prior to proceeding with admission to First Eucharist it must be ascertained that the children are to become members of the Catholic Church. The decision to become a member of the Catholic Church must be recorded together with their Baptism in the parish register.
- Encourage parents/guardians, sponsors, teachers, parish personnel to engage with a parish-based communion programme as part of the preparation for the celebration.

- Encourage the school chaplain to visit the First Holy Communion class/es regularly. The preparation for First Eucharist begins in Junior Infants (Primary One).
- Ideally have the First Communion celebration at one of the Sunday Masses. If children have been participating in a parish-based communion programme that is focussed on the Sunday liturgy it would be more appropriate to have the First Communion celebration on Sunday rather than on Saturday.
- Allow the possibility of exploring if some or several of the Sunday Masses (including vigil Masses) during the month of May might be the occasion when First Communion is celebrated. In particular families might be encouraged to choose the Mass at which they normally worship.
- Remember that if a number of First Communion Masses are to be celebrated during the month of May then the liturgies will require extra organisation.
- Involve in the First Communion celebration members of the parish community who already exercise ministries, e.g. readers, the many forms of music ministry, ministry of welcome, ushers etc.
- Involve first communicants in the parish liturgical celebration – reciting the prayer of the faithful, preparing the altar, presenting the gifts of bread and wine, singing one of the songs from the school programme after communion etc.
- Involve elements of the school catechetical programme in the parish celebration – using the learned gestures while reciting the *Our Father*, having the parish choir sing some of the hymns/songs learned in school, etc.
- Become familiar with the liturgical directions for the celebration of First Communion which are available in the appendix of the *Alive-O4 Teacher's Book*.
- Pay special attention to the presentation of the gifts by firstly having the altar prepared, then the gifts of bread and wine brought forward and presented. Other gifts and symbols of school life and class activity should not be included here but are better presented at the beginning of Mass.
- Pay special attention to the reception of Holy Communion. Children should approach the altar in silence. To receive the host, the child places one hand under the other and slowly extends both cupped hands towards the priest. When the priest says 'The Body of Christ', the child replies 'Amen'. The priest places the host in the extended hand. The host is then slowly placed in the mouth. It

is important that the children be instructed to wait until the host is in the mouth before returning to their seats.

Alternatively, the host can be received directly on the tongue. In this case, ask the children to stand before the priest with their hands joined in prayer. When the priest says 'The Body of Christ', the child replies 'Amen', and then extends his/her tongue, onto which the priest places the host.

In situations where reception under both species is practised, children too may be invited to receive from the chalice. In this case, instruct the children to wait for the priest to offer the chalice with the words 'The Blood of Christ', to which they reply 'Amen'. Then, using both hands, they take the chalice, drink from it, and return it to the priest. When they are ready they return to their seats. Request that cameras should not be used at this moment in the faith life of the children.