

## THE CELEBRATION OF FIRST HOLY COMMUNION WITH CHILDREN

### *Preamble*

“Dear friends, we don’t ever thank the Lord enough for the gift he has given us in the Eucharist! It is a very great gift and that is why it is so important to go to Mass on Sunday. Go to Mass not just to pray, but to receive Communion, the bread that is the Body of Jesus Christ who saves us, forgives us, unites us to the Father. It is a beautiful thing to do! And we go to Mass every Sunday because that is the day of the resurrection of the Lord. That is why Sunday is so important to us. And in this Eucharist, we feel this belonging to the Church, to the People of God, to the Body of God, to Jesus Christ. We will never completely grasp the value and the richness of it. Let us ask him then that this Sacrament continue to keep his presence alive in the Church and to shape our community in charity and communion, according to the Father's heart. This is done throughout life but is begun on the day of our First Communion. It is important that children be prepared well for their First Communion and that every child receive it, because it is the first step of this intense belonging to Jesus Christ, after Baptism and Confirmation.

*(Pope Francis, General Audience, Wednesday, February 5, 2014)*

### *Necessary Requirements*

1. Follow the canons relative to the Eucharist. (Please reference the addendum, “Canon Law on The Most Holy Eucharist,” at the end of this document.)
2. A child must have attained the age and/or use of reason. A seven-year-old is presumed to have the use of reason. (Canon 97 §2, see addendum)
3. A valid baptism is a requirement for receiving the Eucharist. The parent/guardian must provide the candidate’s original baptism certificate. After photocopying it, the original should be returned to the parent/guardian. If the original baptism certificate cannot be located, and the candidate was baptized at your parish, check your baptismal records to verify the baptism. If the candidate was not baptized at your parish, have the parent/guardian contact the baptismal parish to request a new certificate. Once received, photocopy it, and give the original back to the parent/guardian for their records.
4. The administration of the Most Holy Eucharist to children requires that they have sufficient knowledge and careful preparation so that they understand the mystery of Christ according to their capacity and are able to receive the body of Christ with faith and devotion. (Canon 913 §1, see addendum)
  - A. Sufficient knowledge and careful preparation: Pastor’s discretion concerning quality and quantity of catechesis and formative experiences.
  - B. Mystery of Christ according to their capacity: They are children who can benefit from liturgical aids written for their age group.
  - C. Faith and devotion: Do they understand and believe in Jesus’ True Presence in the Eucharist?

5. The normal time for a child to be catechized for the reception of First Holy Communion is in the winter and spring seasons of second grade after having celebrated the sacrament of penance for the first time. The preferred time for the reception of First Holy Communion is during the Easter Season.

### ***Recommended Catechesis***

1. The pastor has discretion as to what catechetical materials are used for First Holy Communion catechesis. Texts and programs listed in the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' (USCCB) document "Conformity Listing of Catechetical Texts and Series" can be used but are not required. That listing can be found on the USCCB website.
2. Catechesis for First Holy Communion should be comprehensive. The diocese has available a suggested, but not required, curriculum for parish use upon request. Our curriculum can be modified to fit the needs of your children, but the core concepts of the sacrament should be discussed.
3. Parents/guardians are highly encouraged to participate in their child's First Communion preparation. The best and most fruitful catechesis for the reception of the Eucharist should involve the parents/guardians as much as possible. By participating in the catechetical programs offered by the parish, parents/guardians can grow in their own understanding and appreciation of the Eucharist and more readily guide their child into fuller participation in the life and worship of the Christian community. Canon law states, "It is primarily the duty of parents and those who take the place of parents, as well as the duty of pastors, to take care that children who have reached the use of reason are prepared properly and, after they have made sacramental confession, are refreshed with this divine food as soon as possible." (Canon 914, see addendum)
4. If possible, the child should be enrolled in a parish process of preparation for the reception of First Holy Communion in which children from the Catholic school, home schooling and the parish catechetical program are united and come together periodically for preparation. They should all participate in the communal dimensions (e.g., ritual, prayer services, etc.) and any other requirements determined by the parish.
5. Lifelong faith formation and conversion is expected to continue following a child's First Holy Communion. First Communicants should be encouraged to continue their participation in communal life by attending religious education classes and getting involved in parish activities and liturgies.

### ***Discernment of Readiness***

It is the responsibility of the parish pastor, in collaboration with the parents/guardians and the candidate, to establish that the candidate for First Holy Communion has sufficient knowledge of the sacrament, has gone through careful preparation, and is properly disposed to receive the sacrament. The pastor, or his delegate, should meet individually with each candidate during the formation process to determine his/her readiness.

## ***Celebration of the Sacrament***

1. Children in parish catechetical programs, Catholic schools, and home-schooled children should be integrated into each celebration of First Holy Communion. If possible, no group should have a private or separate celebration.
2. Sensitivity to language issues of those involved should be considered in the preparation of the celebration of the sacrament.

## ***Recording of the Sacrament***

The names of those children who celebrated First Holy Communion, the minister, place and date of their baptism, and place and date of the ceremony are to be recorded in the Communion Register of the parish where the sacrament took place. This information must also be sent to the parish of baptism. Please see the “Handbook on Sacramental Records and Reports for Parish Personnel” for more information.

## ***Special Considerations***

1. **Home Schooled Children** – The child’s pastor must see to it that proper catechetical instruction for the child is provided. The rights and responsibilities of the parent/guardian and the parish call for collaboration between the two. The same policies apply to children who are home schooled for religious education as are required for children in parish programs and Catholic schools. It is expected that home schooled candidates receiving Eucharistic catechesis in the home will participate in the other communal aspects of preparation at their parish (e.g., prayer services, special projects, etc.) that are prescribed for preparation for the sacrament.
2. **Children with Disabilities** – Special considerations and adaptations may need to be made for those children with disabilities. Please see the USCCB document “Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities, Revised Edition” for more information. Contact the Diocesan Pastoral Center should you need resource assistance.

## ***Unique Circumstances***

Every year most parishes are faced with the enrollment of children, Catholic and non-Catholic, catechized and uncatechized, who are not in sequence with the norms of our diocese and are seeking First Penance and First Holy Communion. Determination of where these students belong in a specific program/process should be made on an individual basis through an interview process that may include the family, pastor or sacramental minister, and the program coordinator.

## ***Frequently Asked Questions***

### **1. How long should the First Holy Communion preparation process be?**

It depends on whether the necessary requirements for reception of the sacrament have been met. If they have been met, reception of the Eucharist should take place as soon as possible. There is no set timeframe for this. However, it would be reasonable to expect participation in a parish process during the school year the child celebrates the sacrament.

- 2. If the candidate currently attends a Catholic school and is receiving First Holy Communion preparation at the school, do they need to be enrolled in parish preparation as well?**

If the candidate belongs to the same parish where the school is located, it is the pastor's discretion as to what preparation is necessary. There may be communal aspects that the parish is doing (e.g., prayer services, special projects, etc.) that are not done at the school that the candidate may benefit from participating in. If the candidate does not belong to the parish where the school is located, then the pastor where the family worships has discretion as to what preparation is necessary.

- 3. What if the candidate currently attends a Catholic school and is receiving First Holy Communion preparation at the school but belongs to another parish. Where should that child celebrate the sacrament?**

It is preferable that the candidate celebrates the sacrament at the parish where the family worships. Because this is a communal celebration, the sacrament should be celebrated with the faith community in which the family worships and is registered. If the family desires the candidate to celebrate his/her First Holy Communion at the parish where the school is located, the family should request the family's pastor to grant permission, in writing, to the school pastor allowing the candidate to celebrate the sacrament at his parish. This permission, if granted, does not excuse a candidate from participating in the communal First Holy Communion activities (e.g., retreats, service projects, etc.) at the candidate's parish. This permission is a courtesy between pastors, but it is not an impediment for receiving the sacrament.

- 4. How many times can someone receive the Eucharist in one day?**

Twice, but the second time must be within Mass per Canon 917 (see addendum). For example, you can receive the Eucharist at a Catholic wedding on Saturday morning and receive it once again at a Saturday evening Mass.

- 5. Do we have to receive the Eucharist every time we go to Mass?**

No. However, it is strongly suggested that you do so unless you are in the state of mortal sin or are nauseated.

- 6. Should a child celebrate the sacrament of penance before receiving his/her First Holy Communion?**

Yes, especially if it will be his/her first celebration of the sacrament of penance.

- 7. Should we refuse celebration of the sacrament if someone violates our dress code?**

No. How one is dressed is not an impediment to receiving the sacrament. You should encourage appropriate dress for this special day but it cannot be used as a reason to deny the sacrament.

- 8. Can we withhold the sacrament if a candidate, or parent, does not attend a certain number, or percentage, of catechetical classes?**

If the requirements of Canon 913 §1 (see addendum) are met, you cannot withhold the sacrament. Let Canon 913 §1 be your guide.

**9. The original baptism certificate for the candidate cannot be located and the parish where the candidate's baptism took place doesn't have a record of the baptism. What do I do next?**

If no record of the baptism can be found, seek a witness who can confirm that the baptism took place. Only one witness is necessary per Canons 875 and 876. Pictures taken at the baptism can be helpful as well. If procedural clarification is needed, contact our diocesan Tribunal and/or Chancellor's Office for assistance.

***Addendum: Canon Law on The Most Holy Eucharist***

**Canon 97 – §1.** A person who has completed the eighteenth year of age has reached majority; below this age, a person is a minor.

§2. A minor before the completion of the seventh year is called an infant and is considered not responsible for oneself (*non sui compos*). With the completion of the seventh year, however, a minor is presumed to have the use of reason.

**Canon 912 –** Any baptized person not prohibited by law can and must be admitted to holy communion.

**Canon 913 – §1.** The administration of the Most Holy Eucharist to children requires that they have sufficient knowledge and careful preparation so that they understand the mystery of Christ according to their capacity and are able to receive the body of Christ with faith and devotion.

§2. The Most Holy Eucharist, however, can be administered to children in danger of death if they can distinguish the body of Christ from ordinary food and receive communion reverently.

**Canon 914 –** It is primarily the duty of parents and those who take the place of parents, as well as the duty of pastors, to take care that children who have reached the use of reason are prepared properly and, after they have made sacramental confession, are refreshed with this divine food as soon as possible. It is for the pastor to exercise vigilance so that children who have not attained the use of reason or whom he judges are not sufficiently disposed do not approach holy communion.

**Canon 916 –** A person who is conscious of grave sin is not to celebrate Mass or receive the body of the Lord without previous 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 resolution of confessing as soon as possible.

**Canon 917 –** A person who has already received the Most Holy Eucharist can receive it a second time on the same day only within the eucharistic celebration in which the person participates, without prejudice to the prescript of can. 921, §2.

**Canon 919 – §1.** A person who is to receive the Most Holy Eucharist is to abstain for at least one hour before holy communion from any food and drink, except for only water and medicine.

§2. A priest who celebrates the Most Holy Eucharist two or three times on the same day can take something before the second or third celebration even if there is less than one hour between them.

§3. The elderly, the infirm, and those who care for them can receive the Most Holy Eucharist even if they have eaten something within the preceding hour.

**Canon 920 – §1.** After being initiated into the Most Holy Eucharist, each of the faithful is obliged to receive holy communion at least once a year.

§2. This precept must be fulfilled during the Easter season unless it is fulfilled for a just cause at another time during the year.

**(all canons related to the Eucharist: 897 – 958)**

***Other References on the Eucharist:***

- *Catechism of the Catholic Church: 1322 – 1419*
- *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*