

POLICIES FOR THE FIRST RECEPTION OF PENANCE AND EUCHARIST

In the light of Quam Singulari, The Catechism of the Catholic Church, The National Catechetical Directory: Sharing the Light of Faith (NCD), The General Directory for Catechesis and The Code of Canon Law, the following policies are for the parishes and schools in the Diocese of Harrisburg.

The normative process is to have the baptized child(ren) entered in a diocesan recognized program of parish catechesis for two years prior to the reception of First Eucharist.

Policy 1: The first reception of Penance will precede the first reception of Eucharist.

- a. “Children must go to the sacrament of Penance before receiving Holy Communion for the first time.” (*Catechism #1457, cf Canon 914*) This sequence is the norm. The Church asserts the right of the child who has reached the “use of reason” (*Canon 97.2*) to *avail* him/herself of the Sacrament of Penance before Eucharist. This right must be respected. (cf *NCD #122, 126*)
- b. In cases of persons with special needs the readiness for the first reception of Penance and Eucharist must be the decision of the Pastor in consultation with the parents, C/DRE and catechist.(cf *Canon #914, commentary; US Bishops Guide for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities #20,23*)

Policy 2: Since Penance and Eucharist are distinct sacraments, the catechetical preparation for the first reception of these sacraments must be given separately so as to maintain the distinct uniqueness of each sacrament.

- a. The catechesis for the first reception of Penance will be given prior to the catechesis for the first reception of Eucharist. "Both Catholic schools and parish programs of religious education must provide the catechetical instruction to students in preparation for reception of the Sacraments of First Penance and First Eucharist. (a)...The Catholic schools will provide the catechesis for the Sacraments during the regular school day within the Religion curriculum. (b) The parish religious education program will provide the catechesis for the students from the parish who attend public schools.” (*Diocesan Policy #6003 RE*)

For interparochial schools, the supporting parishes must meet to coordinate their parish sacramental schedules so that the catechesis for preparation to receive each sacrament is done in a timely manner.

- b. "Catechesis for First Communion is conducted separately from introductory catechesis for the Sacrament of Reconciliation, since each sacrament deserves its own concentrated preparation.” (*NCD #122*) **The minimum time to allow for the catechesis for Penance and Eucharist is two months prior to the first reception of each sacrament.** The catechesis for each sacrament can extend beyond the two-month period.
- c. The catechesis for Penance "must always respect the natural disposition, ability, age, and circumstances of individuals. It seeks, first, to make clear the relationship of the sacrament to the child's life; second, to help the child recognize moral good and evil, repent of wrongdoing, and turn for forgiveness to Christ and the Church; third, to encourage the child to see that, in this sacrament, faith is expressed by being forgiven and forgiving; fourth, to encourage the child to approach the sacrament freely and regularly.” (*NCD #126*) If a child has any fear or apprehension about First Penance an attempt must be made to resolve it. “Everyone needs this sacrament, for we are all sinners, not just those seriously estranged from God and the Church, and we all find here an opportunity to confront our sinfulness, our union with the healing, merciful Christ and His Church.” (*NCD #125* cf also *Catechism of the Catholic Church #1485-1498*)

- d. The catechesis for Eucharist "seeks to strengthen their awareness of the Father's love, of the call to participate in Christ's sacrifice, and of the gift of the Spirit. Children should be taught that the Holy Eucharist is the real body and blood of Christ, and what appears to be bread and wine are actually His living body." (NCD #122; cf also *Catechism of the Catholic Church* #1406-1419)
- e. A separate and distinct celebration for the reception of both sacraments must be observed.

Policy 3: Parents bear the primary responsibility for the Religious Education of their children, including their introduction to the sacraments, which they must discharge in a thoughtful and informed manner.

- a. "Parents are the primary educators in the faith. Together with them, especially in certain cultures, all members of the family play an active part in the education of the younger members. It is thus necessary to determine more concretely the sense in which the Christian family community is a *locus* of catechesis." (The General Directory for Catechesis #255)
- b. Parental involvement in the sacramental preparation of their children is of the greatest importance. "The Congregation is particularly pleased to note truly pastoral concern for proper preparation of the children.... and for the growing importance that the parents of the children be involved in and helped with the religious instruction of their children and especially the preparation for these important sacraments. It expressed hope that all local Bishops will continue and increase their attention to this important aspect of parental involvement in the religious education of their children." (*Letter from the Sacred Congregation of Clergy to the American Bishops on the matter of Confession and Communion*; cf also NCD #122, 126)
- c. The most important element in the preparation for the Sacrament of Penance is the experience of being forgiven in the home. Parents provide this experience so the child will understand the meaning of forgiveness. A similar experience of forgiveness, whenever possible, should be modeled in the parish religious education program and in the school. (cf. The General Directory for Catechesis #226)
- d. The parents' attitude toward and use of the Sacrament of Penance as a means of spiritual growth is a powerful incentive for the sacrament. If parents neglect to make proper use of the sacrament, the child's approach to the sacrament may be negatively affected.
- e. Parents have a right to the assistance and support from the parish leadership in meeting their responsibilities to their children. When parents decide to homeschool their children (*homeschool* denotes a family that assumes responsibility of teaching all academic subjects in the home or a family that uses public education but desires to do religious instruction and formation in the home.) it is expected that they will provide a regular, thorough catechesis and formation for their children. Though homeschooled children are expected to meet the same standards as other students, they are not required to attend the parish religious education classes. In preparation for the sacraments, however, the children must attend parish rehearsals, and be invited to attend retreats or other formation activities. Parents should attend the appropriate sacramental meetings that the parish schedules for adult formation and information.

The Pastor has the final responsibility to evaluate readiness for reception of a given sacrament (cf. *Quam Singulari*), and he should clearly state for all parish families how he will determine that readiness. In determining readiness, this process should not contain requirements that are more or less demanding than they are for other children. Parents who decide to homeschool need to review their educational materials and formational program with their Pastor.

While parents are the primary educators of their children, their interpretation of doctrine can never supercede the legitimate teaching authority of the Pastors of the Church.

Policy 4: The parish must provide programs for the catechesis of parents so as to enable them to fulfill their responsibilities as religious educators of their children.

- a. The parish, is without doubt, the most important *locus* in which the Christian community is formed and expressed. This is called to be a fraternal and welcoming family where Christians become aware of being the people of God. (cf. The General Directory for Catechesis #257)
- b. Parishes have been directed to put into effect parent programs that directly involve parents in the formal preparation of their children for the reception of the sacraments. Such programs are to be continued and perfected. Parishes where parents have not been directly involved in the sacramental preparation of their children are to initiate a parent program. These programs have a two-fold purpose: 1) to supplement and update the parents' understanding of the sacrament; 2) to provide parents with the practical tools to help their children understand the sacrament.
- c. The parish catechetical programs for parents are to focus on the sacraments of Penance and Eucharist. These programs are to strive to increase the adults' understanding and appreciation of these sacraments. The benefits of intergenerational catechetical meetings adults on one level, children and adolescents at their own level - should be considered and developed. Such meetings will provide parents with an understanding of their need to model forgiveness within the family.
- d. Parents have a right to expect assistance from the parish which will enable them to meet their responsibilities as the primary religious educators of their children. (*NCD #60d, 224*)
- e. The parish may provide for the first reception of Penance to be celebrated within the context of a Penance service. In this event, while examination of conscience and expression of sorrow may be done as a group, confession of sin is to be made privately to the priest and absolution is to be given individually to each penitent. (cf *NCD #124; Canon #960; Catechism #1484*)
- f. A communal celebration is the customary manner in which both sacraments are initially received. "The Sacraments are to be celebrated jointly for all students who attend the Catholic school and the parish program of religious education. The pastor, the principal, and the C/DRE are to collaborate on establishing joint sessions for parents and joint formational activities (other than instructional time) for the students." (Diocesan Policy #6003 RE)

These policies touch only on FIRST PENANCE and FIRST EUCHARIST. They indicate a deep and loving concern for the child. They presume that all understand that the catechesis on these sacraments only BEGINS with the first reception. This is only the first phase of a catechesis that must continue into adulthood to insure that a person's understanding and use of the Sacraments of Penance and Eucharist matures as the person matures.

The Department for Religious Education and the Office for Adult Religious Education are prepared to give personal assistance in recommending materials and developing programs to train parents and to assist pastors in following these directives. Other approved parent/teacher programs may be obtained through those listed in the bibliography.

Policy

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NCD/Bishop of Harrisburg