



October 1, 2018 – *Memorial of St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus, Patroness of the Diocese of Pueblo*

Dear Pastor and all responsible for the formation of candidates for sacraments,

Included with this letter, please find the provisional general guidelines for readiness for the reception of the sacraments of Baptism of Children, First Holy Communion, and Confirmation in the Diocese of Pueblo. First Reconciliation preparation should normally be included in preparation for First Holy Communion. These guidelines are available for use immediately by those parishes which wish to implement them. The finalized guidelines will become normative for the Diocese of Pueblo beginning in July, 2019.

You will note that the focus of these guidelines is not just on the outward fulfillment of requirements but, more importantly, on the inward disposition to receive the sacraments. As channels of sanctifying grace, the sacraments are one of the most important avenues through which we live out our relationship with Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Receiving the sacraments without the proper disposition limits the extent to which we can experience the life-giving love and mercy of Jesus and renders the Christian life flat, insipid, and barren. Instead, let us insist on a vibrant life, an abundant life, for those we serve.

These guidelines are not meant to be exhaustive, rather they are meant to mark out the minimum indications of readiness for reception of the sacraments. If a pastor determines that other indications of readiness are fitting for his parish, those may be added as deemed necessary. An example of such a possible addition would be sessions for parents of children receiving First Confession or First Communion. In addition to such indications of readiness, it would also be fitting, appropriate, and desirable for pastors to have in place, and even explicitly delineated, expectations of suitable dress for those receiving sacraments.

Pastoral Note on Baptism of Children

While the emphasis of the guidelines for the sacraments of First Reconciliation, First Communion, and Confirmation focus especially on the presence of the proper disposition to receive the sacraments, the standard for Baptism of Children is much lower. As long as the canonical requirements are met for validity and liceity, the preference in the case of Baptism is to err on the side of Baptism. The Church asks that “there be a founded hope that the infant will be brought up in the Catholic religion” (can. 868 §1 2°). So, to clarify, only if the hope is “altogether lacking” should Baptism be delayed, and, even then, it is never denied; it is just delayed until there is a hope of the child being raised Catholic. As a way of increasing the hope that they child will be raised Catholic, the pastor might propose as godparent(s) someone he trusts will effectively assist the parents in raising the child Catholic.

Pastoral Note on Discernment Interviews for Sacraments

As is noted in the canons quoted in the attached guidelines, it is the pastor’s responsibility to ensure the readiness of candidates for Baptism, First Reconciliation, First Communion, and Confirmation. Discernment interviews prior to the reception of sacraments are one way of ensuring such readiness. They also provide an opportunity to build trust, to build relationships, and to call the candidate or parents

to a deeper relationship with Jesus. Recognizing that there are some parishes where the combined total number of candidates for these sacraments each year is large, it is understandable that a pastor of such a parish might delegate the responsibility for some of the discernment interviews to someone who is qualified, trusted, and trained to conduct such interviews. The preferred order of priority for the sacraments for which the pastor conducts the discernment interviews himself is first, Confirmation; second, First Reconciliation and First Communion; and third, Baptism of Children. As a practical matter, in normal circumstances, all discernment interviews should be completed at least one month prior to the anticipated possible date of reception of one of these sacraments to ensure that there is time for any necessary follow-up interviews or to postpone the reception of the sacrament in cases where the candidate is not ready to receive the sacrament.

Pastoral Note on Confirmation

There is no mandated age for receiving the sacrament of Confirmation in the Diocese of Pueblo beyond what is contained in the Code of Canon Law. As stated in the Code of Canon Law, the candidate for Confirmation must be at least the age of discretion (generally 7 years of age). Beyond that, if the candidate, the parents of a candidate (if the candidate is under 14 years of age), and the pastor agree that the candidate has been suitably instructed, is properly disposed, and is able to renew the baptismal promises and take up the life of discipleship to which the candidate is called by those promises, then the candidate may receive the sacrament of Confirmation. As this depends upon the readiness of the candidate, it is envisioned and desired that there be a wide range in ages of those confirmed. If a parish has sound reasons for focusing on a particular age group (e.g. there is already an effective program in place for the high school students that is bearing fruit), then they should feel free to continue maximizing that opportunity for forming disciples. This new development simply opens the doors to those families that are more engaged, taking ownership of their responsibility as “first teachers of their children in the faith,” and whose sons or daughters are showing readiness at a younger age, eager for the Sacrament sooner rather than later. In such cases, the candidates and their parents would not need to wait or ask special permission to begin preparation for the sacrament of Confirmation, following the enclosed guidelines and in collaboration with the parish staff.

Thank you for your devotion to Our Lord, for your service to His people, and for your dedication to the expansion of His Kingdom. If you have any questions about these guidelines or about the implementation of these guidelines, please contact Seth Wright, Director of Missionary Discipleship for the diocese, swright@dioceseofpueblo.org or (719) 544-9861, ext. 1140.

Yours in Christ,


Rev. Matthew Wertin, Chancellor


Rev. Michael Chrisman, Director of Worship


Seth Wright, Director of Missionary Discipleship

THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM FOR CHILDREN IN THE DIOCESE OF PUEBLO

I, _____, understand that the following indications are helpful in establishing that there is a "founded hope" that my child will be raised in the Catholic Faith. Signed: _____ Date: _____

1. Valid Birth Certificate
2. Consistent Mass attendance on Sundays & Holy Days
3. Regular Confession (*if have made First Confession*)
4. Daily Prayer
5. Documentation of godparent(s) sacraments and suitability
6. **Completed Formation for parents and godparents**

Recommended: Reborn (Augustine Institute/Lighthouse Catholic Media/formed.org); Belonging (Ascension Press)

7. **Petition in the parent's own writing or wording***

- a.) Demonstrating an understanding of the Sacrament (*i.e. based on formation content*)
- b.) Expressing desire for their child to receive the Sacrament
- c.) Committing to continue living the Catholic Faith
- d.) Committing to raising the child to have a relationship to Jesus
- e.) Committing to ensuring their child receives the sacraments of Confirmation, First Reconciliation, First Communion and is prepared to discern their vocation
- f.) Committing to ensuring their child receives proper ongoing catechesis and formation
- h.) Laying out a Plan of Life (for ongoing Sunday Mass, daily prayer, and regular confession)

8. **Discernment Interview with Pastor or Pastor's delegate****

*This could well be done as part of a reflection exercise during Baptism Formation or done verbally in the context of the discernment interview (8).

** This discernment interview will focus on establishing that there is a founded hope that the child will be brought up in the Catholic religion. This could be accomplished in part by the parents telling the story of their relationship with Jesus up to this point in their life.

Basis for saying there is a founded hope that the child will be raised in the Catholic Faith (mark *one* of the following):

1. The presence of 1-8 above. (preferred)
2. The presence of numbers _____ above plus (other reason) _____.
3. Other (please describe): _____

We, the undersigned, acknowledge that there is a founded hope that the child will be raised in the Catholic Faith:

Pastor (and delegate): _____

Parent(s): _____

Godparent(s): _____

The ceremony will take place in _____ (church) on _____ (date) at _____ (time).

The Sacrament has been properly recorded.

Code of Canon Law and Catechism of the Catholic Church

Parents are obliged to see to it that infants are baptized within the first weeks after birth; as soon as possible after the birth or even before it parents are to go to the pastor to request the sacrament for their child and to be properly prepared for it. An infant in danger of death is to be baptized without any delay. For the licit baptism of an infant it is necessary that: the parents or at least one of them or the person who lawfully takes their place gives consent; there be a **founded hope** that the infant will be brought up in the Catholic religion; if such a hope is altogether lacking, the baptism is to be put off according to the prescriptions of particular law and the parents are to be informed of the reason. (emphasis added, *Canons 867-868; see also 849-878*)

Where infant Baptism has become the form in which this sacrament is usually celebrated, it has become a single act encapsulating the preparatory stages of Christian initiation in a very abridged way. By its very nature infant Baptism requires a *post-baptismal catechumenate*. Not only is there a need for instruction after Baptism, but also for the necessary flowering of baptismal grace in personal growth. The Church and the parents would deny a child the priceless grace of becoming a child of God were they not to confer Baptism shortly after birth. Christian parents will recognize that this practice also accords with their role as nurturers of the life that God has entrusted to them. (*Catechism 1231, 1250, 1251; see also 1213-1284*)

THE SACRAMENT OF FIRST COMMUNION IN THE DIOCESE OF PUEBLO

For the administration of the Most Holy Eucharist to children, it is required that they have sufficient knowledge and careful preparation so as to understand the mystery of Christ according to their capacity, and can receive the Body of the Lord with faith and devotion. The Most Holy Eucharist may be given to children who are in danger of death, however, if they are able to distinguish the Body of Christ from ordinary food and to receive Communion reverently. It is the responsibility, in the first place, of parents and those who take the place of parents as well as of the pastor to see that children who have reached the use of reason are correctly prepared and are nourished by the divine food as early as possible, preceded by sacramental confession; it is also for the pastor to be vigilant lest any children come to the Holy Banquet who have not reached the use of reason or whom he judges are not sufficiently disposed. (*Canons 913-914; see also 897-958, 959-991 and Catechism 1322-1419, 1422-1498*)

I, _____, understand that the following indications are necessary to show that my child is ready to receive the Sacrament of First Communion.

Signed: _____ Date: _____

1. **Valid Baptism Certificate**

2. Consistent Mass attendance on Sundays & Holy Days

3. Daily Prayer

4. **Completed Formation**

Recommended: Blessed (Dynamic Catholic); Catechesis of the Good Shepherd; A Family of Faith (Sophia Institute for Teachers)

(N.B. in a group setting is preferred, but not mandatory*)

5. **First Reconciliation** occurs once:**

a.) The candidate is instructed concerning and understands sin and the 4 components (contrition, confession, satisfaction, and absolution, *see CCC 1448, 1491*) of the sacrament of Reconciliation

b.) The candidate is instructed in a practical manner on how to go to confession, using any guides that would be helpful

c.) And it is reinforced that the candidate should begin receiving the sacrament regularly after receiving First Reconciliation.

6. **Discernment Interview with Pastor or a trained and qualified delegate*****

7. Commitment by parents/guardians to bring the candidate to Mass on Sundays and Holy Days and to confession regularly.****

* If formation is not completed in a group setting, the parent/guardian will demonstrate what has been covered to the satisfaction of the pastor.

** Note that the candidate for First Communion is to make his/her First Reconciliation *before* receiving First Communion.

*** This discernment interview will focus on the candidate's lived relationship with Jesus, understanding of the Real Presence of Jesus in the Holy Eucharist, and disposition to receive the sacrament. This could be accomplished in part by the candidate telling the story of his/her relationship with Jesus up to this point in his/her life.

**** By signing below, the parent/guardian is making this commitment.

We, the undersigned, acknowledge the above indications to be present and accounted for:

Pastor: _____ [Catechist (if applicable): _____]

Parent: _____ Parent: _____

The ceremony will take place in _____ (church) on _____ (date) at _____ (time).

The Sacrament has been properly recorded and notification sent to the parish of Baptism.

THE SACRAMENT OF CONFIRMATION IN THE DIOCESE OF PUEBLO

To receive confirmation licitly outside the danger of death requires that a person who has the use of reason be suitably instructed, properly disposed, and able to renew the baptismal promises. Parents and pastors of souls, especially pastors of parishes, are to take care that the faithful are properly instructed to receive the sacrament and come to it at the appropriate time. The sacrament of confirmation is to be conferred on the faithful at about the age of discretion unless the conference of bishops has determined another age, or there is danger of death, or in the judgment of the minister a grave cause suggests otherwise. (*Canons 889-890; see also 879-896*)

Preparation for Confirmation should aim at leading the Christian toward a more intimate union with Christ and a more lively familiarity with the Holy Spirit - his actions, his gifts, and his biddings - in order to be more capable of assuming the apostolic responsibilities of Christian life. To this end catechesis for Confirmation should strive to awaken a sense of belonging to the Church of Jesus Christ, the universal Church as well as the parish community. The latter bears special responsibility for the preparation of confirmands. (*Catechism 1309; see also 1285-1321*)

I, _____, understand that the following indications are necessary to show I am ready to receive the Sacrament of Confirmation. Signed: _____ Date: _____

- 1. **Valid Baptism Certificate**
- 2. Consistent Mass attendance on Sundays & Holy Days
- 3. Regular Confession (*or at least once before receiving the Sacrament*)
- 4. Daily Prayer
- 5. Retreat Experience
- 6. **Completed Formation**
Recommended: Chosen (Ascension Press); Decision Point (Dynamic Catholic); YDisciple Confirmation (formed.org)
(N.B. in a group setting is preferred, but not mandatory*)
- 7. **Letter of Petition in the candidate's own writing**
 - a.) Demonstrating an understanding of the Sacrament (*i.e. based on formation content*)
 - b.) Expressing desire and intent to receive the Sacrament
 - c.) Committing to continue living the Catholic Faith
 - d.) Understanding of spiritual gifts, vocational discernment, & charitable outreach
 - e.) The name of the saint chosen
 - f.) The name(s) of the qualified sponsor
 - g.) The names of other people who will help support the candidate in their journey
 - h.) A Plan of Life (for ongoing Sunday Mass, daily prayer, and regular confession)
- 8. **Discernment Interview with Pastor and Sponsor****

* If formation is not completed in a group setting, the candidate will provide one paragraph on each section of the formation program that is used. This paragraph should demonstrate an understanding of the material covered and an indication of how it applies in living a life of discipleship.

** This discernment interview will focus on the candidate's lived relationship with Jesus and disposition to receive the sacrament. This could be accomplished in the most part by the candidate telling the story of his/her relationship with Jesus up to this point in his/her life.

We, the undersigned, acknowledge the above indications to be present and accounted for:

Pastor: _____ [Catechist (*if applicable*): _____]

Parent(s): _____ Sponsor(s): _____

The ceremony will take place in _____ (*church*) on _____ (*date*) at _____ (*time*).

The Sacrament has been properly recorded and notification sent to the parish of Baptism.

SACRAMENTAL PREPARATION GUIDELINES

FAQs

GENERAL QUESTIONS

1) DO I HAVE TO IMPLEMENT THESE GUIDELINES IMMEDIATELY?

No. These guidelines are available for use immediately, and you are welcome to make use of them, but they are not mandatory for use now.

2) WHEN DO THESE BECOME THE GUIDELINES THAT WE ARE ALL FOLLOWING IN THE DIOCESE?

These guidelines will become normative for the Diocese of Pueblo in July, 2019. At that time, all parishes and missions within the diocese will be using these guidelines. Once they become normative, any customizations in individual or local cases will need to be approved by the Office of Missionary Discipleship.

3) WHY IS THE BISHOP'S SIGNATURE NOT ON THESE GUIDELINES?

As these guidelines are not in force and normative yet, the bishop has not signed this version. The bishop's signature will be on the version that is officially promulgated when they become normative in July, 2019. The time between now and then will allow everyone to help us work out any glitches or unforeseen issues that need to be addressed or incorporated into the final version.

4) WHAT MAKES THESE GUIDELINES DIFFERENT FROM THE ONES THAT WERE PREVIOUSLY IN EFFECT?

The focus of these guidelines is on the readiness of the candidate to receive the sacrament, within the bounds of what is allowed by canon law. Such readiness includes not just knowing certain things or having been through a program but being properly disposed to receive the graces of the sacrament and to bear fruit. Such a disposition is rooted in a relationship with God, not in having checked off certain boxes on a form. These guidelines are not laying out a series of steps to be taken but are identifying a set of signs that point to the readiness of the candidate to receive the sacrament. The process of going through these lists is not one of checking off boxes but one of discernment of readiness to receive the sacrament that is collaboratively conducted by the candidate, the pastor, and the parents.

5) WHAT DO I NEED TO KEEP IN MIND AS I IMPLEMENT THESE GUIDELINES?

The focus is discipleship – What is the candidate's relationship with God like? How has he/she grown in that relationship? Is he/she committed to a life in Christ? How do catechesis and other elements of our preparation process support and encourage discipleship?

The standard is readiness – Is the candidate ready to receive the sacrament with the proper disposition? If not, how can I help him/her to become ready? In what way does the candidate still need to grow in his/her relationship with God before he/she is ready? What questions does the candidate need answered? What more does the candidate need to know, understand, or experience?

The process is one of growth and discernment – Preparing for the sacrament is not merely about completing a specific program. Any sacramental preparation program’s job is to be one aid among many for the growth of individual candidates in their relationship with God and in their readiness to receive the sacrament for which they are preparing with the proper disposition. As such, we cannot depend upon the program to do all of the work of preparing the candidate for the sacrament, and we cannot depend on the program to do any of the work of discerning readiness for reception of the sacrament. There are many good programs that do a good job at *catechesis*, and that is very important, is a big help to religious educators, and is a great thing to take advantage of. Catechesis, though, is just one element of preparation for the sacraments and is just one part of a relationship with Jesus. It is up to the pastor (and those he has designated to help him) to provide guidance in growth in this relationship and to help the candidate to discern readiness for the sacraments.

6) *LOOKING AT THESE GUIDELINES AND THE ANSWERS HERE, AREN'T WE BECOMING THE JUDGE OF WHO IS WORTHY TO RECEIVE SACRAMENTS AND WHO IS NOT?*

We are not judging worthiness. We are not even judging readiness. We are engaging in a process of discernment in conjunction with the candidate and the parents in which it becomes apparent through prayer, discussion, and time that the candidate is ready to receive the sacrament or still needs this or that in order to be ready. The pastor and religious educator have important roles to play in facilitating and drawing out the considerations necessary in this type of discernment, but actual judgments of readiness should be based upon the actual relationship of the candidate with Jesus and should ultimately come from within that relationship. The pastor and religious educator function as guides in this process of discernment.

7) *AREN'T A LOT OF PARENTS OR CANDIDATES GOING TO SEE THIS, THINK IT IS TOO MUCH, AND TURN AWAY FROM RECEIVING THE SACRAMENTS?*

It is possible that parents or candidates will think it is too much and turn away. We can attempt to alleviate these concerns by the way we present preparation for the sacraments. If the parents and candidates are allowed to see that they are valued for themselves, that they are wanted in the parish and in the sacrament preparation process, and that the sacrament preparation process and the sacraments offer something valuable to them, they are more likely to be willing and even eager to enter into the process.

8) *DO WE HAVE TO USE ONE OF THE PROGRAMS ON THE RECOMMENDED LIST FOR EACH SACRAMENT?*

No. The programs that are listed are good programs that might be useful in preparing for the sacraments. It is recommended that one of these programs is used. Other programs may be used as long as they are faithful to the Magisterium of the Church and as long as all necessary catechesis occurs either through the program that is used or through supplemental catechesis of some sort. A list of programs that have been found to be in conformity with the teaching of the Catholic Church may be found at <http://www.usccb.org/about/evangelization-and-catechesis/subcommittee-on-catechism/upload/Current-Conformity-List.pdf>.

9) *WHO DO I CONTACT TO ASK MORE QUESTIONS ABOUT THESE GUIDELINES AND THEIR IMPLEMENTATION?*

You can contact Seth Wright, Director of Missionary Discipleship, with your questions. He would be happy to speak with you over the phone, answer your email, or visit your parish to talk with you about

your questions, concerns, and possible ways to explain and implement these guidelines. You may contact Seth by phone at (719) 544-9861 ext. 1140, or by email at swright@dioceseofpueblo.org.

INFANT BAPTISM QUESTIONS

1) *TO CHILDREN OF WHAT AGES DOES THIS APPLY?*

This applies to children under seven (7) years of age. Children seven and older who need Baptism should be enrolled in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults adapted for Children.

2) *WHY SUCH A LONG LIST OF REQUIREMENTS? ISN'T THIS TOO BURDENSOME? WHY CAN'T PEOPLE JUST BRING THEIR CHILDREN AND HAVE THEM BAPTIZED?*

Children, under age 7, are Baptized based on the Faith of their parents and the “founded hope” that they will be brought up as Catholics and aided into developing and growing in the faith that is imparted to them in Baptism. When the characteristics listed here are present, that would indicate a well-founded hope that this growth of life in the Faith would be likely to occur. Absence of these elements would lessen the foundation of that hope. The intent is not to burden parents or impede them from having their children Baptized. Rather, these elements are meant to highlight what it means to live one’s life in a living and growing relationship with Jesus in the midst of the Church. If there are other reasons to say that there is a founded hope that the child will be brought up in the Catholic religion, there is a place on the form to note that.

FIRST RECONCILIATION/FIRST COMMUNION QUESTIONS

1) *WHEN DOES FIRST RECONCILIATION OCCUR, BEFORE OR AFTER FIRST COMMUNION?*

As noted in canon 914 of the Code of Canon Law, First Reconciliation occurs *before* First Communion. If there is too great a time between First Reconciliation and First Communion or if it is needed in individual cases, the candidate for First Communion should receive the sacrament of Reconciliation again before receiving First Communion.

CONFIRMATION QUESTIONS

1) *IF A CHILD IS PREPARED TO RECEIVE CONFIRMATION AT AN AGE THAT IS DIFFERENT FROM MOST OF THOSE RECEIVING THE SACRAMENT IN HIS/HER PARISH, DOES THAT CHILD RECEIVE THE SACRAMENT AT THE SAME TIME AS EVERYONE ELSE?*

The ordinary minister of Confirmation is the bishop. If at all possible, the faithful should receive the sacrament from the bishop. Therefore, unless there are extraordinary circumstances in an individual case,

all those receiving Confirmation at a parish should receive the sacrament from the bishop during his regularly scheduled visit to the parish for that purpose. So, yes, the child in this question would receive the sacrament at the same time as everyone else.

2) *CAN THE PASTOR ADD REQUIREMENTS SUCH AS SERVICE PROJECTS?*

Yes, the pastor can add additional requirements as he sees the need for them. Such additions can serve to round out the preparation process and to introduce the candidate to ways of living out the sacrament. In this way, these additions can be very valuable to the process and to providing the candidate with a greater appreciation of a life of discipleship. Such additions should be adaptable, though, to different age groups or situations for those who are preparing for the sacrament outside of the normal parish process. Such additional requirements should not be used as a way of discouraging or excluding from the reception of the sacrament those whose parents choose to prepare them for the sacrament in accord with these guidelines and in accord with canon law. When service projects are a part of local requirements and the students already have service projects required by their school, then there should be a collaboration/combination of the efforts, so as to not unduly burden the young people.

3) *SINCE THERE IS NO MANDATORY AGE FOR CONFIRMATION, CAN WE STILL HAVE A CONFIRMATION PREPARATION PROCESS TARGETED AT A SPECIFIC AGE GROUP? IS THERE ANY SPECIFIC AGE GROUP THAT SHOULD BE?*

It would still be fine to have a Confirmation preparation process targeted at a specific age group, and that would be the normal way in which candidates are prepared for Confirmation in a parish. What age group is targeted could vary from parish to parish, and each parish is able to determine which age group they want to focus on based on the local situation. If there is a normal age for preparation for Confirmation in a parish, individual families retain the option of presenting children at a different age, if they are able to prove readiness according to the guidelines. In such cases they have the right to request the Sacrament according to canon law, and should be admitted; if need be, after consultation with the Office of Missionary Discipleship.

4) *WHAT IF A LARGE AMOUNT OF OUR PARISHIONERS DECIDE TO PREPARE THEIR CHILD FOR CONFIRMATION AT AN EARLIER AGE AND OUR CONFIRMATION PROGRAM SUFFERS FROM IT?*

If that were to happen, it would probably be a sign that you have a large number of parishioners who are engaged with their Faith and are taking the education of their children in the Faith, their role as primary educators, and the importance of the sacraments seriously – just as they agreed to do at the Baptism of their child. If those things are the case, you are doing a great job creating an environment where people can truly become disciples of Christ. Congratulations! Now, it is a matter of adapting your programs to match what the Holy Spirit is doing and the needs of your parish.

5) *WHO SHOULD WE CONTACT WITH QUESTIONS ABOUT THE RITES OR CEREMONIES?*

Any issues, questions, and/or concerns regarding the Rites/Ceremonies/Etc. themselves - of the actual administering of the Sacraments – should be addressed to the Office of Worship. Rev. Michael Chrisman is the Director of Worship. He may be reached at (719) 544-9861 ext. 1115 or mchrisman@dioceseofpueblo.org.

I'm including the attached article because I think it speaks to something very important as we implement the new guidelines for discerning readiness to receive the sacraments. Yes, we want candidates for the sacraments to know their Faith and to be properly disposed to experience the fruit of the sacraments in their lives, but we want these things because we care about them, because we know that they are loved by God and that He wants to do great things in their lives. We want them to experience the fullness of what the sacraments have to offer. I think the attached article can shed some light on how that can be lived out in our interactions with those who approach us for the sacraments. Enjoy!

Seth

Sacramental Formation - Moving From Forms and Classes to Relationship and Conversion

-
- [Blog](#)



The email she sent me was pretty blunt. A woman wanted to ask some questions about baptism, so she called her local parish. The parish worker who answered the phone was blunt and not very nice - NO! You can't have your child baptized without being registered at the parish. There was no way around it. The woman was distraught. Her family had baptized children in the Catholic Church for generations. It was something they always did and wanted to talk about it with me.

Why is it so hard?

Why all the hoops to jump through?

Why don't they understand me?

If you are like me a hundred problems start to creep in during these kinds of situations. Parishes, priests, Catholic lay staff - none are supposed to be just Sacramental assembly lines, where we start with the raw material in order to create "good Catholics" which are spit out at the end - but we can certainly feel that way. So many people to get prepared for baptisms, weddings, Confirmation, etc. So little time and people to help us. We get stretched thin, as staff, and then fall back on the classes, videos, etc. that never seem to change anything. Stuck in a cycle which maintains the status quo, we don't know what to do.

Furthermore, we can't just give out the Sacraments incognito or without hope that there is some kind of living faith that will be carried out. So, what are we supposed to do with all of this? How can we change things?

Well, I believe there is a lot we can do and I hope to make a few practical suggestions that can help us shift from seeing Sacramental formation as forms and classes into relationships and conversions. Of course, I can't answer all the issues in one blog post. But, I do hope this can give you a starting point to launch into something better.

We all need to remind ourselves of this - most folks who are coming to the Church to receive a Sacrament (or for a funeral, pastoral care, etc) will be doing so during big events in their lives - births, marriages, deaths, etc. So, we need to honor this fact - these moments are **REALLY BIG DEALS!** We need to be with them to celebrate, mourn, and journey with them. This means we must start with relationship. Yet, as with any relationship, we need to build trust and the first step of trust is making a good first impression. (Yes, that means having a good website - with language that isn't too churchy - but I won't get into that here.) What I am aiming at is hospitality. Radical hospitality is the first step.

First things first.

To imagine what it looks like - put yourself in the women's shoes at the beginning of this post. I imagine the phone call to have gone something like this:

Parish Worker - "St. Meany's, how can I direct your call?"

Caller - "Well, I am not sure. I need to talk to someone about getting my daughter baptized."

PW - "I can help you with that."

C - "Wonderful. Well, can you tell me what I need to do to schedule a baptism?"

PW - "First of all, we don't schedule them for individual families, but do them every 2nd Saturday of the month. But, before you are able to schedule a baptism, you will have to fulfill all of the requirements first. Are you a registered parishioner?"

C - "Um. No. Is that a problem?"

PW - "Well, we require that anyone who has their child baptized is a registered parishioner and is on our mailing list for donation envelopes. You will also need to attend

a class, along with the Godparents, fill out a number of forms, and do XYZ too.”

C - “.....”

Not exactly hospitable, is it? Well, it isn't abnormal that the first conversation goes like this. Now, **there isn't anything wrong with having requirements** for folks to have to fulfill before getting a child baptized, before getting married, etc. The Church takes the Sacraments seriously and so should we. So, **this post isn't so much about changing the rules as it is changing our behavior and attitude.**

How could this call gone better? Well, here is a sample of what could have been:

Parish Worker - “St. Meany's, how can I direct your call?”

Caller - “Well, I am not sure. I need to talk to someone about getting my daughter baptized.”

PW - “That is great news! I would love to be able to help you with that.”

C - “Wonderful. Well, can you tell me what I need to do to schedule a baptism?”

PW - “Yes I can, but before we get into the details, can I have your name?”

C - “Sure. My name is Mary Jones”

PW - “Hi Mary. My name is Joseph. I would love to answer questions you might have about our process of baptism, but we here at St. Meany's believe that nobody should go through such important event, as baptism is, alone. So we are overjoyed at being able to help you through this process. The first thing we always do is have you schedule an appointment (which will be whenever is convenient for you) to sit down with one of our baptism team members, to walk you through the process, help answer your questions, and be your guide during this time. But, you can always ask me a preliminary questions now too.”

You can finish the rest for yourself. Notice the difference. While the first negative example is focused on WHAT needs to be done, the second is focussed on WHO is going through the process. It was personal.

What actually happens is that the attitude and behavior have changed from rules / process toward hospitality / evangelization. Thus, the person is not just another number being rushed through the Sacramental factory.

NOTE - Many ancient societies had obligations of what hospitality was supposed to look like. The host, was to provide for the guest, even when a stranger. This idea of what

hospitality was like, was important in Jewish culture and early Christian culture. We need to regain this idea that we are obligated, as Christ-followers, to be hospitable to those who come to us in need...especially those in need of grace!

Second things second.

What do we do next. Well, there are many different paths that we could go down, but I believe all of them need to have a personalized accompaniment as an integral part of them. This might look like having a well-formed parishioner (who is also a Missionary Disciple), walk with each person through the process. Think of this person as a Sacramental Sherpa. Someone who helps the others find the way and carry their burdens. We need not have staff who have to do everything. The staff at the parish could do the initial meeting, matching with host, coordination of the program, training of hosts, etc. This would mean a lot of work to get it up and running, but in the long run, it multiplies the staff member to be able to do less day-to-day work and gets more parishioners to take ownership of the process. It also helps those going through the process to have access to individualized help.

Some of the questions parish staff might have are:

-How and where do I start with such a shift in how we operate?

-What are the steps that I need to do to work in such a manner?

Let me try and answer these questions.

How and where do I start with such a shift in how we operate?

-Can you identify folks who are missionary disciples who might be willing and able to help with such a process? If not, then you will have to start forming them yourself, through an intentional process of evangelization and maturation process of accompaniment.

If you can name some missionary disciples, then I would gather them together and pitch a vision to them about how this is a good opportunity to evangelize and change the culture in the parish.

What are the steps that I need to do to work in such a manner?

-Draw up a plan. Know what you will do and what others will do. Set up a timeline for

when things need to happen, who is doing them, and exactly what needs to get done. This includes, but isn't limited to, these things:

- Finding others to help.
- Knowing what is required by the diocese, canon law, catechetical documents, etc.
- Training those will be accompanying others. The best way to do this is to accompany them yourself, so they can see a model of accompaniment lived out.
- Updating all documents that talk about the process.

Remember, your goal should be conversion of hearts, not just getting folks through the process and feeling good about it all. So, train folks on practical evangelization skills, including giving their testimony, preaching the kerygma and inviting a response, listening, asking questions, assessing where someone is in the thresholds of conversion and stages of discipleship, and knowing how to respond to what they need individually.

Go and make disciples sometimes means you don't have to go anywhere to find folks who need to be evangelized, they will come to you. Don't waste the opportunity!

If you want to know more about these topics, I encourage you to read the following:

- [16 Tips To Improving Your Parish Hospitality](#)
- [The Broken Model of Behave -> Believe -> Belong](#)
- [Pathway Of Discipleship - A Model To Help Guide You & Others](#)
- [What Discipleship Relationships Look Like & Why Catholics Aren't Doing It Enough](#)
- [When You Are Too Busy In Ministry To Be Effective](#)
- [There Are No Magic Bullets That Change A Parish](#)
- [12 Reasons for Ministry Burnout & How to Prevent It](#)