

## **Sacramental Policies and Guidelines**

### **Diocese of Paterson, New Jersey**

**May 31, 2009**

#### **Introduction**

**There are fundamental policies that apply to catechesis for each of the Sacraments. The following revised policies are based on the general principles for sacramental catechesis found in the National Directory for Catechesis (#35-B.):**

Dioceses and parishes should present sacramental catechesis that:

- Is a comprehensive and systematic formation in the faith, one that integrates knowledge of the faith with living the faith
- Is fundamentally Trinitarian and centers on initiation into the life of the Triune God
- Presents Christian life as a lifelong journey to the Father in the Son and through the Holy Spirit
- Is appropriate to the age level, maturity, and circumstances of those being catechized
- Is intended for all members of the Christian community, takes place within the community, and involves the whole community of faith
- Involves parents in the preparation of their children for the sacraments
- Is integrated into a comprehensive catechetical program
- Focuses primarily on the symbols, rituals, and prayers contained in the rite for each sacrament
- Enables the believer to reflect on the meaning of the sacrament received by implementing a thorough experience of “mystagogia” following the celebration

The policies that follow are based on these principles. The practical ways of putting these policies into practice can be found in the accompanying guidelines for each sacrament.

***There are certain guidelines which apply to all the sacraments and are, therefore, presented in this introduction.***

## **General Guidelines for Sacramental Catechesis**

1. Programs for sacramental preparation are parish-based and should make use of textbooks that have been identified by the US Bishops Committee on Conformity as being in keeping with the teachings contained in the Catechism of the Catholic Church.
2. Proof of valid Baptism is required before admission to First Penance and Reconciliation, First Eucharist, and Confirmation.
3. Sacramental catechesis takes place within the integrated faith formation program and is an ongoing process. As children grow in maturity, catechesis provides the opportunity to understand the truths of our faith, the meaning and value of the sacramental life and leads them to a greater practice of the faith. A developing catechesis appropriate to the age, ability, and faith level of the person is a lifelong process.
4. When planning sacramental preparation programs for children and the adults who are responsible for them, parishes need to keep in mind the various situations of families today. Diverse patterns of family life, varied work schedules, cultural differences, and multiple commitments can make it difficult for parents/guardians and children/youth to participate in some parish programs and activities. There needs to be some flexibility in implementing these guidelines.

In order to provide programs that reflect these realities and meet the needs of families, the following should be taken into consideration:

- a. Parish catechetical staff should ascertain the actual needs of families through dialogue and personal conversation
- b. Parish catechetical programs should instruct and encourage the adults responsible for the candidates through ongoing faith formation programs. These should begin with pre-Baptismal programs and continue through the children's pre-school years and the various stages of growth as their children prepare for First Penance and Reconciliation, First Eucharist and Confirmation
- c. In addition to the Sunday Eucharistic Liturgy, families should be encouraged to participate in the various religious celebrations and events that take place in the parish.
- d. Parishes should take every opportunity to provide ongoing faith formation for the adults in the parish by means of instructional series, bulletin inserts, Communal Penance Celebrations, retreat experiences, family programs for Advent and Lent,

parent meetings, and all other means of helping the adults to grow in faith as they lead their children into a deeper relationship with God and the Church.

5. Parents/guardians are the first educators of their children. Parents/guardians should be encouraged to:
  - a. Share their own faith story with their children
  - b. Participate in Sunday Eucharist with their children
  - c. Model a Christian commitment of prayer, community, worship, and service
  - d. Be committed to help their children to participate fully and on a regular basis in the parish faith formation program
  - e. Pray for, and with, their children

### **Diocesan Policies for the First Reception of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation**

1. *A validly baptized person who is appropriately prepared has a right to receive the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation.*
2. *The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation is to be celebrated prior to the reception of First Eucharist. (Addendum to the GDC, 1971)*
3. *The parent(s)/guardian(s), pastor, principal/DRE/CRE, catechist, and child have rights and responsibilities in determining the child's readiness for the reception of First Penance/Reconciliation.*

#### **Guidelines for Policy #3:**

Readiness for reception of this sacrament includes knowledge of:

- the person of Jesus
- the Gospel message of forgiveness
- sin and its effects
- understanding and experience of sorrow, forgiveness, and conversion.”  
(NDC, #36, B2)

The understanding of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation is a gradual development; the rate of moral, psychological and religious development differs from one person to another. Therefore, a person is to be considered ready to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation when he/she has an initial understanding of the concepts listed above and freely desires to receive the Sacrament.

There is a reasonable expectation that appropriate preparation includes regular participation at Sunday Mass, on-going catechesis and that personal prayer is a part of the life of the candidate.

4. *The parent(s)/guardian(s) of the child and the parish community should be involved in the preparation for this Sacrament and participate in its actual celebration.*

#### ***Guidelines for Policy #4***

- a. The pastor, through loving example and pastoral leadership, should establish an environment of peace and reconciliation which facilitates the work of the Holy Spirit throughout the entire parish community.
- b. The parish community is the model for understanding and appreciating the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation as an integral part of growth in Jesus. They are to enter into the spirit as Christians always in need of reconciliation.
- c. Most importantly, preparation should include the parent(s)/guardian(s) who precede, accompany and enrich all other forms of catechesis. (CT #68) "When children are baptized, parents accept the responsibility to bring up their children in the practice of the faith and to see to it that the divine life that God gives them is kept safe from the poison of sin, to grow always stronger in their hearts." (NDC #54,C - taken from the Rite of Baptism of Children #56.)
- d. Parishes are to provide programs that will assist the parent(s)/guardian(s) in fulfilling their role in the preparation of their children for this Sacrament (NDC 36 B, 1-2). These sessions offer the opportunity to update their own understanding of the sacrament, as well as materials and ideas for preparing their children for Penance and Reconciliation. Effective programs should lead to, but not be limited to:
  - Understanding that God is a merciful and loving Father who wants every person to live in communion with him
  - Instruction on the elements necessary to receive this Sacrament: contrition, confession, absolution, satisfaction
  - Understanding that the priest acts in the name of Christ and of the Church in forgiving our sins and is bound to secrecy by the "seal of confession"
  - Instruction on the necessity of sacramental confession for serious sin
  - Understanding of the value of frequent reception of Penance and Reconciliation to strengthen us to live our Christian life
  - Understanding that Christians are to live in an attitude of forgiveness towards others just as God forgives us
  - Realization of the need to ask forgiveness of God and of others

- Recognition of the opportunities for reinforcing the values of forgiveness and reconciliation in the daily interactions of family and social life
  - The opportunity to participate in parish communal Penance and Reconciliation Celebrations as a family
- e. Parish celebrations of First Penance and Reconciliation should normally be communal in nature, but always with individual confession and absolution. Participation of parishioners, especially the families of the children is to be encouraged. The tone should be celebrative and joyful.
- f. The unity of the community is further emphasized by bringing together parent(s)/guardian(s) from programs involving parish, school, and religious education programs when applicable.
5. *Parishes are to provide programs geared to the needs, culture, and lifestyle of the children and of their parent(s)/guardian(s) who are responsible for the fulfillment of the adult role in the preparation of the children for this Sacrament. (for Guidelines, cf. Introduction: General Guidelines, #4)*
6. *Catechesis concerning the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation should begin as soon as a child enters into the formal process of faith formation. It should continue through this process and throughout life.*

**Guidelines for Policy #6:**

- a. "Since conversion is a lifelong process, catechesis for the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation is ongoing. Children have a right to a fuller catechesis each year" (NDC #136,B,2)
- b. Young people should be encouraged to participate in celebrations of Penance and Reconciliation with peers and families. Families should be encouraged to attend the parish celebrations of Penance and Reconciliation together.
7. *Children should have completed one year of the formal parish faith formation program prior to the year of immediate catechetical preparation for the celebration of the Rite of Penance and Reconciliation.*
8. *The celebration of First Penance and Reconciliation should be separated by a respectable length of time (at least six weeks) from the celebration of First Eucharist to maintain the solemnity of each Sacrament.*

## **Diocesan Policy for the First Reception of the Sacrament of Eucharist**

1. *A validly baptized person who is appropriately prepared has a right to receive the Sacrament of Eucharist.*
2. *The first reception of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation is to be celebrated prior to the reception of First Eucharist.*
3. *The parent(s)/guardian(s), pastor, principal/DRE/CRE, catechist, and child have rights and responsibilities in determining the child's readiness for the reception of First Eucharist.*

### **Guidelines for Policy #3**

A child is ready to receive the Sacrament of First Eucharist when the child according to his/her capacity:

- Has celebrated the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation prior to First Communion
- Participates actively and consciously in Sunday Liturgy on a regular basis
- Understands that the Eucharist is truly the Body and Blood of Christ under the appearance of bread and wine
- Understands that the Eucharist is the commemoration of Christ's last meal with his disciples before he died, and a memorial of his sacrifice for our salvation
- Understands that by sharing in this special meal, we become brothers and sisters in the Body of Christ on earth

*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 confessions; 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 (Canon 914).*

*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 (Canon 914 § 1).*

4. *The parent(s)/guardian(s) of the child and the parish community should be involved in the preparation for this Sacrament and participate in its actual celebration.*

### **Guidelines for Policy #4**

The catechesis offered should help parent(s)/guardian(s) to grow in their own understanding and appreciation of the Eucharist and enable them to catechize their children more effectively (NDC, 36 A - 3). Such programs should be offered by parishes to assist them in

carrying out this right and responsibility. Effective programs should lead to, but not be limited to:

- Instruction about the ritual, symbols, and structure of the Mass
- Understanding of the presence of Jesus in the Word, in the people assembled, in the celebrant and most especially in the Eucharist which is His very Body and Blood
- An adult understanding of the theology and experience of Eucharist in their lives
- An explanation of how to assist in the preparation of their children for Eucharist
- Assistance in understanding that Christian family living is part of the catechetical preparation of children for First Eucharist
- A parent/child retreat experience to reflect on the Sacrament of Eucharist. The presentations and prayers of such a retreat should include
  - Prayer, listening and discussion
  - Practice on how to receive the Sacrament, including the norm in the United States of bowing in respect before receiving

5. *Parishes are to provide programs geared to the needs, culture, and lifestyle of the children and of the parent(s)/guardian(s) who are responsible for the fulfillment of the adult role in the preparation of the children for this Sacrament. (cf. Introduction: General Guidelines, #4)*
6. *Catechesis concerning the Eucharist should begin as soon as a child enters into the formal process of faith formation. It should continue through this process and throughout life.*

#### **Guidelines for Policy #6**

Since the Eucharist is the foundation of the Christian life, catechesis begun in the early years is to be continued and developed throughout childhood and adolescence. Since the life of faith is dynamic and a growing reality for the maturing Christian, so the understanding and appreciation of the sacrament of Eucharist is never complete at any given age. Faith formation, appropriate to the age, ability and faith level of the person is a lifelong process.

7. *Children should have completed one year of the formal parish faith formation program prior to the year of immediate catechetical preparation for the celebration of First Eucharist.*
8. *The celebration of First Eucharist should be separated by a respectable length of time (at least six weeks) from the celebration of First Penance and Reconciliation to maintain the solemnity of each Sacrament.*

## **Diocesan Policy for the Reception of the Sacrament of Confirmation**

1. *A validly baptized person who is appropriately prepared has a right to receive the Sacrament of Confirmation.*
2. *At the present time, it is recommended that the celebration of Confirmation be in the years of high school, preferably junior or sophomore year.*

### **Guidelines for Policy #2**

The preparation and the celebration of the Sacrament of Confirmation are parish-based. The parish is the center of lifelong faith development; therefore, it is essential to integrate youth into the life of the parish. Students who attend Catholic high schools and wish to be prepared for the Sacrament of Confirmation need to enroll in their parish Confirmation program.

Certain elements of the parish preparation program and the Catholic high school instruction and activities will overlap. The parish personnel responsible for the Confirmation program should be clearly aware of the components of preparation that are to be undertaken jointly by the Catholic high school and the parish, and those that take place totally within the parish.

The parish and Catholic high school personnel involved in the Confirmation program, should be sensitive to the parish/Catholic high school relationship and design a program that responds to the various needs of the youth. The active participation of all Confirmation candidates in parish life is crucial to strengthening their commitment to the Church and lifelong active membership in the parish community.

3. *The parent(s)/guardian(s), pastor, principal/DRE/CRE, catechist, and candidate have rights and responsibilities in determining readiness for the reception of Confirmation*

### **Guidelines for Policy #3**

In determining a candidate's readiness for Confirmation, the following criteria should be used:

- a. The candidate has met the requirements of law:
  - has been validly baptized and has not been confirmed (Canon 889:1)
  - has the use of reason
  - has been suitably instructed
  - is properly disposed
  - is able to renew his/her baptismal promises (Canon 889:2)

- b. The candidate shows evidence of willingness to use the Gifts of the Spirit to:
    - bear witness to Christ
    - build up the Body of Christ in faith and love (Introduction to the Rite, #2)
  - c. The candidate has met the legitimate requirements of the local parish community:
    - has faithfully participated in the catechetical sessions and requirements of the preparation process
    - has completed the required interviews (suggested: initial, middle, final)
    - has participated in the retreat component of the process
    - has completed the “apprenticeship for discipleship” requirements (e.g. service projects, working with an adult in ministry, etc.)
    - has demonstrated faithful participation in the liturgical life of the parish
4. *The parent(s)/guardian(s), sponsor, and the parish community should be involved in the preparation for this Sacrament and participate in its actual celebration.*
  5. *Parishes are to provide programs geared to the needs, culture, and lifestyle of the candidates and of the adults who are responsible for the fulfillment of the adult role in the preparation of the candidate for this Sacrament. (for Guidelines, cf. Introduction: General Guidelines, #4)*
  6. *Catechesis concerning Confirmation should begin as soon as a child enters into the formal process of faith formation. It should continue through this process and throughout life.*
  7. *Immediate catechesis concerning the Sacrament of Confirmation is ordinarily a two year process. It is a comprehensive and systematic formation in the faith, one that integrates knowledge of the faith with living the faith. It includes formal instruction, retreats, and service commitments.*

### **Guidelines for Policy #7**

The instructional component of immediate catechesis for Confirmation should include the following:

- A basic understanding of Creation, the Mystery of God as Trinity, and the Mystery of Christ as Incarnate Word and Redeemer.
- The Church as “the instrument and sign of salvation”
- The Holy Spirit as the third person of the Trinity and His special role in the life of Church and the individual
- The Sacraments of Initiation into the community of faith
- The Eucharist as the source and center of the Church’s life
- The meaning and importance of the sacraments in our life
- The meaning and effects of Baptism, the symbols and Rite of Baptism, the baptismal promises, the commitment of living as followers of Jesus

- The presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives and in the Church
  - The connection between Baptism and Confirmation
  - The meaning and effects of Confirmation
  - The gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit
  - The symbols and Rite of Confirmation
  - The implications of Confirmation for our participation and involvement in the life of the Church, especially through our parish community
  - The connection between Christian life and building the kingdom of peace, justice, and love through active involvement in gratuitous service
- (cf NDC #36 A:1-2)

While the instructional areas indicated above are essential, they should be connected with life. The parish program should provide not only intellectual information, but formation of the heart and transformation into Christ in the choices the candidates make and their willingness to be of service. Therefore, retreats, periodic rituals, times of community building, and opportunities for service should all be components of the Confirmation preparation program.

*8. Each person to be confirmed should have a catechist and a sponsor. The catechist is chosen by the parish and is responsible for a group of candidates. The sponsor is chosen by the candidate and is to be responsible for the candidate during and after the faith formation process.*

### **Guidelines for Policy #8**

A. The Catechist should be a person who has:

- a basic understanding of adolescent psychology
- a basic understanding of adolescent faith and moral growth
- a basic command of communication skills
- basic skills in faith-sharing/story-telling
- a genuine love for young people at this stage of their development
- the basic skills necessary to design and participate in:
  - worship and prayer experiences
  - learning experiences
  - justice and service experiences
  - faith growth experiences
  - relational experiences

B. The sponsor need not be of the same sex as the candidate. Ideally he/she should be a member of the local Catholic community, but cannot be a parent or guardian of the candidate (Canon 874 §1,893). The Confirmation sponsor may also have been the baptismal godparent of the candidate. In fact, given all other considerations, the

baptismal godparent is the ideal choice for this ministry. Above all, the sponsor should be a person who is:

- a mature, active member of the Catholic Church (at least 16 years of age [Canon 874 § 1,893])
- free to undertake the responsibilities of being a sponsor (fully initiated)
- reasonably informed and up-to-date in Church teachings
- chosen by the individual candidate in consultation with the parish staff
- willing to accept this ministry knowing full well what it involves
- adequately prepared for this ministry by the parish (e.g. provided with a sponsor-companion book – attending the various Rites – participating in meetings...)

The sponsor is expected to:

- journey with the candidate during the different aspects of the parish preparation program
- be a friend and companion to the candidate, helping the candidate integrate the teachings of Jesus into his/her daily living
- minister to the candidate even after the actual celebration of the sacrament

9. *The Candidate may choose to retain his/her own baptismal name or choose another name. In this case, it is to be that of a recognized saint of the Church. If the candidate's baptismal name is not a saint's name, this is an opportunity for the candidate to choose a saint as a model and patron.*
10. *Confirmation is to be celebrated within the Eucharistic Celebration in order to express more clearly the fundamental connection of Confirmation with the entire process of Christian Initiation.*
11. *Catechesis for Confirmation should take place within the context of a parish's total youth ministry effort. It is not a substitute for, or in competition with, ministry to high school age youth.*
12. *The parish should provide opportunities for study, spiritual growth and service after the reception of Confirmation. Specifically, the parish should be prepared, in practical ways, to welcome the participation of the fully initiated in the life of the parish.*
13. *If the number of candidates is insufficient, nearby parishes will join together for the Celebration of Confirmation.*

## **Diocesan Policy on Sacraments of Initiation and Penance and Reconciliation For Persons with Disabilities**

### **Introduction**

Just as the Church must do all in its power to help ensure persons with disabilities a secure place in the secular community, so it must reach out to welcome gratefully those who seek to participate in the ecclesial community.

In the case of many persons with disabilities, integration into the Christian community may require nothing more than issuing an invitation and pursuing it. For some others, however, full participation can only come about if the Church exerts itself to devise innovative programs and techniques. At the very least, we must undertake forms of evangelization that speak to the particular needs of individuals, make those liturgical adaptations which promote their active participation, and provide services that reflect our loving concern for those with disabilities.

Full participation in the Christian community has another important aspect that must not be overlooked. When we think of persons with disabilities in relation to ministry, we tend automatically to think of doing something for them. We do not reflect that they can do something for us and with us. By their example, they can teach us much about strength and Christian acceptance. Moreover, they have the same duty as all members of the community to do the Lord's work in the world, according to their God-given talents and capacity.

### **General Considerations**

The parish is the door to participation for persons with disabilities. Parishes should be physically and psychologically accessible. Physical accommodations need to be accompanied by attitudes of welcome and hospitality.

1. All forms of liturgy should be available to persons with disabilities. Realistic provision must be made for them to participate fully in the Eucharist and other liturgical celebrations.
2. Evangelization and catechesis for persons with disabilities must be geared in content and method of their particular situation. Programs should be integrated as far as possible, within the catechetical activities of the parish.
3. Persons with disabilities and their families have a right to sacramental participation and catechesis. The family should be actively involved in this process.
4. In those instances in which these persons are institutionalized or are in residences, the parish, if possible, should establish a relationship with the administrators to ensure proper pastoral care.
5. The context of sacramental initiation for persons with disabilities is the quality of their relationships. Sponsor/catechists should journey with these persons, developing a bond which stimulates faith, hope and love, thus forming community.

6. Readiness to receive the Sacraments of Initiation and Penance and Reconciliation is important on the part of the individual, the family and the parish community. Sometimes readiness is difficult to determine with the individual. Thus, the faith of the family and the faith community is sufficient.
7. Celebrations for the Sacraments of Initiation and Penance and Reconciliation should be adapted to the readiness, needs, and ability of the person and be part of the communal life of the parish.

## **Baptism**

1. In the case of infant Baptism, the parish is to provide catechesis for parents and godparents, assuring that the faith of the child will be nurtured.
2. If the disabled person is of catechetical age, the usual process of the Rite of Christian Initiation, (if adults, RCIA) is to be followed with adaptation according to the needs and capacity of the individual.
3. Diocesan policy and guidelines regarding the Sacrament of Baptism should be adapted according to individual circumstances.

## **Confirmation**

1. Baptized persons with disabilities have the right to receive Confirmation.
2. Catechesis and integration into parish Confirmation programs should be adapted according to the ability of the person.
3. If they are adults, they are candidates within the RCIA process, with the necessary adaptation.
4. Diocesan policy and guidelines regarding the Sacrament of Confirmation should be adapted according to individual circumstances.

## **Eucharist**

1. Baptized persons with disabilities have the right to receive the Eucharist.
2. The person must desire to receive the sacrament and understand, according to his/her ability the difference between ordinary bread and the Eucharist, and between ordinary wine and the Precious Blood.
3. In instances in which persons are non-verbal, their readiness is expressed in gesture, sign, or their reverential silence.
4. Diocesan policy and guidelines regarding the Sacrament of Eucharist should be adapted according to individual circumstances.

## **Penance and Reconciliation**

1. The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation can be very fruitful in the lives of persons with disabilities. Often they have the experience of being offended and of offending others themselves. Participation in a celebration of reconciliation can help them sense a new beginning of these relationships.
2. Such persons frequently are comfortable in parish celebrations of Penance and Reconciliation, especially during Advent and Lent. If they have poor communication skills, the priest could ask a question which elicits a “yes” or a “no” answer.
3. The communal celebration of the sacrament should be adapted to the communication and relational gifts and limitations of those present.
4. Diocesan policy and guidelines regarding the sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation should be adapted according to individual circumstances.

## **Conclusion**

By welcoming persons with disabilities through the waters of Baptism, the oil of anointing in Confirmation, the consecrated bread and wine of the Eucharist and the peace and joy of Penance and Reconciliation, the parish builds up the Body of Christ in faith, hope and love.

[These policies and guidelines are based on the “Pastoral Statement of U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops on Persons with Disabilities” (1978), “Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments for Persons with Disabilities” (1995), and the U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Statement: “Welcome and Justice for Persons with Disabilities”(1999)].