

ARCHDIOCESAN POLICY

FOR THE PROPER PREPARATION OF CHILDREN FOR THE RECEPTION FOR THE FIRST TIME OF THE SACRAMENTS OF PENANCE AND EUCHARIST

Rationale

The proper preparation of children who are to receive the sacraments of penance and Eucharist for the first time has rightly been an important issue for parents, parish priests and religious educators.

Pope John Paul II teaches that “Catechesis is built upon a certain number of elements...that prepare for catechesis or spring from it.” These include:

- The initial proclamation of the gospel...to arouse faith
- Experience of Christian living
- Celebration of the sacraments
- Integration into the ecclesial community (*Catechesi Tradendae 18 and Catechism of the Catholic Church 6*).

The need for these experiences is as important for catechesis and the proper preparation for Penance and Eucharist as it is for the other sacraments.

The responsibility for this preparation belongs firstly with parents. This reflects the teaching of the church, that children being initiated into the Church should be able primarily, to look to their parents and family for the necessary nurturing of their faith (*cf Canon 914*).

It should be noted that the responsibility for this preparation also belongs to the parish priest. Importantly, since the child is receiving a Sacrament of Initiation into the church community, normally the parish should be involved in the child's preparation – in fact “the pre-eminent place for catechesis” is the parish. (*Catechesi Tradendae 67*). The whole family therefore should receive support from the pastor and the parish community, and in turn parents should be supportive and involved in the parish's efforts to prepare the children properly (*cf Catechesi Tradendae 68*).

In the preparation of children for the first reception of the sacraments of Penance and Eucharist and Church has two other concerns.

One is, that prior to receiving the above mentioned sacraments, children are to have according to their capacity, “sufficient knowledge and to be accurately prepared” (*Canon 913.1*). Church Law also states that “children are properly prepared...over an appropriate period of time” (*Canon 777.2*).

In the Archdiocese of Perth, the proper preparation required for children to receive the sacraments of Penance and Eucharist is outlined in full in the Archdiocesan Catechist Program and the Catholic School religious education Guidelines. Sacrament preparation programs approved by the Archdiocese for the children with disabilities come under the direction of the Archdiocesan Director of Religious Education.

The second concern of the Church is "...to ensure that children who have reached the age of reason are properly prepared (to receive the sacraments of Penance and Eucharist for the first time) as soon as possible" (*Canon 914*).

The importance of these two concerns of the Church is reflected in the added responsibility Church Law requires of the parish priest. Namely, that he is responsible for ensuring that children have in fact been properly prepared and that those "whom he has judged to be insufficiently disposed, do not come to Holy communion" (*Canon 914*). This calls for special pastoral care in making a guided and prudent judgement according to the knowledge and preparation as required by the Archbishop.

Accordingly, in the light of the large number of children in the Archdiocese who lack the prerequisite experiences for catechesis as identified in *Catechesi Tradendae 18* by Pope John Paul II, and because of the knowledge and other preparation required for the first reception of the sacraments of Penance and Eucharist, the Archdiocese of Perth has the following policy.

That programs for preparing children to receive the sacraments of Penance and Eucharist for the first time will be conducted in the Archdiocese of Perth over a period of two years.

The Archdiocese of Perth strongly recommends:

That the sacrament of Penance be received upon the completion of proper preparation and received again before first Holy Communion, with proper preparation, be received in the following year.

Policy Implementation

1. Promulgation and implementation

The Policy, promulgated by the Archbishop in July 1997, contains the expectation that it will be fully implemented in the Archdiocese of Perth no later than 1 January 1998.

2. Publicising the policy

Parishioners are to be informed regularly of the policy and its rationale during the phasing in period.

3 Children not participating in the parish or Catholic school two year program

Parents need to be assured that where their children have not completed a two year parish or Catholic school preparation program for the first reception of Penance and Eucharist, yet have fulfilled the requirements of church law regarding proper preparation, the parish priest on a case by case basis, is to respect the right of these children to receive these sacraments.

Parents will be asked as part of their child's preparation that the child show evidence of proper preparation for the Sacraments of Penance and Eucharist, taking into account the child's capacity to understand. This preparation needs to reflect the content outlined in the Archdiocesan Catechist Program and the Catholic School Religious Education guidelines.

The child's proper preparation may be gathered by one or more of the following means:

- a) reviewing the program used by the parents and the child's work;
- b) informal discussion with the parents and/or child;
- c) asking the child to participate in some of the parish's preparation classes.

The parish priest may find it advisable to consult with the parish catechist coordinator and/or the Catholic school Religious Education coordinator.

The importance of the parish element in preparing properly for the sacraments should be discussed, and parents and children should be encouraged to participate in some aspect of the parish preparation e.g. Parent meetings for sacramental preparation.

4. *Children with disabilities*

It is important to note that children with disabilities may have special sacrament preparation needs. Therefore it is important that parish priests and religious educators be pastorally sensitive to these special needs.

These children have the right to receive the sacraments. Therefore, providing they have been instructed to the limits of their capacity to learn they are not to be refused the sacraments. Mindful of the difficulties facing parents, parish priests and religious educators should also strive to offer parents of these children, whatever help and resources they need to fulfil their faith education responsibilities.

5. *Upper – primary school age children*

Children who enter a parish or Catholic school program at an upper primary level, and have not received the sacraments of Penance and Eucharist, would benefit greatly from a pre-sacrament year of general religious education. This would assist the child to prepare properly for the first reception of the sacraments of Penance and Eucharist the following year.

The situation may arise where the parish priest and parents may need to discuss the shortening of the two year preparation period.

6. *Children in rural parishes*

Parents in rural parishes that are unable to maintain a two year communal preparation program for the sacraments of Penance and Eucharist, may be asked to prepare their children at home.

Parents in this situation are to receive the support necessary for them to prepare their children properly. This should include a suitable teaching program, assistance on how to use the program, pastoral visitation from the parish priest and opportunities for children to benefit from some aspect of parish preparation.

The parish priest and parents may need to discuss the shortening of the two year preparation period.

7. *Commitment to the Sunday Liturgy*

With regard to points 5 and 6 and in fact with all families, their commitment to attending Sunday Mass may be an issue that needs to be discussed by the parish priest with the parents. The importance of Sunday worship with a welcoming parish community is to be stressed (*cf Catechism of the Catholic Church 2168-2188*). In the case of parents with an indifferent attitude, the negative influence this is likely to have on the child needs to be raised. However, this should not be a reason for denying access to the sacraments.

Appendix

Christian Initiation of Children Who Have Reached Catechetical Age

The request of unbaptised children to receive the sacrament of the Eucharist for the first time needs to be considered in the context of the liturgical rite proper to this request. Therefore the Church's response to these unbaptised children is found in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Children Who Have Reached Catechetical Age. For the purposes of this appendix the above Rite will be referred to as R.C.I.C. of C.A. [1].

“This form of the rite of Christian Initiation is intended for children, not baptised as infants, who have attained the use of reason and are of catechetical age. They seek Christian initiation either at the direction of their parents or guardians, or with parental permission, on their own initiative” (*R.C.I.C. of C.A. 242*).

The rite points out that these children require “both a conversion that is personal and somewhat developed, in proportion to their age and the assistance of the education they need” (*R.C.I.C. of C.A. 243*). This process must therefore take into account the child's capacity and development in faith and so “as with adults, their initiation is to be extended over several years, if need be, before they receive the Sacraments” (*R.C.I.A. of C.A. 243*).

For this reason the process of this rite contains several steps that correspond to the process of the R.C.I.A. (*cf R.C.I.C. of C.A. 243*).

The Archdiocese of Perth has a commitment to the ongoing implementation of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults in its parishes, *and as a consequence seeks a gradual acceptance by parishes of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Children Who Have Reached Catechetical Age.*

However, it is important to note that this rite is more than a program of catechetical instruction. It is a liturgical rite which needs the endorsement of the parish priest and the involvement of the parish community in order to be properly implemented.

[1] The Rite of Christian Initiation of Children Who Have Reached Catechetical Age is found within the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults Part II, Rites for Particular Circumstances.