

Preparing for First Holy Communion taken from Catholic Culture

Instructions on how to prepare your child for his/her First Communion, including discussion on dealing with distractions during time of Thanksgiving prayer.

DIRECTIONS

Receiving Holy Communion for the first, or the hundred and first, time is like nothing else in the world. It's a wonder we can take it so calmly. Of course, if we could grasp what happens, we would die on the spot. Saints have. Blessed Imelda died after receiving Communion from the hands of Our Lord, but for the rest of us there is little chance of that. The rest of us have trouble remaining recollected long enough to say Thank-You with simple graciousness. We salute baseball stars and Hollywood beauties with wild enthusiasm, and we take Communion so calmly. We greet new cures for our physical ills with bounding optimism, and we consider whether to communicate daily without even a quickened pulse. We act as though the important thing is how long men will live, not how many will get to Heaven.

Preparing for First Communion

Unless we carefully reassemble our values, helping a child to prepare for First Holy Communion is apt to be the sum of catechism lessons learned, trips to rehearse the procession, shopping tours, dress fittings, and last-minute reminders to get film for the camera. All these things are normal and good and in the right scheme of things, humanly speaking — but they are not the heart of the matter.

Perhaps it is necessary to justify the early reception of First Communion. “After all, do you honestly think they understand what it's all about — at *seven*?”

The objection that a child should wait until he can understand what he is doing when he receives Holy Communion is no objection at all. He understands as well at seven as at seventy. The Holy Eucharist is a mystery as profound and unfathomable as the Trinity. One does not *understand* how Christ can assume the form of bread and wine. One *believes*. A child must believe, and if it helps to substitute the word understand, then he must understand that the bread looks like bread but is not bread, it is the Body of Christ. The wine looks like wine but is not wine, it is the Blood of Christ. To ask him to understand the mystery of it is asking of him something that even his elders do not understand.

“But how can you be sure they are really reverent enough?”

Before we protest too loudly on this score, we should weigh a child's supposed incapacity for reverence (as compared to the more perceptible adult) against his purity of heart and mind and soul. Enough said. The relationship in Communion is a two-way thing. There is not just the child receiving Christ. There is Christ also, wanting to come to the child. “They are My delight.” “Suffer them to come unto Me.” First Communion at seven is not an imprudence. It is not a piously sentimental occasion. It is world-shaking.

Reading the lives of the child saints is apt to leave the parents of the average child properly depressed. St. Therese never refused God anything after she was three. Blessed Imelda desired Christ in the Eucharist with such longing He brought it to her Himself, in secret. St. Tarcisius died at the hands of pagan soldiers rather than surrender the Eucharist he was carrying to the early Christians.

We look at our own children, who seem to be taking it all so calmly, and wonder how to stir up in them any of the awareness of these blessed ones. Unless God wills it, we never will. For some mysterious reason, it was His will that these small saints enjoy a conscious intimacy with Him in the Eucharist which sends our souls reeling. But though our own children may not receive the same privileges of grace, they have this in common with the child saints: Christ comes to them as wholly as He did to the saints. What the child saints experienced by divinely cultivated intuition, we must substitute for as best we can with teaching, with illumination, with the feeding of their faith. And all the while there will be sufficient grace.

How prepare a child to receive Christ in Holy Communion? There are a thousand ways for as many children. If there are frustrations that go with teaching catechism class, the most poignant of all must be having to teach children about First Communion *en masse*. This is a subject that demands long, intimate interludes, with time to ponder and weigh and imagine. Here is one of the times when a mother and a father will stop short and suddenly see what a tremendous thing it is to be a parent. A soul, whose creation waited upon them, is about to receive the Body of the Son of God, Who, has waited for this since all eternity.

“Just think, dear, since before the beginning of the world God was thinking about you, and His Son was wanting to come to you in Holy Communion. He always knew what day it would be, what hour, what minute. He will not divide Himself into twenty bits of Jesus, so that the twenty in the First Communion class may receive a piece of Him. There is no such thing as a piece of Him. He will come to you as though there were no one there but you. Where the Holy Eucharist is, in each host, or even each piece of a Host, Jesus is wholly there. He is the same God Who made the heavens and the earth and all things, and Who is surrounded by the angels and the saints in Heaven. He is the same Jesus Who was born in Bethlehem, and the same Jesus Who died on the Cross.”

“But Mother — why bread and wine?”

If we have talked to them about the meaning of sacrifice, about the reason for the Mass, this is not hard to explain.

“Remember when we talked about the Mass, and I showed you the name of Melchisedech in the missal? Melchisedech was the priest-king of Salem, and Salem means *Peace*. When Jesus offered bread and wine at the Last Supper, he was imitating this unique priest in the Old Testament who offered a sacrifice of bread and wine to thank God for Abram’s victory. (Abraham was first called Abram; God changed his name). Jesus is the Divine High Priest, because He is God, and He offered Himself in sacrifice for our sins. And Jesus is the King of Peace. Remember when Pilate asked Him: ‘Art thou a king?’ Jesus said: ‘Thou hast said it.’ And after the Resurrection, which proved He was God, when He first appeared to the Apostles, His greeting was ‘Peace be to you.’ It was not an accident that Jesus offered the same things Melchisedech offered. He wanted to remind us that He is also Priest, and King of Peace.

“And isn’t it good that it is bread and wine, which are easy to get and easy to prepare on the altar? Suppose it were a lamb, or fruit? That would make it very complicated for priests to offer the Divine Sacrifice. Then there is another thing about the bread and wine. Think of them first as wheat and grapes. Before they can be made into bread and wine, they must be wholly crushed. They suffer a kind of passion all their own in order to become bread and wine, the substances used in the Mass. Our Lord was wholly crushed on the Cross, so He could be the perfect sacrifice for our sins.” Children love to know the meaning of the liturgical symbols on the altar and around the church. Understanding about the wheat and wine makes for a momentary meditation every time they see these symbols.

Furthermore, bread is called the staff of life. When men are poor, and have nothing else to eat, they can exist on bread. Our Lord is the staff of our spiritual life. The Holy Eucharist is a Divine bread with which we feed our souls. “Give us this day our daily bread” doesn’t mean just the bread on our tables; it asks God the Father also to let us receive His Divine Son daily, if possible, in Holy Communion.

First Communion Day

There are temporal concerns as well as spiritual when it is time for First Communion. First is the effect of the costume, especially for the girls. White dress, white shoes, white socks, white *veil* — how to bear all this glamour and not succumb? Once a little girl confessed to me, after five minutes of dreamily surveying her veil in the mirror: “Mother, I think it’s very pretty, and I think I look pretty in it. But I think maybe Jesus doesn’t want me to think I look pretty. Maybe it’s wrong and that makes me feel kind of funny.”

That sums up very well, I think, the struggle between pride and humility. And it is a real problem for girls, always. On First Communion Day you want to look as pretty as possible to please God. I don't think the solution to pride and vanity lies in telling comely little girls they are ugly. It isn't going to develop the right kind of humility (you couldn't properly call it humility), and it is apt to set up defensive attitudes that could cause really serious trouble. Part of perfect humility is to be able to admit possessing the talents and gifts God has given you, and take no personal credit for them. You must learn to wear them like garments God has bestowed, happily, gratefully, honestly. They are not essentials, but extras, attached to which are certain obligations of stewardship. Along with learning how to live with them, you must learn also to beware of the devil who loves to tamper with them.

“If you think you look nice in your veil, it would be wrong to pretend you don't. Jesus would prefer you to be honest. You can't fool Him anyway, and if He has given you a nice face and a pretty veil, you must thank Him. But the beauty of your soul is far more important, and that's what the devil would like you to forget. He is forever trying to stir up trouble with the good gifts God has given you, so when he tempts you to think only of your face, turn your thoughts around to your soul and remember that the prettiest face in the world is as nothing if the soul is not beautiful.

“All this lovely white is not meant to tempt you to be vain about how you look. It is a symbol of the purity and beauty of your soul. If you were to forget this, and forget that it is for Jesus you dress nicely, then it would be better if you were dressed in rags.”

I had an experience once which leaves little girls, big ones, too, pondering beauty in a new light, and it is a nice story to tell around First Communion time. A long time ago I became acquainted with a little nun at a retreat house, a lay sister whose work was making the beds, sweeping the floors, setting the table. Each year on retreat I would see her and we would nod and smile at each other, and usually at the end of the retreat we had a few minutes to chat. Finally, I asked her name.

“My name? Sister Felicitas — that means happiness.”

“What a beautiful name, Sister, and especially good for you.”

“Oh? Why? “

“Why, because you look so happy. Yours is a very happy face.”

“Is it? I wouldn't know.”

“What do you mean, you wouldn't know?”

She was embarrassed. Something had slipped out that she had not meant should slip out. “I haven't seen my face in fifteen years.”

“Fifteen years! But, Sister, what about the mirrors in the bedrooms?”

“Oh, I just close my eyes tight when I walk past them.”

She had no way of knowing that she was a radiant beauty: apple-cheeked, skin so smooth, and a freshness in her face that would turn most women green with envy. Her age was a mystery. Only her walk, her frame, some of her ways hinted she was no longer young. All this without mirrors, without creams, without cosmetics. Beauty for her equaled convent soap and water and total preoccupation with God. If ever there was a walking sermon on the adage that beauty is from within, it was Sister Felicitas.

We are all dust, and children must know it too. A pretty face, someday, is a pinch of dust. First Communion Day is an appropriate time to contrast the two kinds of beauty, physical and spiritual, and a good time to remember that our obligation is to raise young women who will be holy, not necessarily beautiful.

Why some children giggle and squirm even at their First Communion is hard to say, unless they have not had enough preparation beforehand. Sisters do a magnificent job, but they still cannot take each child aside and spend as much time as they would like with him, explaining, helping with meditations. This is the parents' work. Reverent behavior even when all eyes are on him — even when someone next to him is taken with a fit of self-consciousness and has no outlet for it but giggles, will probably depend on how far a child has been helped to penetrate the beauty and mystery of this day. It would help, too, if most of the comments from loving family and friends — both before and after — had to do with what has happened rather than how pretty we all look.

Because children love ritual, and ceremony, and doing things up round, they are apt to touch up these solemn performances with bits of embroidery now and then. As an example, genuflecting when they leave the altar rail. Even though Sister has explained that it is not necessary, sooner or later they will do it on their own. But if they are reminded why it isn't necessary, it makes sense to omit it. If you carry Our Lord within your very own body, it is not necessary to genuflect when passing in front of the tabernacle. *You* are the Tabernacle for the Host you have received.

Distractions and Thanksgiving

We have said something about acts of thanksgiving after Communion in the chapter on the Mass. Unless a child is constantly reminded, even given the words to say until he is able to phrase his own thanksgivings, he can easily forget to make any thanksgiving. It takes time and patience to form the habit, to learn how to fight through the distractions and pay perfect attention to God. It is not necessary that a child *feel* the grandeur of his union with Christ in the Eucharist. In all probability, he will feel more like looking around to see who else is receiving. But if he can learn to apply his will to making a thanksgiving, close his eyes or cover his face so that distractions are shut out, his thanksgiving has as great a value as if he were dissolved in sweetness. It is the action of the will which gives the value to prayer; it is too bad to wait until you are twenty or more, and have “discovered” prayer for the first time, to learn this. How much nicer to learn it at seven — and why not?

For emphasis we repeat the three most important things for children to say in their thanksgiving: “Thank You for coming to me in Holy Communion. I love You. Please help me to love You more,” phrased however each child would phrase them. Then we can remind him to remember Father from whose hands he has received the Body of Christ, his family and friends, special intentions, the souls in Purgatory, and everyone in the world.

The child who, at this age, wants to go on talking to Jesus is probably unusual (although they should all be encouraged to do this). The child who lifts his head to watch what is going on has at least said the necessary things before distractions set in. Grace will work on even the least of these things, like yeast in a dough, because they are pure now, and very innocent. We must not let them waste their innocence.

In our family there is always a family feast following First Communion. Here, with the table beautiful in white linen and the best silver, with Granny's Delft china, with a lovely ceramic of Our Lady and her Son as the centerpiece, the First Communion child is the honored guest. His gifts are at his plate, and a little bouquet of flowers, his Baptismal candle is lighted, and after Grace, before sitting down, the honored guest receives a kiss from everyone in the family. Every year the feasts of First Communion are kept, if not on the exact feast day then on the parish First Communion day.

One more member of the family at the Communion rail is a thrill all its own. At the breakfast afterward, if the preparation has been thorough and the emphasis where it belongs, a First communicant will put what it all means in his own words. “Daddy has Jesus in him, and Mother has Jesus in her, and Granny has Jesus in her...and Jesus is in me!” Jesus Christ, the Son of God, in *me* — is it not world-shaking?

Activity Source: *We and Our Children* by Mary Reed Newland, Image Books, 1961