

A young girl with dark hair, wearing a white lace-trimmed First Communion dress and a small floral headband, is shown in profile. She is looking down at her hands as a priest's hands, wearing white vestments, place a small host into her palms. The background is a blurred church interior with other people.

CATHOLIC
PARENT
KNOWHOW

PREPARING YOUR CHILD FOR...

First Communion

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**Practical
Preparations**

HOW TO RECEIVE THE
EUCCHARIST

You Are Your child's Best Teacher

Dear Parents,

A child's First Communion is an important and exciting milestone in the life of a Catholic family. Speaking about the Eucharist, Pope Francis has stated:

"Every time we celebrate this Sacrament we participate in the mystery of the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ. The Eucharist is the summit of God's saving action: the Lord Jesus, by becoming bread broken for us, pours upon us all of his mercy and his love, so as to renew our hearts, our lives, and our way of relating with him and with the brethren" (General Audience, February 5, 2014).

As the first and most important teachers of their children, parents present their children for baptism and guide them toward Christ as they are initiated into the Church community. Handing on our faith to the next generation can feel like an awesome responsibility. We may sometimes wonder if we "know enough" or are "good enough," but God gives parents all the grace they need to raise their children to know and love him.

One key to teaching children about the Faith is tapping into our own experiences. We may find that the things we know best can be powerful illustrations of our faith. Amy Welborn has written about how we can better understand the Mass from our own family experiences:

► **Preparing for Mass** is important, just like preparing for major family events, such as a baby's birth, the first day of school, or a move. If we don't prepare well for these important experiences, we may become so preoccupied with details that we miss the experience itself. Preparing for Mass by getting ready as much as possible the night before, and allowing plenty of time to get to the church and get settled, can help us really experience the celebration.

► **The Penitential Rite** is our time to experience God's mercy and forgiveness as we acknowledge the times we have failed him. All families sometimes have misunderstandings, miscommunications, and conflicts. Like a loving parent, God always takes us back. His love for us is unconditional.

► **The Liturgy of the Word** is the time in the Mass when we listen to our sacred stories, when important truths are communicated and passed down. Just as important lessons in families are repeated, so the important truths of Scripture are repeated, from the Old Testament, to the Psalms, to the Gospels, to the epistles, and in the cycles of the readings at Mass.

► **The Eucharist** is our family meal. In our individual families, we come together out of the common need to be nourished. Family meals bring us together and give us a collective identity. As a Church, we are nourished by Christ himself. Through our communion with Jesus and with one another, we are formed as the Body of Christ.

► **The Dismissal Rite** is like a commencement, or sending forth. Just as we leave our families to go out into the world, so we are sent by Christ to live what we have learned.

We hope this booklet will assist you in reflecting on your own knowledge and experience of the treasures of our faith and help you with some of the practical details in planning for your child's First Communion. May God bless you as you lead your little one into communion with him.

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Explaining the “Real Presence” of Jesus to Children

In the United States, First Communion is typically celebrated some time between the first and fourth grades, most often in grade two, when children are seven or eight years old. Children this age are in what Swiss developmental psychologist Jean Piaget called the “concrete operational” stage of cognitive development. They see and understand things in very concrete, black-and-white terms. They still have some difficulty thinking in the abstract or understanding symbolism. It can be a challenge to offer direct, concrete explanations of abstract concepts such as transubstantiation and why Jesus would offer himself to us as food.

One way to accurately but simply explain transubstantiation to a child is to say: “When we celebrate the Eucharist, God changes the bread and wine so they become Jesus himself. It still looks and tastes like bread and wine, but it’s

really Jesus. He comes in the form of bread to remind us of his body, and in the form of wine to remind us of his blood.” We can explain why Jesus gives himself as bread and wine by saying: “Jesus wants to be very close to you. He wants to become part of you and for you to become part of him. The Eucharist helps us be more like Jesus.”

Remember that a child’s understanding of the Eucharist will unfold and grow over time. Children need a solid assurance that God comes to us in a special way in holy Communion and that what happens is much more than what we see. This will plant the seed they need to keep learning about Jesus’ greatest gift to us — the gift of himself.



The “Rite of Way”

Because the Eucharist is a universal prayer of thanksgiving to God, it is important that we as Catholics are together in our understanding of how to receive the Body and Blood of Christ. Traditions and form vary somewhat around the world, but some responses and norms are consistent. Here are some of the unifying practices outlined by the U.S. Catholic bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy. These actions remind us that the Body and Blood of Christ are the sign and source of our unity together.

➤ As we join the Communion procession, we are united as the Body of Christ, moving forward together to share in this sacred meal. Communicants are asked to respectfully process to the front of the church with their hands folded in a sign of prayer.

➤ In this country, Communion is received standing. Because

communicants are receiving Jesus himself, the U.S. bishops have instituted as a norm a slight bow of reverence immediately preceding reception of the Eucharist.

➤ A communicant may receive in the hand or on the tongue. When Communion is received in the hand, the following directions apply. If the person receiving is right-handed, the left hand should rest upon the right. The person

distributing will lay the Host in the palm of the left hand.

The Host is then taken by the right hand to the mouth by the communicant. If the person receiving is left-handed, this is reversed.

➤ The person distributing Communion will say to each person receiving, “The Body of Christ.” Each communicant should clearly respond, “Amen.” This response affirms and proclaims his or her belief that the

How to Receive the Eucharist

consecrated bread and wine are truly the Body and Blood of Christ.

➤ Communicants should not reach out with their fingers to take the Host from the person distributing. The Host must be consumed as soon as it has been received. Girls and women who are wearing gloves and plan to receive the Host in the hand must remove their gloves before receiving.

➤ When a communicant is receiving under the form of wine, the person holding the cup will say to each person receiving, “The Blood of Christ.” Each communicant again responds, “Amen.” Communicants are not permitted to dip the Host into the chalice. If the person receiving is not able or willing to drink from the cup, then he or she should receive only under the form of bread.

➤ Upon returning to their seats, communicants who have just received the Eucharist should offer a prayer of thanksgiving to God, especially by singing the Communion hymn.



What Scripture Teaches Us about the Eucharist

An angel brings bread to Elijah (1 Kings 19:5–7).

An angel met Elijah on his journey through the wilderness at a time when Elijah felt he could not go on. The angel told Elijah to get up and eat so he would be strong for his journey. From Elijah's story we can learn that we need food for our own journeys. **Even when we feel we cannot go on, Christ provides us with the gift of himself to strengthen us for our work in the world.**

Jesus teaches that his flesh and blood are real food and drink (John 6:22–59).

Jesus frequently spoke in metaphors, but he seemed to go out of his way with repetition to emphasize the fact that he intended the Eucharist to be understood literally: **He was giving himself to us as food and drink.** This was difficult even for his followers to understand, and some left him, but Jesus did not try to stop them by offering an alternative explanation, an indication that they understood what he meant but could not accept it.

Jesus feeds the five thousand (John 6:1–15).

Jesus takes one small boy's lunch and feeds a multitude of people. The account of this miracle teaches us that **Jesus can feed everyone who "hungers" for intimacy with him.**



Melchizedek's offering (Genesis 14:18–20). Melchizedek offered bread and wine to God in thanksgiving. This offering foreshadowed Jesus' establishment of the Eucharist. Hebrews 5:6 calls Jesus "a priest for ever, after the order of Melchizedek." Scripture speaks of Melchizedek's offering to prepare us to **recognize the Eucharist as a feast of thanksgiving.**

Jesus celebrates the Passover with his disciples (Matthew 26:17–30). On the night he was betrayed and arrested, Jesus celebrated the Passover meal with his disciples. This meal commemorated the freedom of the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt. As part of the first Passover meal, the Israelites were commanded to eat the flesh of the Passover lamb that was sacrificed to save them. Passover was intended to prepare God's people for Jesus, the "Lamb of God" who would be sacrificed to save us from the bondage of sin. In fact, St. Paul calls Jesus "our paschal lamb" (1 Corinthians 5:7). When Jesus celebrated the Passover meal with his disciples, he offered the bread and the cup with the words, "This is my body" and "This is my blood." Jesus spoke clearly about the Eucharist so we would know that **he is truly present in this great meal.**



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Throughout history, God has prepared his people to receive the gift of Christ in the Eucharist. The Eucharist is foreshadowed in Old Testament Scripture and is made explicit in the Gospels and epistles of the New Testament. Here are a few examples of Scriptures relating to the Eucharist, along with what we can learn from them:

Manna from heaven (Exodus 16). Scripture tells how God provided bread from heaven, called manna, to the Israelites as they wandered through the desert after leaving Egypt. This account teaches us that **God provides his people with what we need.**

Jesus changes water into wine (John 2:1–12). Jesus' first miracle was at a special celebration — a wedding in Cana. At the request of his mother, he turned water into wine. The Eucharist we celebrate in Mass is described in the Book of Revelation as the wedding feast between Christ, the bridegroom, and the Church, his bride. In the midst of this Eucharistic celebration, Jesus takes his first miracle one important step further by changing wine into his blood. **Through the Eucharist he also transforms all of us so that we become more like Christ as we live as the "Body of Christ" in the world.**

Jesus and his disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–35). After his resurrection, Jesus appeared to the disciples as they were walking. They later stopped and shared a meal. At first, the disciples didn't know it was Jesus who was with them, but they recognized him when he broke the bread. This passage of Scripture can teach us that **the Eucharist reunites us with Jesus and we can recognize and know him in this meal.**

Some Things Change, Some Things Remain the Same

In the past several years, a lot has changed about how First Communion is celebrated in many parishes around the country. This can sometimes be unsettling for parents who remember their own First Communion and long for a more "traditional" approach. However, some of the changes in form are more in keeping with what is done in other parts of the world and what was done in the United States in earlier centuries. In addition, some practices are being altered to fit more closely with what Catholics have always believed about the Eucharist. So, while we may fondly remember things being done a certain way, what's "traditional" is not always easy to pinpoint. Let's take a look at some of the major changes taking place in parishes around the country and the rationale behind them:

First Communion within the context of a regular Sunday Mass, rather than a special Mass.

As a celebration of the Resurrection, the Sunday Mass is for the entire parish, the entire Church. Celebrating First Communion within the regular Sunday parish Mass makes sense for a number of reasons. After First Communion, the Sunday Mass is where most children will receive the Eucharist most often. They have joined in celebration with the whole parish, and their initial celebration should reflect this. Second, Church documents, such as the *General Directory for Catechesis*, remind us that catechesis is the responsibility of the whole parish. Individuals should be within the context of the whole parish community when they celebrate the sacraments of initiation. Finally, celebrations such as First Communion are an important teaching tool for the parish as a whole. Seeing individuals celebrate the sacrament for the first time can renew our own appreciation for this wonderful gift.

Celebrating "family-style" versus all first communicants sitting and processing together.

In the past, part of the charm (and photo opportunity) of First Communion celebrations

continued on the next page



has been having the communicants process down the aisle at the beginning of Mass in two lines (one for boys and one for girls) to take their seats at the front of the church. When the time comes for the Eucharistic procession, the children process to the altar in two lines to receive before the rest of the congregation. While this form has its aesthetic appeal, in some parishes it is being replaced by a family-style celebration in which the first communicant processes with his or her entire family. This is meaningful in a number of ways. In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, parents are called the “primary catechists” of their children and the family is referred to as the “domestic church.” It is therefore fitting that the child be presented for his or her first reception of the Eucharist (as for baptism) by the family. This form also highlights the fact that the child is joining the rest of his or her family at the Eucharistic table for the first time.

Some parents fear a loss of a special sort of recognition that seemed to come with the First Communion liturgies they remember. With some creativity and flexibility, family-style First Communion Masses can also be tailored to highlight the “specialness” of the occasion. Parishes can have the First Communion families sit at the front. They may also have them create banners with symbols that are representative of their families to be hung on the side of the pew or elsewhere in the church. First Communion families may be a part of the opening procession or recession, and the families or children may be asked to come to the front of the church for a special blessing after the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

Focusing on lifelong celebration of the Sacrament, versus focusing on the child's first reception of the Eucharist.

While a child's First Communion is certainly a time for special celebration, it should be the beginning of a lifelong celebration of the Sacrament. Each time we receive the Eucharist, we receive Christ himself, and we understand this even more deeply as we grow in knowledge of the Faith. For this reason, there is more focus in some parishes on teaching the meaning and implications of the Eucharist (not just how to receive, but what the Eucharist means in our lives) as well as a focus on using First Communion as an opportunity to educate parents and the parish as a whole about the Sacrament.

While some things change, some things remain the same. The Eucharist is the “source and summit of the Christian life.” May we all be renewed and refreshed as we welcome our children to the table.

TEN

FIRST COMMUNION



Spiritual Preparations

Talk to your child about his or her baptism.

All sacraments are necessarily related to baptism, the first sacrament we celebrate.

Most children, having been baptized as infants, won't remember their baptism. Take out your child's baptismal candle and pictures and talk about the important day he or she was welcomed into the Family of God. Discuss how First Communion is an extension of that day, as now they are welcomed to the family meal.

Talk with your child about your own First Communion experience.

Try to remember as much as possible about your own First Communion day and share this with your child. Encourage other family members (such as brothers and sisters) to talk about their experiences as well. Take out First Communion photos if you have them.

Photos: Shutterstock, Karen Cullway, Eric Comolay

Practical Preparations

Plan the wardrobe.

Several weeks in advance, involve your child in deciding what he or she will wear on First Communion day. Spring fashions are generally in the stores by late winter, so if your child is celebrating in the spring, February or March is a good time to shop. More traditional First Communion attire may include white dresses with veils for girls and black or white suits for boys. However, at some parishes, nice Sunday clothes are the norm. The most important part of choosing what your child is to wear is to make sure his or her attire reflects the dignity and joy of the occasion.



WAYS TO PREPARE FOR COMMUNION DAY

Celebrate meals together as a family.

Unfortunately, our society's hectic pace has made sitting down to meals as a family less common; yet, the family meal is an important opportunity for sharing and becoming closer to one another. It's difficult for children to understand the Eucharist as the family meal of the Church if they have no experience with eating together with their families at home — the “domestic Church.” If you don't already, make it a point to eat together at the table with no television on several occasions before your child's First Communion. It's a practice you may decide to continue.

Spend time in family prayer.

In Pope Saint John Paul II's “Letter to Families,” the pope called prayer the source of all renewal of family life. Spend some time praying together, asking God to prepare your child to receive Jesus in the Eucharist and thanking him for this wonderful gift. You may even want to pray a First Communion novena during the days leading up to your child's First Communion celebration.



Help your child understand and participate in the Mass.

Encourage your child to pay attention to the Mass singing and praying the responses along with you. Special children's missals and books about the Mass often include both the prayers of the Mass and pictures. You may also wish to practice the prayers of the Mass with your child at other times. For example, say, “The Lord be with you,” and encourage your child to respond appropriately.

Attend Holy Thursday Mass and Eucharistic Adoration as a family.

The Holy Thursday liturgy, which typically precedes First Communion on the parish calendar, can be a wonderful learning experience for children preparing for Eucharist. It recalls the story of the first Eucharist, Jesus' Last Supper with his apostles, and closes with the transfer of the Eucharist and Eucharistic Adoration. Some parishes also have other times for adoration of the Blessed Sacrament.

Stopping by for a short time of prayer can help children better appreciate Christ's presence in the Eucharist.



Invite friends and extended family members.

Be sure to let friends and family members know as soon as possible about your child's First Communion celebration. You may want to enlist your child's help in writing invitations to attend.

Involve cultural and family traditions in your First Communion preparations.

Find out if there are First Communion traditions that are specific to your family or cultural group and involve these traditions as much as possible in your preparations for your child. This will highlight the fact that he or she is joining the family at the Eucharistic table.

Find a meaningful gift to mark the occasion

While First Communion isn't about getting gifts and money, it's helpful for your child to receive something concrete to help remember this important milestone. Spiritual articles make especially good First Communion gifts.

TABLE PRAYERS

Grace Before Meals

Bless us, O Lord, and these thy gifts,
which we are about to receive
from thy bounty.

Through Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Mealtime Family Prayer

Thank you, Lord, for the gift of our
family.

We love and treasure our time
together,
for we see how fast the days fly by.
Please be with us in our eating and
sharing,
this day and every day,
so we may become nourished in
body and soul.
Through Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Grace After Meals

We give you thanks, O Lord,
for all the graces and benefits
we have received from your bounty.

Through Christ our Lord.
Amen.



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