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Jonathan Schott
St. John Fisher College

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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"In Roman Catholic parishes throughout not only the Diocese of Rochester, New York, but also around the United States and Canada, parish-based catechetical formation in preparation for sacramental celebration is losing ground in favor of the family-based model, where the parents fulfill their roles as the primary educators of their children."

Roman Catholic Sacramental Preparation: For Kids Only?

By: Jonathan Schott

In Roman Catholic parishes throughout not only the Diocese of Rochester, New York, but also around the United States and Canada, parish-based catechetical formation in preparation for sacramental celebration is losing ground in favor of the family-based model, where the parents fulfill their roles as the primary educators of their children.¹

The question however, is how adequately prepared are the parents themselves in providing a strong and solid sacramental preparation? Are we, as Catholic education ministers, providing the parents of our children with necessary catechesis and tools to fully integrate and develop our young people to participate in what are known as the “master works” of God?²

For the most part, the answer is no. Time and time again those of us who fill ministerial roles as “master catechists” or catechetical leaders run into problems of parents not assuming the role of the primary educator of their children during sacramental preparation. Whether the reason be that the parents do not feel adequate theologically to assume this leadership role, or be it that parents simply are not active in their faith - the “Easter, Christmas, and Communion” Catholics, - there is nonetheless a breakdown in parents’ ability to “teach the faith” to their children, especially during sacramental catechesis.

What are the reasons for this breakdown? I note three specific reasons here. First, some parents simply do not know what “catechesis” means. For some, it means dropping their children off for parish-based formation classes once a week or sending their children to a Children’s Liturgy of the Word or its equivalent on Sunday during Mass. The unfortunate

¹ Department of Evangelization and Catechesis, Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester, “Guidelines for Sacramental Preparation,” p. 25; cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, #2225-2227.

² Cf. Luke 5:17; 6:19; 8:46.

result of the “drop off model” is that it separates parents and children from forming their faith together. This dichotomy is particularly noticeable in parishes that embrace the classroom model of formal Children’s Christian Formation but embrace a model of family home-based sacramental catechesis.

Secondly, in some of these cases, a lack of knowing what catechesis is may be the result of some misinformation. For example, parents who bring their children to religion class once a week may assume that these children will be catechized for sacramental preparation when in actuality they are not. Also, parents might not be adequately informed of what the Church teaches in this regard, specifically, that they are responsible in the sacramental catechesis of their children. As the National Catechetical Directory states,

“Parents have a right and duty to be intimately involved in preparing their children for [the Sacraments.] Catechesis aims to help parents grow in their understanding and appreciation of [the Sacraments] and participate readily in the catechizing of their children.”³

Third, persons who in roles at the parish level in terms of Catechetical Leader or Director of Religious Education have not been active enough in their models for sacramental catechesis in promoting parental involvement and parental guidance in children’s sacramental preparation. This may be a result of the “old guard” who grew up in the Catholic school system before Vatican II or simply catechetical leaders who too zealously and wrongly take on the responsibility of catechizing children for the sacraments.

³ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *National Catechetical Directory for Catholics of the United States*, “Sharing the Light of Faith,” Washington, D.C., 1979, #121.

What is the solution to this problem? Can we require that all parents, if they utilize the parish-based religious education model, must in turn serve as a volunteer catechist so that they may be more directly involved in their children's catechesis? Do we send out the parents of those children who are dismissed for Children's Liturgy of the Word so that our already scarcely populated pews are even emptier? Or, do we take a new approach to our sacramental catechesis, empowering parents, informing parents, and enabling parents to work alongside their children as they prepare to celebrate in God's great gifts of grace. This option is the future of sacramental catechesis for children: family faith formation focusing on catechesis, evangelization, worship, and our Catholic life. But how do we accomplish this goal?

I think a very good platform to develop this way of thought and action is to embed a parental sacrament preparation module into an existing structure and timeline for parish sacramental celebrations. Most parishes already require parent information meetings, perhaps a retreat, an activity day, Mass attendance, and so on. But none of these options function in their fullest capacity if the parents are simply "going through the motions of what must be done" for their child to celebrate a sacrament while all throughout these meetings, retreats, and so on parents are actually thinking more about the family party after little Joey makes his First Eucharist. We as the catechetical leaders do not have the responsibility to prepare children for the sacraments; we have the responsibility to *empower families* to prepare for the sacraments *together*.

I mentioned above four ways in which families can learn more and experience more in order for them to be empowered in their sacramental catechesis. These four "pillars" are absolutely critical if we are to succeed in our role of re/in/forming our parish families during

sacramental preparation.⁴

First, we must be clear on what catechesis is. A segment of the parental preparation module should be devoted to understanding the nature and goal of catechesis, and be more aware that catechesis is not, to put it very simply, “teaching.”

Secondly, we need to refocus our efforts to include a move toward evangelization. When we speak to parents about evangelization, we are speaking about conversion, about a deepening of our faith alongside our children; growing deeper in our relationship to God through an experience of conversion in sacramental preparation.

Third, we must reiterate again and again that our sacramental celebrations fall directly in line with our worship celebrations. Sacraments happen during liturgy. Attendance and participation in parish liturgies is a keystone to developing a sense of conversion and a sense of association with God.

Finally, we must empower the parents of our children to know that sacraments are for life. Celebration of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist should happen over the course of one’s earthly existence; from womb to tomb. Furthermore, the sacraments give us life. We are participating in Christ when we prepare for and celebrate a sacrament. We spiritually and physically bond with Christ in our sacramental celebrations; in the sacraments we get life. Yet most importantly, when we do things “in memory of me,” there is a spiritual drive and desire inside each one of us to be welcomed into Christ’s presence at the time our death. Through our love and adoration of the sacraments, we hope for the greatest glory of all: eternal life in

⁴ I use the spelling of the word re/in/forming here for specific reasons. One, I contend that parents may have been misinformed about what catechesis is and their responsibilities, therefore they must be *re-informed*. Secondly, we are bringing a fresh approach to the models for sacramental preparation, therefore we are *informing* our participants in a new way, which will lead to a deepening of our faith as a whole, therefore we are *forming* our faith as Catholics.

Christ Jesus.

This model for family sacramental formation may not be the best model developed, it may very well be a trial case that is unsuccessful when put into practice. My hope, however, is that we as Catholics can grow together in a deeper understanding of our sacramental and spiritual lives by coming together with parents and children during their very special time in preparing for a sacrament. And even if we only reach one family, one small family in a sea of others, then we are beginning to transform and inspire.