



Q How will my child benefit from using the *Together in Jesus* program?

A The title *Together in Jesus* expresses the aim of the program—to draw your child into fuller and more active participation in the life of the Church. This means both in its life at Sunday worship and in the daily call to love one another.

Like every Catholic, your child will become one with Christ by receiving his Body and Blood. Eucharist is the sacrament that both nourishes the individual and creates the community that is the Body of Christ in the world—the Church. The effect of Eucharist is communion—the gift or grace of sharing God's life.

Together in Jesus explores the traditions of the Church with your child.

- Our Church welcomes new members through the Sacraments of Initiation: Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist (Lesson 1)
- The Church remembers Jesus in the seasons and Sundays of the liturgical year (Lesson 4)
- Jesus in his lifetime welcomed everyone, eating with sinners and feeding crowds of listeners (Lesson 5)
- Jesus ate a special meal with his followers on the night before he died (Lesson 6)
- Jesus' followers today gather for Mass and receive the Body and Blood of Christ (Lesson 7)
- The children will celebrate their First Eucharist (Lesson 8)

Questions Parents Ask About First Eucharist



Q How can just six lessons teach children enough to receive the Eucharist?

A Indeed, *Together in Jesus* does offer children just six lessons of immediate preparation for receiving First Eucharist. In most parishes, however, First Eucharist preparation takes place in addition to a regular religion program for primary children.

Together in Jesus will make your child aware of the main events in Jesus' life, the main parts of the Mass, and the roles children can take in liturgies, such as gift bearers and readers.

First Eucharist preparation aims only to help children begin participating in the Eucharist. All of us deepen our understanding of the Eucharist and our response to its meaning through taking part in the sacrament over time. The Church asks us to gather and celebrate the Eucharist weekly so the sacrament can continuously nourish our growth as individuals and as members of the Church.

Q Why is the Eucharist so important for Catholics?

A To receive First Eucharist, a child must have reached the age of reason and recognize Jesus is really present with us in his Body and Blood. Eucharist gives us our identity as Church. We who share the Body and Blood of Christ are to become the Body of Christ, the Church. We who drink the cup pledge the pouring out of our lives as Jesus poured out his.

Saint John Paul II stressed the importance of the Eucharist in the life of the Church: "The Eucharist is the heart and the summit of the Church's life, for in it Christ associates his Church and all its members with his sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving offered once for all on the cross to his Father; by this sacrifice he pours out the graces of salvation on his Body which is the Church" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1407).

Q What help does *Together in Jesus* give me, as a parent?

A First of all, the program gives you background in this special parent handout. In addition, *Together in Jesus* provides a special poster to display at home on your refrigerator or elsewhere and use as a focal point for family involvement in your child's First Eucharist preparation. This poster

features a parent/child activity for each of the program's six First Eucharist lessons.

"Parent Notes" on the poster make additional suggestions about activities parents and their children can do together as part of the child's preparation. These notes integrate parent involvement with the children's lessons.



Whose job is it to prepare my child for the First Eucharist?



Both the family and the parish have important roles in preparing children for First Eucharist. From their child's birth, parents share their faith, first by choosing Baptism for their child and then by word and by example in everyday life. The *General Directory for Catechesis* tells us that the witness of parents' Christian life is irreplaceable in children's religious awakening (#226). The Second Vatican Council recognized the family as the center of living faith when it called the family the domestic Church.

When children reach the age of reason, the parish community, in the name of the whole Church, invites children to come to Jesus' table. In some parishes, parents act as catechists and prepare their own children to receive First Eucharist. Some parishes offer a home-based religious education program as an option that parents may choose.

Most parishes train catechists to specialize in helping young children understand the Eucharist at their own level. But even in this situation, parish directors of faith formation realize that while

catechists can teach children Gospel stories to help them understand Mass as Jesus' special meal and can explain the actions of the priest at Mass, they cannot take the place of parents and family. All members of the family—father, mother, other children, and members of the extended family—nurture the faith of children by receiving the sacraments, by praying, and by striving to live holy lives of sacrifice and charity.



What can I do as a parent to help?



Only parents can help prepare their children for First Eucharist by taking them to Sunday Mass. Children learn by doing. Taking your children to Mass is an irreplaceable way parents nurture their children's Catholic faith.

Many children make their First Communion because grandparents insist or parents don't want them to miss out. But because of family circumstances, some of these children can't make their second, third, and fourth Communion, which are just as important as their first. Eucharist is the food and fuel of Christian life. Many catechists report that the first communicants they prepare don't or can't receive Holy Communion again in the next year.

It confuses children to have their catechists tell them they should go to Mass every Sunday and receive Holy Communion but then not be able to get there. Many parents with young children work long hours at more than one job. Weekend work schedules may make getting to church difficult. However, during

your child's First Eucharist preparation year, it is vital to find ways to participate in Eucharist together.

The First Communion of an oldest child catches some parents with their commitment to participating in parish life a bit unsettled. During the young-adult years, many young people take a break from going to church or being active Catholics. A child's First Eucharist preparation can be a call to take one's own faith issues off the shelf, examine them, bring them up to date, and assess what one really wants for one's child.

Sharing the life of a parish community can be a real support and source of sustaining friendships for young parents, especially those whose own parents live at a distance. Worshiping with others tells children their parents share values and traditions with a wide variety of people.

Another reason to take your children to Eucharist is that the liturgy itself is a great teacher for young children. The sights, songs, signs, colors, smells, touches, and tastes of the Mass are all concrete and within the grasp of children.

Children will not remember all the words they hear, but they are likely to remember the people they watch each Sunday going to Holy Communion, the scenes they see in stained-glass windows, the incense wafting overhead.

Many catechists complain they can't teach much in the few hours of First Eucharist preparation or even in the weekly classes during the year. Catechists do only part of the work of nurturing and forming children's faith. Sharing the life of the community that prays

together and does the work of justice together also instructs. This is the Catholic way to grow into a sacrament—through participation.

Celebrating the liturgical seasons in small ways at home can help children realize the Sunday Gospels tell the story of Jesus' life. These celebrations can include:

- Advent wreath and prayers
- Putting up the crib
- Keeping a palm
- Having a crucifix
- Reading Bible stories
- Celebrating baptismal anniversaries
- Looking and talking about parents' wedding photos
- Talking about family members' Baptism and First Eucharist photos

Q What can my child really understand about the Eucharist?

A In preparing children for First Eucharist, we have to consider the concreteness of their thinking and their ability to understand symbols. We want to share our faith that the consecrated bread and wine are the Body and Blood of Christ. The guidelines in the *National Directory for Catechesis*, Chapter 5, #36, page 127, direct us to help children understand that this consecrated bread is different from any other bread. However, the children don't observe any concrete change in the bread.

The best approach to helping children begin to understand that they receive the Body of

Christ in Holy Communion is to teach them about the Church, the People of God, who gather around the risen Jesus. The children can experience Eucharist as a celebration of believers who remember that Jesus died and rose, as a meal shared by friends and started by Jesus before he died, and as the sacrament through which Jesus comes to us and shares with us his new life.

Primary children can only begin to understand that they receive the Body and Blood of Christ in First Eucharist. They must continue to share the faith of their parents and catechists. First Eucharist is a celebration of the shared faith of the parish community—young and old, parent and catechist—sharing and becoming the Body of Christ, the Church.

Q Does my child have to go to First Reconciliation before celebrating First Eucharist?

A The Church requires that your child celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation before receiving First Eucharist. A child must be free from mortal sin and in the state of grace to receive Eucharist. Parishes have the obligation to prepare your child for First Penance.

This preparation and the celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation are usually separated by a significant time period from the preparation for First Eucharist and its celebration so that children do not receive the impression that they must always celebrate Reconciliation before receiving Holy Communion.

Q How will I know when my child is ready to receive First Eucharist?

A Talking with children is the main way to help discern their readiness to receive First Eucharist. Parents, catechists, and pastors share the responsibility of determining a child's readiness.

A child's desire to receive First Eucharist is important. Desire may arise from wanting to do what classmates are doing. This is fine. Companions can be good influences on children. Desire may arise from a child's own faith, which is beginning to form apart from the faith he or she shares with parents.

To receive First Eucharist, the Church requires only that a child be able to distinguish that the Body and Blood of Christ are different from the regular bread and drink we serve on our meal tables. Usually children must have reached the age of reason to make this distinction. They must affirm that Eucharist is the Body and Blood of Christ really present with us. A child must also be free from mortal sin and in the state of grace.

The Church does not require that children have a profound doctrinal understanding of the Eucharist. Rather we invite children to join the community at Jesus' table and to learn the meaning of Eucharist through participating in the sacrament.

Joining the parish community to give thanks and praise through, with, and in Jesus' name and to receive Holy Communion with other Catholics will nurture both children's understanding of the sacramental action and their commitment to becoming the Body of Christ in the world, the Church.



What if my child doesn't want to receive First Eucharist?



Parents and sponsors of children preparing for First Eucharist must allow for the unique development of every child. Eucharist is one of the three sacraments in the journey every Catholic makes on the way to becoming a full member of the Church. If a child does not want to receive First Eucharist, parents and catechists must pay attention to the child's feelings.

Perhaps the child has a misunderstanding that needs to be talked through. Perhaps a child simply isn't ready. If a child is eager to receive First Eucharist, parents and catechists should affirm his or her faith and desire. If not, parents need to help the child work his or her feelings through and seek the help of a catechist if they wish.



What are the rules regarding fasting before receiving the Eucharist?



Church law requires Catholics to fast from food and beverage, with the exception of medicine and water, for one hour before Holy Communion.



What should my child wear for First Communion?



White clothes are not a must, but they are a continuing custom in many parishes. Some directors of faith formation urge parents to play down the white dress and veil and the

white shirt and tie because children at this age tend to remember these concrete aspects of the day much more than its central meaning.

Sometimes a child doesn't want to wear white, prefers another color, or wants to wear a favorite outfit. This is fine, but to enhance First Eucharist as a celebration, children should wear dress-up clothes.



Should my child drink from the communion cup?



In most parishes children receive both the Body and Blood of Christ on their First Eucharist day. The Church encourages the use of both species, especially on important occasions, but we share fully in the Sacrament of the Eucharist whether we receive Holy Communion under both species or one species alone.

Sharing the cup is reasonably safe. Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion wipe the cup each time someone drinks.



What's the right way to receive Holy Communion?



Teach children to extend their hands toward the priest or Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion with left hand, palm open, cupped in the right. Left-handed people can do the opposite. This gesture expresses reverence and openness to receiving the gift of the Body of Christ.

The priest or Extraordinary Minister holds up the host and declares our Christian faith, saying, "The Body of Christ." The child affirms our faith by

answering, "Amen." The child then takes the host with the right hand and places it in his or her mouth. Encourage children to thank God for Jesus and his love after receiving Holy Communion.



What if my spouse isn't Catholic?



Discuss with your pastor and director of religious education how your parish handles interfaith matters. Probably your parish will want you to invite your spouse to be as full a part of your child's First Eucharist as possible.

If your spouse is not comfortable taking part in the First Eucharist celebration, consider having the child's grandparents, godparents, or family friends join in standing with the child on this important day.



Should our family have a celebration for our first communicant?



A family celebration will add importance to the day. Do what is customary for your family. Invite family and friends or go out for a special meal. If you customarily give gifts, help family and friends know what gifts your child needs.

