



**Guidelines for
Parish-Based
Religious Education
of Children**

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**COUNCIL FOR CATECHETICS OF THE
IRISH EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE**

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‘The definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch, but in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ.’

Pope John Paul II, *On Catechesis in Our Time, Catechesi Tradendae*, 5

‘In baptising their children, parents/guardians express their desire for them to be disciples of Christ. As part of the Christian community, they seek to help their children grow in faith. The preparation for and first celebration of Reconciliation and first participation in Holy Communion can be a very special time of rediscovering the joy of faith at the heart of family life.’

Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference, *Preparing and Celebrating the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Holy Communion for the First Time: Guidelines and Discussion Document for Homes, Parish Communities and Schools*, p. 7

Introduction

Faith is a gift received at Baptism that must be nurtured and nourished in order to grow. The family has a vital role in the transmission of the faith that comes to us from Jesus Christ. Parents and guardians are the children's first teachers in the faith. Pope Francis teaches that it is in the family that children learn the 'trade' of faith, as it were, 'passing it down from one person to another' (Pope Francis, *On Love in the Family, Amoris Laetitia*, 16).

Faith, though received as an individual, develops and strengthens through communal practice and worship. The parish is a faith community that sustains and nourishes our faith. Pope Francis reminds us that the parish should be the larger family where faith continues to grow. It is called to be a place of welcome, where families feel they belong, where they feel affirmed, where they experience nourishment and support. Again, Pope Francis reminds us that the 'main contribution to the pastoral care of families is offered by the parish, which is the family of families' (*AL*, 202). Catholic primary schools can also play a vital role in assisting parents in the spiritual, moral and religious development of children.



It is important that parents, having chosen Baptism for their children, are aware of their role within the parish. It is equally important that parishes recognise their responsibility to young families in facilitating their involvement in parish life. Families should be invited to attend Sunday Eucharist; to pray with their young children; to teach them about their faith and involve their children in the life of their local parish.

While the majority of Catholic parents choose a Catholic primary school for their children, a significant number of families, for a variety of reasons, send their children to schools that are not under Catholic patronage. Children attending Catholic primary schools are entitled to two and a half hours of religious education every week. The Veritas religious education programme *Grow in Love* is a structured programme informed by the content of the *Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland* (2015).

Catholic primary schools prepare children to celebrate the sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist for the first time and to receive the sacrament of Confirmation. Children who attend non-Catholic schools do not receive formal religious education during the school day. The local parish must take responsibility for supporting these parents in nourishing and developing the faith formation and catechesis of their children.



In this context, and in the context of a growing appreciation of the role of families and of parishes in supporting the faith development of Catholic children, the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference presents these guidelines regarding children requiring a parish-based religious education outside the Catholic school network.

Therefore, the purpose of these guidelines is two-fold:

- to assist dioceses and parishes in their provision of a parish-based religious education programme outside the Catholic school network, including sacramental education and preparation;
- to support parents in their task as primary educators of their children in the ways of faith by providing a parish-based religious education programme.

‘Christian parents accept the responsibility of bringing their child to Christ through a religious and prayerful upbringing. They seek to encourage her or him to grow personally in the faith they have been gifted with at Baptism and to become fully members of their family, the Church.’

National Directory for Catechesis in Ireland, *Share the Good News*, p. 78

Some General Principles to Keep in Mind

- Parents must be invited to engage in the faith formation of their children at the earliest possible stage in their child's life.
- Whether religious education happens in a Catholic primary school or in the local parish, children require holistic formation in their faith, supported and encouraged by their peers and teachers. Religious education makes a significant contribution to the holistic development of the child and enables the child to develop morally, spiritually and religiously. Parishes support all parents in this role, whether it be in Catholic schools or in parish-based programmes.
- It is important to remember the *whole* Christian community is responsible for Catholic religious education. The Christian community must help parents assume their responsibility to educate their children in the faith and assist them in this. As necessary, such



assistance should extend to the offering of financial assistance to the locally run programmes as the need arises.

- Religious education is much more than sacramental education or sacramental preparation. It includes instruction, formation and participation in religious and liturgical experiences that will bring a child into an ever-richer understanding of their faith (which is a life-long process). It must not be reduced to a short period of preparation before the reception of a sacrament.

Therefore, parents who wish their children to engage in formal faith formation should be invited to enrol their children in the parish-based religious education programme from Junior Infants (P1). The celebration of the sacraments is part of their child's faith journey, not an 'add-on'.

- The importance of prayer and liturgy should be highlighted in any religious education programme and children should be offered, at regular intervals, opportunities to develop their prayer lives. As the children come to know and love God, their relationship with him will mature. They will begin to understand the importance of 'talking to God'. They should learn age and stage appropriate skills that will enable them to reflect on and review their lives in the light of Gospel values, particularly in terms of a desire to reach out to people who are marginalised and disadvantaged in our society.
- In terms of specific engagement for sacramental preparation, the Code of Canon Law outlines the duty of the parish priest to:

ensure, in accordance with the norms laid down by the diocesan bishop, that children are properly prepared for First Reconciliation and First Holy Communion and for the sacrament of Confirmation, by means of catechetical formation over an appropriate period of time. (CCC 777, 2)

For this reason, the local parish priest should work to ensure that those who ask for the sacraments are nourished in the faith that we treasure. He should be supported, as relevant, by the parish pastoral council and others working with him in his parish. Ideally, parish-based religious education classes should be supported through visitation by the priest/s. The work of the priest should also be supported through, for example, the appointment of a person or a team to oversee and support the parish-based religious education programme.

- Only programmes approved by the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference and/or the local bishop should be used. The religious education of Catholic children requiring a parish-based religious education programme should emphasise both the process and the content, as well as ensuring that skills relating to religious literacy, inter-religious literacy and spiritual literacy are developed. Age and stage appropriate methodologies should be employed, with appropriate Continuing Professional Development (CPD) offered to the educators.

Good Practice

Two models of religious education for children requiring parish-based religious education are envisaged:

Model A

- A parish or pastoral unit or deanery/pastoral area based programme. The parish or pastoral unit or deanery will employ the services of a trained and qualified person. Parents will be expected to contribute on a weekly basis to help cover the costs of running the programme. The programmes will be expected to observe the norms of local diocesan child safeguarding policies. Model A should be understood as the preferred option.

Model B

- An ‘after school’ programme organised by a committee of local Catholic parents. This option should only be considered where, because of large numbers of children enrolling in the parish-based religious education programme, the parish does not have the necessary resources to support the work without this additional support.

Whether the first or second model is employed, the diocese will ensure that the programme is animated by the diocesan adviser for religious education. Such animation should be understood as a key dimension of the diocesan advisor’s evolving role.



- Information about the parish's religious education programme should also be shared formally with parents when they present their child for Baptism. Parishes that have schools that do not espouse a Catholic ethos should make reasonable efforts to publicise the parish's provision for religious education for the Catholic children attending these schools. This might happen through parish and/or diocesan websites, through local newsletters and through local newspapers, as appropriate and, where possible, through the schools.
- Prior to being admitted to a local parish or pastoral unit or deanery/pastoral area-based religious education programme, parents are expected to apply in writing on behalf of their child. The application should confirm their commitment to do their part to help in the faith formation of their child.
- In addition to weekly religious education classes and regular Mass attendance, the children preparing for the sacraments will also participate in all parish-based preparation programmes such as *Do This in Memory* for first Eucharist and *You Shall be My Witnesses* for Confirmation.
- In general, it is most appropriate for the child to attend religious education classes in their local parish or pastoral unit or deanery and, in time, to celebrate the sacraments in the parish in which they live/normally worship.
- For children presenting for Reconciliation and Eucharist for the first time and for Confirmation, the candidates should be issued with a certificate of participation by the course director stating that they have participated since Junior Infants (P1) in the parish-based religious

education programme, completed the parish's sacramental preparation programme and are ready to celebrate the sacraments.

- To assist in the furnishing of the necessary certificate of participation to the local priest, an attendance register should be kept by the catechist to ensure that each child is gifted with the kind of faith experience that is envisaged by the parish-based religious education programme.
- Parish led celebrations of the sacraments should be understood as the norm for all children but particularly for those children who have been prepared as part of the parish-based religious education programme. In exceptional circumstances, where numbers warrant a separate ceremony, the emphasis should be on the parish celebration. The celebration should not be presented as pertaining to a particular school.
- The catechist appointed to do this important work will be a person of faith and a practising Catholic and have the required knowledge, skills and commitment to engage with such an important task.



Proposed Structure of a Parish-Based Religious Education Programme

- Catholic children attending non-Catholic schools should be offered significant contact time in religious education classes over the course of the school year, so that the catechist can offer the kind of holistic programme envisaged in this document. The document recognises the pivotal role of human connection and development of community in such a programme.
- The central role of parents will also be nurtured by ensuring that they are aware of the programme that their child will be following, by suggesting ways in which they can support their child on their journey of faith and by including them regularly in class events.
- Opportunities for gathering parents and children together to celebrate their faith will be offered throughout the year, including eucharistic celebrations, carol services, penance services, rituals and prayer services.
- Celebration of the Sacraments will take place during the year in which the child is to celebrate the sacrament – Second Class (P4) for Reconciliation and Eucharist for the first time and Fifth/Sixth (P7) Class for Confirmation.

Bibliography

Pope John Paul II, On Catechesis in Our Time, *Catechesi Tradendae* (1979). This is an apostolic exhortation following the synod on the topic of the handing on of faith in our time.

The Irish Episcopal Conference, *Share the Good News*. This is the National Directory for Catechesis in Ireland published in 2010. It addresses specific catechetical issues that arise in the Irish context.

The Irish Episcopal Conference, the *Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland*. Approved by the Irish Episcopal Conference and granted the Decree of *Recognitio* by the Holy See in 2015, the aim of the *Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum* is: ‘To help children mature in relation to their spiritual, moral and religious lives, through their encounter with, exploration and celebration of the Catholic faith’.

Irish Episcopal Conference, *Preparing and Celebrating the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Holy Communion for the First Time: Guidelines and Discussion Document for Homes, Parish Communities and Schools* (2016). This document is primarily a resource for parishes. It is hoped that it will assist parishes to engage further with parents/guardians and schools. This material can be adapted by dioceses and parishes seeking to develop their own guidelines and resources in this area.

Pope Francis, The Joy of Love, *Amoris Laetitia*, published in 2016, is a post-synodal apostolic exhortation on love in the family. In it Pope Francis addresses the pastoral care of families, including the education of children.



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