

CHAPTER 5

FIRST HOLY COMMUNION OF CHILDREN

A. INTRODUCTION

- 5.1.1 Toward the end of early childhood, the young disciple whose baptismal faith has been enriched through catechesis is presented to the Church for admission to Holy Communion and the completion of Christian initiation. The young Christian then begins a lifelong participation in the central mystery of our life in Christ, which is the Eucharist.
- 5.1.2 The principal fruit of receiving the Eucharist in Holy Communion is an intimate union with Christ Jesus. The Lord said: “He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.” Life in Christ has its foundation in the Eucharistic banquet: “As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats me will live because of me.” Through it Christ unites them to all the faithful in one body – the Church. Communion renews, strengthens, and deepens this incorporation into the Church, already achieved by baptism.
- 5.1.3 What material food produces in our bodily life, Holy Communion wonderfully achieves in our spiritual life: it preserves, increases, and renews the life of grace received at baptism; it separates us from sin, for the Eucharist cannot unite us to Christ without at the same time cleansing us from past sins and preserving us from future sins; it strengthens our charity, which tends to be weakened in daily life; and this living charity wipes away venial sins; in the Eucharist, Christ revives our love and enables us to break our disordered attachments to creatures and root ourselves in him. Finally, the Eucharist commits us to the service of the poor.⁴⁹⁷
- 5.1.4 If, in Egypt, the destroying angel saw the blood of the Paschal lamb sprinkled on the doors and dared not enter, “how much less will the devil approach now when he sees, not that figurative blood on the doors, but the true blood on the lips of believers, the doors of the temple of Christ.”⁴⁹⁸

⁴⁹⁷ CCC 1391-1397; John 6: 56-57. “By the same charity that it enkindles in us, the Eucharist preserves us from future mortal sins. The more we share the life of Christ and progress in his friendship, the more difficult it is to break away from him by mortal sin. The Eucharist is not ordered to the forgiveness of mortal sins—that that is proper to the sacrament of Reconciliation. The Eucharist is properly the sacrament of those who are in full communion with the Church.” CCC 1395.

⁴⁹⁸ Saint John Chrysostom, *Catecheses*, in *Liturgy of the Hours*, Good Friday, Office of Readings.

- 5.1.5 A plenary indulgence is granted to the faithful who receive Holy Communion for the first time, or devoutly assist at the first Holy Communion of others.⁴⁹⁹

B. OFFICES AND MINISTRIES

Parish Community

- 5.2.1 Parish communities should welcome children who are being led to first Holy Communion, and provide opportunities for liturgical participation in accord with the Directory for Masses with Children, and the Lectionary for Masses with Children.
- 5.2.2 A partial indulgence is granted to the faithful who teach or study Christian doctrine.⁵⁰⁰

Parents

- 5.3.1 It is primarily the duty of parents and those who take the place of parents, as well as the duty of pastors, to take care that children who have reached the use of reason are prepared properly and are refreshed with the divine food of the Eucharist as soon as possible.⁵⁰¹
- 5.3.2 Parents should bring their children to Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation, and even to daily Mass if possible, to integrate them into the Church's Eucharistic life. The celebration of the seasons and feasts of the liturgical year is a primary means for gaining an understanding of the mystery of Christ, for the liturgical year "unfolds the entire mystery" and "completes the formation of the faithful."⁵⁰²

⁴⁹⁹ MI, grants, 8 §1 1^o. For the conditions for gaining a plenary indulgence, see ADW, Liturgical Norms and Policies, 7.12.6.

⁵⁰⁰ MI, grants, 6.

⁵⁰¹ CIC can. 914. With the completion of the seventh year, a minor is presumed to have the use of reason. See CIC cann. 97 §1, 99, 852 §2. In RBC 1, "the term 'children' or 'infants' refers to those who have not yet reached the age of discernment and therefore cannot profess personal faith." See also ADW, Liturgical Norms and Policies, 2010, 2.1.6.b, 2.44.2, 3.7.1-3, 4.8.2-3, 5.6.2, 5.7.1-2, 7.5.8, 7.7.15, 8.3.1-3, 9.17.3.a.

⁵⁰² Cf. CIC can. 913 §1; General Norms for the Liturgical Year and the Calendar, 1.

Pastors

- 5.4.1 The pastor is to collaborate with parents in order to lead baptized children to Eucharistic Communion at the proper time and with appropriate formation.⁵⁰³
- 5.4.2 It is for the pastor to exercise vigilance so that children who have not attained the use of reason or whom he judges are not sufficiently disposed do not approach Holy Communion. Interviews of parents and child often serve as valuable means for discerning the faith life of the family and exploring the child's readiness for the sacrament.⁵⁰⁴
- 5.4.3 The pastor should give special consideration to cases mentioned below regarding those in danger of death, children presented before the usual time, and children who have not consistently participated in a catechetical program.⁵⁰⁵

Catechists

- 5.5.1 Catechists assist both the progress of the candidates and the growth of the community. They should take care that their teaching is
- a. filled with the spirit of the Gospel;
 - b. adapted to the signs and cycles of the liturgical year;
 - c. suited to the needs of the candidates; and
 - d. thoroughly grounded in Catholic doctrine.⁵⁰⁶

C. CANDIDATES

General

- 5.6.1 The administration of the Holy Eucharist to children requires that they have sufficient knowledge and careful preparation so that they understand the

⁵⁰³ CIC can. 914.

⁵⁰⁴ CIC can. 914; RS 87.

⁵⁰⁵ See ADW, Liturgical Norms and Policies, 2010, 5.9.2-4.

⁵⁰⁶ RCIA 16; NSC 7.

mystery of Christ according to their capacity and are able to receive the body of Christ with faith and devotion.⁵⁰⁷

- 5.6.2 With the completion of the seventh year, a minor is presumed to have the use of reason. Whoever habitually lacks the use of reason is equated with infants.⁵⁰⁸

Catholic Children of Catechetical Age

- 5.7.1 Those who were baptized in the Catholic Church as infants are to be admitted to Holy Communion when they reach the use of reason.⁵⁰⁹
- 5.7.2 Those who as infants received baptism in another Christian community but who, *while still infants*, were received into full communion with the Catholic Church are likewise admitted to Holy Communion when they reach the use of reason.⁵¹⁰

Children of Catechetical Age Who are to be Baptized or Received into Full Communion with the Catholic Church

- 5.8.1 Children of catechetical age who as infants were neither baptized as Catholics nor received into full communion with the Catholic Church are considered adults, and are to be admitted to Holy Communion at the time of their baptism or reception into full communion, according to the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults.⁵¹¹

Admission to Holy Communion

- 5.9.1 To be admitted to first Holy Communion, children must have “sufficient knowledge and careful preparation so that they understand the mystery of Christ according to their capacity and are able to receive the body of Christ with faith and devotion.”⁵¹²

⁵⁰⁷ CIC can. 913 §1. See also ADW, Liturgical Norms and Policies, 2010, 5.9.1-4.

⁵⁰⁸ See CIC cann. 97 §1, 99, 852 §2. See also ADW, Liturgical Norms and Policies, 2010, 2.1.6.b, 2.44.2, 3.7.1-3, 4.8.2-3, 5.3.1, 5.7.1-2, 7.5.8, 7.7.15, 8.3.1-3, 9.17.3.a.

⁵⁰⁹ CIC can. 914; cf. can. 97 §2. See also ADW, Liturgical Norms and Policies, 2010, 2.1.6.b, 2.44.2, 3.7.1-3, 4.8.2-3, 5.3.1, 5.6.2, 7.5.8, 7.7.15, 8.3.1-3, 9.17.3.a.

⁵¹⁰ See ADW, Liturgical Norms and Policies, 2010, 2.33.1-2.

⁵¹¹ CIC can. 852 §1, 866; RCIA, II, ch. 1 or 5; NSC 18; 19. See also ADW, Liturgical Norms and Policies, 2010, 2.34.1.

⁵¹² CIC can. 913 §1.

- 5.9.2 A child who is exceptionally mature for his or her age and is judged to be ready for receiving the sacrament must not be denied first Holy Communion, provided he or she has received sufficient instruction.⁵¹³
- 5.9.3 Children with physical, mental, or learning disabilities and those who are behaviorally disturbed are to be presented for Eucharistic Communion along with their age peers, when they express a desire for the sacrament and in some way manifest their reverence for it. In cases of profound disability, the Eucharist may be shared without further requirements, as long as the child is able to consume the sacred elements.
- 5.9.4 In danger of death, children may receive Holy Communion if they are able to distinguish the Body of Christ from ordinary food and receive Communion reverently.⁵¹⁴ Such children are also to be confirmed.⁵¹⁵

D. FORMATION AND READINESS

Formation of Candidates

- 5.10.1 As “the culmination of Christian initiation”⁵¹⁶ the first reception of Holy Communion invites the candidate into full participation at the table of the Lord, that is:
- a. self-offering along with Christ;
 - b. taking one’s place with “the whole community of the redeemed” in the “universal sacrifice offered to God by our High Priest;” and, finally,
 - c. coming to the table of the Eucharist where we eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Son of Man so that we may have eternal life and show forth the unity of God’s people.⁵¹⁷
- 5.10.3 The time of formation must be understood to include the whole period following the child’s baptism. Thus, parents are to help their children develop a life of prayer, a knowledge and love of Jesus Christ and his teachings, and a

⁵¹³ RS 87.

⁵¹⁴ CIC can. 913 §2; PCS 280.

⁵¹⁵ CIC cann. 889 §2, 891; RC 11; PCS 31, 246, 276, 280.

⁵¹⁶ RC 13.

⁵¹⁷ CIGI 2.

- practical relationship with the local church, especially through regular attendance at Mass.⁵¹⁸
- 5.10.4 Through support and practical helps, parishes should assist parents to fulfill this role in the first several years of a child's life.
- 5.10.5 When children approach the age of reason, they should be enrolled in the catechetical programs the Church provides to assist and augment formation within the Christian family. Such programs should present the teachings and moral life of the Catholic Church through catechesis that is comprehensive and accommodated to the various stages of the child's growth as a faithful disciple of the Lord.
- 5.10.6 In particular cases (except in danger of death) where a child is presented for first Holy Communion before the ordinary time, the pastor should, in consultation with the parents, determine that the child is ready.⁵¹⁹
- 5.10.7 In the case of children who have not participated consistently in catechetical programs, the pastor should consult with catechists and parents to determine the type of preparation required.⁵²⁰

Eucharistic Formation: Sacrament of Penance

- 5.11.1 The first Holy Communion of children must always be preceded by sacramental confession and absolution. *This order of the sacraments is to be observed without exception by all who exercise the care of souls.*⁵²¹

⁵¹⁸ RBC 5.5; RC 3; CIC can. 914.

⁵¹⁹ CIC can. 914.

⁵²⁰ CIC cann. 843, 912.

⁵²¹ RS 87, citing CIC can. 914; SCDS, Declaration, 24 May 1973 SCSDW, SCC, Letter to the Presidents of the Bishops' Conferences, 31 March 1977; SCSDW, SCC, Response, 20 May 1977. Cf. CIC can. 989: "After having reached the age of discretion, each member of the faithful is obliged to confess faithfully his or her grave sins at least once a year." The discipline on the order of the sacraments was set forth by Pope Saint Pius X in the decree *Quam singulari* (1910) and reiterated by the SCDS in 1973. A few years later, due to "dissension and doubts" the SCC stated again: "According to the decree, *Quam Singulari*, there is only one age for these sacraments and that when it is reached, the obligation begins of receiving both according to the designated order, i.e., confession before communion. 'The age of discretion both for confession and for communion is the age in which the child begins to reason, i.e., around the seventh year, either before or after. From that time begins the obligation of satisfying both the precept of confession and of communion.' When he arrives at the age of discretion, the child has the right in the Church to receive both sacraments. It would be an absurd and unjust discrimination and a violation of his conscience if he were prepared for and admitted only to holy communion." SCC, Response, 31 March 1977. "Pope Pius, in defining the 'age of discretion,' did so at the same time and in the same terms for both sacraments and largely on the basis of the understanding, the intuitions and even the desires of the

- 5.11.2 The value of this practice is to catechize the children, from the age of reason, to the true Christian spirit of penance and conversion, to growth in self-knowledge and self-control, to a true sense of sin, even of venial sin, to the necessity of asking for pardon from God, and above all, to a loving and confident abandonment to the mercy of the Lord. Such a catechesis is principally the task of the parents, assisted by catechists and priests. They are to inculcate in the children not just a sense of sin, but also the serene joy in the encounter with the Father who forgives, as it is signified in the absolution given by the priest.⁵²²
- 5.11.3 In rare and particular cases where a child, after appropriate preparation and invitation, chooses not to approach the sacrament of penance, the pastor, in consultation with parents, should determine if it is advisable to proceed with Eucharistic Communion, which is his or her right if otherwise qualified. If the child is admitted to the Eucharist, care must be given to his or her continuing catechesis regarding the sacrament of penance, so that he or she may soon share it fruitfully.
- 5.11.4 Similar discernment is to be made in the circumstances of children who, because of severe cognitive impairment, are not able to make a confession of sin. (The guidance of the Department of Ministry to People with Special Needs should be sought in these cases.)
- 5.11.5 Whenever possible, the opportunity should be provided for those who celebrate the sacrament of penance for the first time to do so in the context of a communal celebration along with adults and other children.

child himself. The final decision as to when the 'age of discretion' might be present, and therefore the possibility and desirability of receiving both sacraments, was to rest not with the parish priest nor any other random priest, sister, teacher, or special consultant of a professional kind; it was to lie with the confessor of the child—a major acknowledgment of the maturity of a youngster, an assumption that he will have already established a spiritual relationship of a most intimate and faithful kind with his confessor or spiritual director. Moreover, it was indicated that the only other consultation that seemed indicated or appropriate, was with the child's parents.... *Quam Singulari* held in high esteem the knowledge which a child, just beginning to reason, can have about God, not merely as one who rewards the good and punishes the wicked, but also as one who dwells in unutterable mystery, including the triune God and certainly the God of the Incarnation. He nowhere suggested that it was necessary that the child should commit to memory and repeat by rote accurate but superficial theological definitions which convey no idea to the budding intellect. He simply recognized that at this age a child, in fact, usually so develops intellectually as to reveal frequent and astonishing intuitions not merely into human situations but also divine realities. He indicated that the child must be able to distinguish the eucharistic from common bread, to recognize not less so, that what looks like bread is, in this case, not bread but somehow nourishes us with the very life and love of Christ who is God." John Cardinal Wright, "First Confession and First Communion," 7 December 1980.

⁵²² Cf. Congregation for the Sacraments, Letter to the NCCB on the Sacraments of Reconciliation, Holy Orders, and Marriage, 20 December 1986.

- 5.11.6 Those who plan such celebrations must familiarize themselves with Chapter II of the Rite of Penance, which is normative for these liturgical rites.
- 5.11.7 In the context of a celebration prepared primarily for adults (as in parish Lenten services), every effort must be made to welcome and accommodate children who are celebrating the sacrament of penance for the first time.
- 5.11.8 Planning for the rite, selection of readings, and preaching should reflect the teaching of the Rite of Penance.
- 5.11.9 The doctrinal elements of catechesis for the sacrament of penance must always reflect the teaching of the Church in its worship and its creeds. In preparing for their role, catechists are to rely especially on the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, *The United States Catholic Catechism for Adults*, *The Teaching of Christ*, and other archdiocesan-approved catechetical materials.
- 5.11.10 Catechesis concerning this sacrament should also reflect the teaching of the Rite of Penance that this sacrament is rooted in baptismal grace and leads toward complete reconciliation in the Eucharist.
- 5.11.11 In teaching, discussions, and publications regarding penance, care should be given to appropriate titles and descriptions of the sacrament. The formal title is the “Sacrament of Penance;” the liturgical ritual can be called the “Rite of Reconciliation” (e.g., “The children will celebrate the sacrament of penance for the first time,” or, “The Rite of Reconciliation has been scheduled for our children who are preparing for first Holy Communion.”)
- 5.11.12 Regarding the “prayer of the penitent,” or “act of contrition,” children should develop a proper understanding and motivation in order to offer the prayer honestly. Like other penitents, children always have the freedom to speak this prayer in their own words. Models of traditional prayers may be presented even for memorization.⁵²³
- 5.11.13 First penance shall be celebrated in the parish that the child’s family attends. Pastors may allow exemptions from this policy.⁵²⁴

⁵²³ RP 19; see 85-92 for examples.

⁵²⁴ ADW, Policies for Catholic Schools, 2009, 1223, 1225-1226.

Eucharistic Formation: First Holy Communion

- 5.12.1 The doctrinal elements of catechesis for first Holy Communion must always reflect the teaching of the Church in its worship and in its creeds. In preparing for their role, catechists are to rely especially on the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, *The United States Catholic Catechism for Adults*, *The Teaching of Christ*, and other archdiocesan-approved catechetical materials.
- 5.12.2 In teaching, discussions, and publications regarding first Holy Communion, it must always be clear that the candidates are, by baptism, already members of the Body of Christ and living in communion with the Lord. They are to be welcomed into full Eucharistic sharing, participating for the first time in the holy meal of the Lord's Body and Blood.

Eucharistic Formation: Parents

- 5.13.1 Parents of all candidates should be gathered and prepared in the year or so prior to the celebration of first Holy Communion.
- 5.13.2 Parents should be reminded of their unique and God-given role in the Christian formation of their children. They should be given an opportunity to receive practical information concerning preparations for the first Eucharistic Communion of their children, and for the celebration of the sacrament of penance during the time of formation. In addition, they should have the opportunity for personal spiritual preparation for these sacramental celebrations.
- 5.13.3 Parents who for the first time are leading a child to Eucharistic Communion are to be provided with catechesis to deepen their understanding and appreciation of the Eucharist in the life of the Church and in their own lives. They should also be helped to appreciate the relationship between such Communion and the call and dignity of baptism. Within this context, they are to be offered catechesis concerning the Church's ministry of reconciliation, celebrated in the sacrament of penance and fulfilled at the table of the Lord.
- 5.13.4 Parents who have previously participated in such programs are to be welcomed to take part again.
- 5.13.5 Parents and families with special needs (e.g., family crisis, alienation from the Church) are to receive particular pastoral attention to enable them to participate fruitfully in the celebration of the sacrament.

- 5.13.6 A candidate whose parents do not participate in special programs may not for this reason alone be deprived of the right to Eucharistic Communion.⁵²⁵

E. NOTES ON RITES, TIMES, AND PLACES

- 5.14.1 The mystery of Christ unfolds throughout the liturgical year. At its center is the celebration of the Paschal Mystery of the Lord and the renewal of baptismal life at Easter. The initiation of children into sacramental life should be accommodated to this pattern and be supported by its themes and spirit.⁵²⁶
- 5.14.2 Candidates for first Holy Communion during the Easter season should normally be led to their first celebration of the sacrament of penance during the preceding Lenten season.⁵²⁷
- 5.14.3 The season of Lent is a time of “purification and enlightenment” for all the members of the Church. The children should experience the example and support of the whole community in their efforts at conversion and baptismal renewal leading up to the Easter festival.
- 5.14.4 Since the Easter season is the preeminent time for celebrating Christian initiation, first Holy Communion is to be celebrated during that time and in the context of the parish Sunday Mass which most fully expresses the life, worship, and love of the Body of Christ, and in which the local community welcomes its newest communicants.⁵²⁸
- 5.14.5 The special focus of the candidates should be on their participation in the action of the Eucharist. The candidates should be well prepared to sing the acclamations of the Eucharistic Prayer, join in the Lord’s Prayer, share the sign of peace, and partake in Holy Communion. Some of them should be involved in the Presentation of the Gifts.
- 5.14.6 Other liturgical roles (e.g., greeter, reader, cantor) are better given to other competent young people and adults.

⁵²⁵ CIC cann. 843, 912.

⁵²⁶ General Norms on the Liturgical Year and Calendar, 1, 17, 18.

⁵²⁷ Cf. RCIA 293.

⁵²⁸ RS refers to Pope John Paul II’s Apostolic Letter on the Lord’s Day, *Dies Domini* (1998) which reminds the Church that Sunday is “rightly regarded as the as the day of the Eucharist.” It recommends that first Holy Communion be celebrated on Sunday, especially from the Second to the Sixth Sundays of Easter. The document also specifically discounts Holy Thursday Evening Mass as an occasion for first Holy Communion. Reference to *Dies Domini* can be very helpful for catechists and preachers in explaining to the faithful the unique importance of the Lord’s Day and its celebration of the Eucharist. See also ADW, Liturgical Norms and Policies, 2010, 11.26.3.

- 5.14.7 Since the Communion rite to which they are admitted includes the possibility of sharing in both the Eucharistic bread and cup, children should be fully prepared for Communion under both forms (including the chance to taste both elements in their unconsecrated form as part of their catechesis). In the Mass of first Holy Communion, they should be able to exercise the options allowed to all communicants: reception of the host in the hand or on the tongue, and the opportunity to share in the cup of the Lord's blood.
- 5.14.8 Though normal decorum should prevail, no special clothing may be required of candidates for first Holy Communion.
- 5.14.9 First Holy Communion should always be administered by a priest and never outside the celebration of Mass.⁵²⁹ While not required, it is fitting that First Holy Communion be administered under both species. The deacon or other authorized minister may offer Communion from the chalice.
- 5.14.10 First Holy Communion shall be celebrated in the parish that the child's family attends. Pastors may allow exceptions to this policy.⁵³⁰
- 5.14.11 Parishes must consider all candidates for first Holy Communion equally. There must be no distinction or separation of children according to schools or parish religious education programs.
- 5.14.12 When the children of the parish are admitted to the Eucharist on various occasions, they may still be gathered together to celebrate a special Mass as a large group of new communicants.
- 5.14.13 Where possible, baptismal sponsors or godparents of the candidates should be invited to take part in celebrations of first Holy Communion.

F. REGISTRATION OF FIRST HOLY COMMUNION

- 5.15.1 Soon after the celebration, notations are to be made in the parish First Holy Communion register, recording the names of the ones who received first Holy Communion and the place and date. Notations must also be made in the baptismal registers of the communicants. If this happened in another parish, it is the responsibility of the pastor of the place where first Holy Communion was given to notify the pastors of the places of baptism.

⁵²⁹ RS 87.

⁵³⁰ ADW, Policies for Catholic Schools, 2009, 1223, 1225-1226.