



ADOREMUS 2018

Symposium Presentation

7 SEPTEMBER 2018

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preparing children for the sacraments of initiation

In this session, I will offer some principles and practical suggestions which I hope will be helpful in preparing young children for their First Communion, with some reference also to First Confession. It is a personal view, but born of many years of teaching classroom RE and as a Parish catechist and also, I should add as a mother and now a grandmother. I will be talking about what I believe is good pedagogical practice and of course the teaching of the Church. There is much at stake here.

I was once approached after Mass by the aunt of a pupil of mine, who was visiting from another parish. Vicky was Catholic reared and attended Catholic schools in the 1980s, and was evidently practising and going to Sunday Mass, but with huge gaps in her own religious formation, which she herself recognised when her PP asked her to take the First Communion classes the following year. She said “I sort of understand it but don’t know how to say any of it. I don’t have the vocabulary or the background knowledge – help!” In our increasingly secular and post-Christian society, and as a result of a lack of confidence and coherence in teaching Catholic doctrine since the upheavals of the 1960’s and 70’s, I think there are a lot of Vickys. Good First Communion preparation must therefore take nothing for granted – we need to be aware that the catechists themselves may need formation in the Faith, and though it would be great to send them all on courses, that mostly isn’t going to be practical. Parishes have to rely on good-hearted volunteers who will vary greatly in their theological understanding of the Faith.

And the same is of course even more true of most of the parents who want their children to make their First Holy Communion. We know that many will not be regular Mass-goers; and even those who are won’t have received any formation in the faith since their schooldays – and that, even if it was good, will have been at least a decade ago. We must not of course be snuffy about this. I am strongly opposed to the idea that parents should have to pass some sort of test of their Catholic practice before being ‘allowed’ to bring their children to the altar. All Catholic parents have the right to bring their children to the sacraments. What we must recognise, therefore, is that First Communion preparation is an opportunity to catechise not just the children but also their parents and, yes, even the catechists!

How can we do this? I am not advocating that parents should be made to attend endless extra talks. Family life is very busy, and both parents – if indeed there are two in the home - are likely to be working.



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We mustn't add extra burdens to parents trying to juggle their family and work. What we must do is to put simple but clear formation in the Faith into our First Communion courses themselves. It must contain doctrine, for the children and for their parents. And we must include simple and enjoyable 'extension' activities which the children can do at home with their parents - or even grandparents!

The first thing I want to talk about is the doctrinal content of our courses. For too long, catechetical material for the very young in preparation for their First Communion has been beset by abstracts. Community, togetherness, celebration, sharing, belonging, gathering – all these realities of course have their place in the experience of the Christian life, but they are far too abstract to be the starting point for young children. Abstract concepts are very much adult ones. Young children think primarily in the concrete. They relate to individual people. They can have a strong sense of affection for a 'best friend'. They are curious about physical and practical things. They also love repeated actions, gestures and rituals. So it is unhelpful to begin with abstract and adult-centred concepts such as "community" or "gathering".

No, we must personal about Jesus and the child's relationship with him. Their preparation for meeting Jesus in Holy Communion and in Confession needs to be focused on forming them as individuals, with the support of the parents and catechists, and of course alongside their peers, in a personal relationship to Christ.

In this context, I believe that one can over-emphasise the "special meal" aspect of receiving Holy Communion. Children certainly understand about birthday cake and Christmas dinners (though today, sadly, the family meal eaten together cannot be taken for granted). But receiving Jesus is something on a different plane. Just to say that the Mass is a communal gathering for a shared meal is – to use a useful modern word – reductive. We mustn't reduce it to that. To overemphasise the communal meal angle and to shy away from the more challenging ideas of sacrament, sacrifice and the Real Presence is to miss a great catechetical opportunity and to short-change the children.

We are not just introducing the children to a communal event. We are handing on something precious. As priests, teachers, parents and catechists we are called to hand on the Deposit of Faith. In the words of St Paul in 1 Corinthians 11: "For the tradition I received from the Lord and in turn handed on to you is that on the night he was betrayed the Lord Jesus took some bread, and after he had given thanks he broke it, and he said, 'This is my Body'". Blessed John Henry Newman wrote of the "precious deposit" as a thing, almost an object, which must be handed on. "Keep the deposit" says St Paul to Timothy (chapter v. 10) and in another place "Guard the noble deposit". If we are not doing that in our sacramental preparation, then we are falling short.

And we shouldn't fall into the trap of thinking that we are preparing the children only for the Big Day itself. Just as in Marriage Courses, more time and effort should go into forming the couple for the living out of their vows over many years than in planning the wedding day, so in First Communion and Confession preparation, we are not just preparing for a day – we are forming the children in the Christian faith and

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life, in Jesus himself. We don't need lots of emphasis on things for the children to do during the First Communion Mass – writing of Bidding Prayers, reciting of poems, painting posters to decorate the church. To be honest, these can be displacement activities for actually teaching children about Jesus whom they are going to receive.

So where should we start? Where Christian formation always starts – with the person of Christ. It may seem a truism to point out that sacramental preparation must be Christocentric, centred on the person of Jesus, but it needs to be said all the time. Catechesis must have at its centre and as its goal, the Jesus Our Lord, who is the chief protagonist in the Eucharistic journey of love which the child is embarking on. First Communion preparation should place the life and teachings of Christ at its centre, with his Passion Death and Resurrection in particular explored and explained in depth. We must help the children to know and love Jesus – through the stories of his actions and words and through the teaching of the Church which has handed down the Gospel to us as a “precious deposit”.

First, we need to place Jesus in the context of Salvation History. Children love a story, and Salvation History is the great story of how God made us and has revealed himself to us. If this sounds too long a story to tell, look at the Fourth Eucharistic Prayer which tells it all beautifully and with a clear narrative sweep. We can do it through simple ‘landmarks’: Creation by the One God who made human beings out of love. The Fall, when human beings rejected God. Moses and the giving of the ten Commandments. Then, the great beginning of God coming among us as Man: the Annunciation narrative, the role of Mary as the Second Eve who says ‘yes’ to God and lets Jesus come to her, and thereby to us. Our great salvation story climaxes in the Incarnation – the heart of our faith. This must be at the heart of First Communion preparation.

This Salvation History context was the basis of catechesis in the Early Church and it should be so for our children today. It allows the catechist firstly to help the children to reflect on the beauty of the created universe and also what is special about human beings: we are different from the animals and plants; we are made in God's image, our souls need him, just as fishes need the sea. Even young children are taught about the environment and how we need our beautiful planet to live in. As our physical bodies need oxygen, water, food, so our spiritual selves need God. Even seven-year olds can be very interested to discuss the creation narratives in the Book of Genesis. The story of Revelation starts here. But we shouldn't emphasise too much the “how” of creation, for example, what was made on which “day”. What is important is the broader meaning of creation by God out of nothing, the patterned beauty of creation, humankind as God's special creature, who can know and love him – but also has the freedom to reject him and sin. This can all be taught without being a fundamentalist. Apologies for this digression - it is rather a hobby horse of mine after thirty years in the classroom explaining that you don't have to reject science to believe the faith!

And the story of the Fall, Original Sin, is an essential part of our faith because it is about an essential part



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of human experience. Children of this age are perfectly aware that not all is right with the world, even if it is their rather small world of family, neighbours and classmates that is imperfect: people cheating, falling out, being unkind, bullying, things being “Not fair!” Children have a strong sense of right and wrong, and they know when they have done wrong. At this age a child has already learnt how to say ‘sorry’, to be forgiven, and even how to forgive others – ‘making up’ with a friend after an argument. So it is not difficult to explain the Ten Commandments for child’s level of experience. Again, the language we use in our explanations of these key teachings can make or mar the children’s outlook. It’s a modern cliché to say that religion isn’t just about rules. But children understand about rules. Games don’t work unless there are rules. And when God gave the Commandments, the Law, it was a great privilege for the Jewish people, and not a burden: “God has not given this to other nations, he has not taught them his decrees”, wrote the psalmist. To know what God wants us to be like is a precious thing which he has revealed in his great mercy. The story of Moses and the burning bush shows us the One God and how God wants us to live. You may be thinking that this all seems a long way from First Communion Day, but of course it is an important step on the way towards First Confession. And we must give our children these great riches of our heritage to help them know what God has done for us and how we can know him.

But our teaching of Salvation History is all leading to Jesus. We should dwell on the Annunciation – the moment of the Incarnation. There is so much that the catechist can draw out of this text: the arrival of God’s greatest gift to us (if you are teaching this around Christmas time especially), the unique place and role of Mary, Jesus as God and Man. We can then look at some key Gospel passages relevant to understanding Jesus as God and Man starting with his Baptism. This can be a good opportunity to revisit the children’s own Baptism and bring in the family though reminiscences and photos of the occasion, contacting God-parents and looking at the font in the church. Jesus’s Baptism in the River Jordan can be a very visual way of presenting the Trinity: we can hear God the Father, we can see God the Son, and we are given an image of God the Holy Spirit. Don’t shy away from teaching the Trinity. There is no need to say that it’s some kind of puzzle we can’t understand. It’s how God shows us himself and how he draws us into himself. Plant the seeds for later thinking and understanding.

The story of Jesus continues through the call of the disciples and through them the spreading of the Good News which began two thousand years ago – the beginnings of the Church, the Apostolic Succession, the priesthood, the idea of vocation – the importance of listening to Jesus’s words and acting on them. This is where ideas of the believing community of the Church through time and space begin to be recognised. Show the children that they are part of something big and something with a direct descent from those fishermen in the boat.

To help put across Jesus’s teaching in a concrete way, and to show how Jesus relates to individuals in love and compassion, look at some miracle accounts from the Gospel, perhaps ones including children like the raising of Jairus’ daughter and the cure of the epileptic boy (perhaps leave the Gadarene swine for the moment!). In the story of Jairus and his family we see Jesus coming to the child’s home to heal and save her, bringing happiness and peace, and conquering sin and death. This is a good preparation



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for the sacrament of Penance as well as that of the Eucharist, sin being a kind of death which Jesus can release us from. And why not look at the colourful and engaging story of Zaccheus? You remember him – the dodgy tax collector who was rather short and had to climb a tree to catch sight of Jesus. But Jesus spots him, calls him by name and tells him he’s coming to his house for tea that day. And Zacchaeus repents of how he’s been ripping people off and promises to pay it all back. What a memorable –and funny! – story. It’s a good way into the idea of Confession being made to Jesus himself, the ideas of contrition and reparation. Zaccheus has examined his conscience and found himself wanting; he wants to show Jesus that he can put it right. He does this because he has met with and been drawn to the person of Jesus Christ. His life is never going to be the same again. The standard Act of Contrition could almost have been spoken by Zaccheus and could be learned by the children at this point, along with encouraging the habit of a nightly examination of conscience. For this you will of course need lots of parental support, but in this way the child’s First Confession can be an occasion of re-connecting with the sacrament for other family members.

Back to the Eucharist. I have to admit to a slight obsession with the Miracle at Cana, or as John puts it “the first sign which Jesus worked”. Though there are many layers of meaning and varied allusions which one can miss even after thinking about the text for twenty years, there are so many relevant points which can be brought out of the passage for First Communion preparation. To start with, the history of the relationship between God, his creation and wine. Why wine? The qualities of wine to soothe and heal, to celebrate and to gladden the heart, the fellowship in drinking wine socially or ritually. And now at Cana Jesus is the real new wine. The story is implicitly but strongly Eucharistic. Plant it in the children’s minds and let it mature! The children are of course likely to receive Communion under both kinds on the big day even if not always afterwards, so it is good for them to have positive associations and not just regard it as alcohol they are allowed to have. The wine that Jesus will give them is himself, his life following into them.

Another obvious Gospel narrative to share with the children is the Miracle of the Loaves, or the Feeding of the 5000. There are plenty of connections to make with the Mass and with Holy Communion, and it sits well with the Cana miracle as it too brings out the generosity and overabundance of God, his power over his creation and our need and desire for him. The hungry people with nothing to sustain them, needing Jesus’s compassion, his divine power, links with the Old Testament People of God who were fed miraculously by him with manna. Couple this with some key phrases from John chapter 6 about “eating the flesh of the Son of Man and drinking his blood” – very graphic and shocking words which only make sense when we understand that it is the Eucharist he is talking about. Teach the children that Jesus is their Bread of Life – this is how he is going to come to them under the appearance of bread.

Cue for tackling what a Sacrament is. The Sacramental principle is hard-wired into the Catholic faith: God, really incarnate in Jesus Christ, sanctifies the physical world by his presence and continues that presence and that personal involvement with creation through the sacraments. Sacraments are what God does. They are outward, physical, human-shaped signs of his divine actions. The whole point about



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sacraments is that a perfectly normal physical substance or human activity can be made by God into something divine. We could not bear the full-on experience of a direct encounter with God, even Moses saw a Burning Bush and could only see God's back! All Catholics through time and space could not partake of Jesus's merely biological reality – his human body is in heaven and is of a finite size. The foods of bread and wine are such wonderfully rich outward signs: unlike fully finished foods like an apple or a fish, bread and wine are composite foods, made by a co-operation between God and mankind, nature and technology. All can share them in exactly the same way without diminishing the amount.

The Paschal Mystery is at the heart of our Catholic faith and so the Death and Resurrection of Our Lord must be at the heart of Eucharistic preparation. The Last Supper was a last Passover meal which in Jesus's hands becomes the first Mass. The words of consecration are central of course. The children will hear them at every Mass. It is good to bring out the sacrificial language: "given up for you.... poured out for you". The Johannine Bread of Life discourse brings out the meaning so clearly. When we receive his Body and Blood under the appearances of bread and wine, his saving death is made real here and now again for us, and we share in his victory over sin achieved on Calvary when he allowed himself to be "taken as a criminal" and put to death to make up for all our sins. Some of the children may be up to reading C. S. Lewis's *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*, or at least listening to it. The story of how the great lion, Aslan, gives up his life to free the boy who has betrayed him but then rises to life again to break the power of evil – this can give children an insight into the deep reality that the power of God's love has for us. In a different way, the Stations of the Cross are of course a practical and pictorial guide to the Passion and Death (and implicitly the Resurrection) which all children can follow, including as it does words, pictures and gestures. They need not be confined to Lent, but are unparalleled as a devotional aid at any time.

Just a little digression at this point on the question of methodology might be worth making here. We have come to understand so much more about types of learning over the last few decades – the different ways different children learn. We now recognise that there are visual, aural and kinaesthetic learners, for example. A primarily visual learner will respond to the words on the page, pictures and writing. An aural learner will listen well, await explanation and ask good questions. A primarily kinaesthetic learner needs involvement of a more physical kind, using their sense of touch at least as much as the other two senses. In catechesis, this can take the form of games, making models or going round your church looking at the features and fittings, learning to genuflect and so on. All good activities for this "non-standard" way of learning. If you can think of ways to do all of these, then you will have a good catechetical tool with something for everyone. Beware of overdoing the pictorial element though: when I once asked a young relative "What do you do at First Communion classes?", his answer was "Colouring in"...

Reinforcement of the new and sometimes difficult ideas such as sacrifice is vital. I recommend using cloze technique. With this you give the child a short passage which is about something they have just learnt but it has gaps in the text where key words are. The children then fill in the gaps using the correct word from a list you have given them. So the child is re-using new vocabulary and information from the



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just-read passage to reinforce key ideas. I should emphasise, this isn't about the children putting things in their own words (another mistaken emphasis in some catechetical material). We are passing on key concepts expressed in key words. Children love using the right words in context – it's how they learnt language in the first place. They do it every day with secular subjects and will see no problem in doing so with their religious knowledge. If you haven't got the right word, you won't be able to express the right idea. Again, we are passing on a precious deposit.

Learning by heart has been in and out of fashion in education, but I believe it needs to be an element in preparation for the sacraments. The young mind is very absorbent, and can pack away in its recesses many ideas, memories and experiences which only get squeezed out later. So put in some key phrases, answers to Frequently Asked Questions, prayers they should all know if they are to join in fully with the worshipping community at Mass, from the Hail Mary to the Creed. Catechetical groups, like school classes, will inevitably contain a mix of religious backgrounds and levels of intellectual ability, so there will always be a need for extension work for the more able and simple reinforcement for the less able. If the material goes home regularly, this will encourage the family to get involved, and indeed perhaps to reinforce their own understanding of the faith, as I suggested earlier.

And so to Easter: as this is likely to fall only a few weeks before First Communion, this is a wonderful opportunity to pick up the pace. The Resurrection is, with the Incarnation, one of the key doctrines which sets Christianity apart from all other faiths, even the monotheistic ones. Children should be aware of the uniquely Christian importance of Easter – not just as a feast of chocolate (though there is nothing at all wrong with chocolate I hasten to add). I particularly like the Risen Christ's encounter with Mary Magdalene in the garden (children hear so little from the Fourth Gospel) as there we see the devastation wrought on his followers by his death, a dawning realisation of the truth, the difference between the Risen Lord and what he was before, the connection with the Ascension, and a strong female character.

Other questions to cover as part of the programme must include the Sunday Mass obligation. All children will not necessarily have this as part of their family life, and there is no substitute for habit. But we should make strong links between belief and practice, and this is the place to talk about the idea of belonging to the community of the Church, rather than at the beginning of the course. We don't just come together because it's nice to be together- we come to Sunday Mass because Jesus wants us to and we obey him because we love him. We come together to do something unique: to take part in a sacred action which bring Jesus's Death and Resurrection to us all, and in which which Jesus comes to each of us individually in Communion.

At some point near the time, there will have to be the discussion about how to receive Communion. I think this should be a parental decision. Most will opt for communion in the hand, though this often means careful supervision of the transfer to the mouth which is difficult in the melee of a parish Mass. Both forms of reception should of course be respected and therefore also taught. In both cases, teach reverence. These are sacred, ritual actions, not casual ones.



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Just as preparation for First Holy Communion needs to be Christocentric, so Eucharistic Adoration should play a prominent role in the child's spiritual formation. Getting to know Jesus has these two key aspects at this as at every stage of catechesis: knowing and loving. Introducing a child to Eucharistic Adoration can be and should be central to both.

Benedict XVI in *Sacramentum Caritatis* taught: "In the Eucharist, the Son of God comes to meet us and desires to become one with us; eucharistic adoration is simply the natural consequence of the eucharistic celebration... The act of adoration outside Mass prolongs and intensifies all that takes place during the liturgical celebration itself... I recommend that, in their catechetical training, and especially in their preparation for First Holy Communion, children be taught the meaning and the beauty of spending time with Jesus, and helped to cultivate a sense of awe before his presence in the Eucharist".

The very fact that we now tend to refer to Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament as Eucharistic Adoration is, I believe, a positive development. It shifts the emphasis a little away from the act of putting the monstrance up on the altar and includes us all in a common act of worship: every knee shall bow. Saint John Paul, whose first parish in Krakow, St Florian's, has perpetual adoration, urges us, in his *Dominicae Cenae* to adore Christ in the Eucharist. "The Church and the world have a great need for Eucharistic worship. Jesus awaits us in this sacrament of love. Let us not refuse the time to go to meet him in adoration, in contemplation, full of faith..." This is true of children as much as the rest of us creatures made to adore God.

There are a number of aspects of Eucharistic Adoration which give the practice great power and significance for children, and which are helpful in their Eucharistic formation.

Firstly, the quiet. Many children's experience of the Mass whether in the parish or at a school liturgy, is inevitably a noisy one with many distractions from others, much singing, standing and sitting and so many words. The liturgy involves us all with responses and acclamations, so a degree of this is inevitable. But this is why if we are also to develop a personal and internalised relationship with Christ, adoring the Blessed Sacrament in the still and quiet of the church can prove very fruitful. It is usually argued that children cannot be still and concentrate for long enough, but try it. Start small, by calling in to a holy hour for a very few minutes. Any child rising eight who is not a stranger to a church can kneel for a short time with a family member or two or a small group of class-mates suitably accompanied. Build up from a few minutes to five, then ten. And don't be tempted to introduce activities or readings, however relevant. Don't be afraid of silence. Let heart speak to heart.

As part of their preparation for First Communion the children will be becoming familiar with our beliefs about Christ as the Bread of Life, the Last Supper and the Real Presence. So here is the ultimate visual aid: Jesus present in the consecrated host, just as he promised, with us always to the end of time, there in front of us on the altar in our church in our home town. The silence, or as close to silence as you can get it, is a powerful aid in helping the child at this important stage in developing their inner life. Bombarded as they are with information, sound, chatter, traffic and the media, children benefit enormously from



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times of stillness and silence in which they can learn to reflect, listen to their consciences and recognise the voice of Christ, the Good Shepherd who knows them by name and who does not speak to them in the whirlwind but in the still small voice of peace.

Secondly, Adoration gives us focus. Even if your church does not have a central tabernacle, it will have a central altar, and this is where the monstrance will be, drawing the eye and the heart to the Blessed Sacrament. It is impossible not to look. This central position can help the mind and the eye to connect the sacred host with important artefacts in the church, the altar and tabernacle, and also the cross, in one glance— the Last Supper, the sacrifice on Calvary, the Mass, the living presence of Christ: a wonderful visual lesson in linking the elements of the Paschal Mystery. Eucharistic adoration with small numbers is a great opportunity for children to kneel right at the front of the church and have an uninterrupted view of it all. And they can feel close to Jesus, one to one: he who is going to come to me in Communion, is here waiting for me before my eyes, asking me to spend some time with him.

It might be helpful for children starting to learn how to adore Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament, if they could at least sometimes see the priest, robed and reverent, take the host from the tabernacle and place it in the monstrance. The connection will then be very clear. And there should be a pay-off in terms of understanding that Jesus is really present in the tabernacle even when he cannot be seen.

Thirdly, the body language. Although a quick bob in the direction of the tabernacle is better than nothing, adoration before the Blessed Sacrament is an opportunity for children – and the rest of us indeed – to show in our gestures the reverence we ought to feel. The double genuflection which is traditional in this country before the monstrance acts as a kind of brake. We tumble into the church from the busy outside world and in a unique gesture we almost prostrate ourselves before the physical presence of Our Lord. This unusual action signifying something extraordinary is not lost on children.

Some prior catechesis on the monstrance itself could be a good thing: it is not something most children will see very often. Made of a precious metal, and often highly decorated, it becomes an opportunity for catechesis. On a slightly different but related matter, the best First Communion Mass homily I have ever heard started with the priest showing the children his chalice and explaining why the inside of the bowl is made of gold. Startlingly simple and catechetical, well, gold.

Adoration speaks to simple hearts. Children deserve to experience this personal relationship with Jesus, and Eucharistic adoration is the perfect place to begin, as part of First Communion preparation if not before.

Pope Francis has spoken of knowing Jesus through adoration: “One cannot know the Lord without being in the habit of adoring, of adoring in silence... To waste time — if I may say it — before the Lord, before the mystery of Jesus Christ. To adore, there in the silence, in the silence of adoration. He is the Lord, and I adore Him.”



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So the big day has arrived, or is imminent– make it both Christ-centred and child-centred. I'm sure that, like me, you have been to First Communion Masses which have been memorable for either their moving beauty or for their well-meaning but hyperactive chaos. Don't let it be all focused on performance, either by the children or by adults, with constant activity, singing and wordy commentaries elbowing out the central event. Everything must point to that act of Jesus becoming present under the appearance of bread and wine, and coming to the child for the first time. So turn down the volume, let the gestures speak for themselves, encourage prayerfulness with silence at the right points. Napoleon Bonaparte (not normally considered a model Catholic but certainly someone who had cause to be pleased with his achievements) was asked what the happiest day of his life had been. He answered that it was his first Communion day. Quite a thought. What best practice can we build on to make this so for all our children? Precise organisation will depend on numbers and on the physical layout of the church, but I have been impressed by the practice of each child going up to receive one at a time, when their name is called out, with Mum and Dad just behind. This might make things a bit longer, but by having to listen out for your name, quiet attention is called for, and the individual welcome to Jesus by the child is reinforced. If there are to be photos of the special moment (discreet ones I hope) then individual calling up facilitates that too. A free for all at the Communion queue, with lots of shuffling going on and loud hymn singing, does not help the child to make internal prayers or to behave respectfully. At a recent First Communion Mass I went to, most of the children returned to their seats with hands in pockets or fussing with veils, grinning at their friends just going up. When this occurs, it isn't the children's fault – it's the result of bad catechesis. We must give our children the habits of reverence, teach them to be recollected, with hands together, eyes down, and then to kneel in the pew speaking to Jesus in their hearts. What a precious moment!

First Communion and Confession preparation is a kind of mini-Catechumenate for our children. They take that first step towards Jesus Christ by coming for catechesis and they can, with good practice and planning, be made ready for the great day of having Our Blessed Lord “under my roof” for the first time. We mustn't let the opportunity for formation pass by. Let the little children come to him.