

First Holy Communion and Confirmation in the Parish

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In addition to the more solemn liturgical feasts and seasons in the Catholic Church, the celebrations of First Holy Communion and Confirmation have taken on a great importance in parish life today. Like the protocol guiding the celebration of Christmas and Easter each year, First Holy Communion and Confirmation liturgies in the parish need to follow sensible guidelines for a quality celebration. The norm guiding any sacramental celebration in a parish is that followed when the entire community is gathered together. In other words, the Sunday liturgy becomes the norm for First Communion and Confirmation Masses and their preparation. While they may involve children enrolled in a parish school or religious formation program sponsored by a parish, they are still parish events.

Since the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council were implemented in the United States, many interpreted the call for “full, conscious and active participation” to imply that everyone gathered in the congregation was to undertake some important service role in the liturgy. Translating that understanding to a First Communion Mass or a Confirmation Mass in the parish, some adults who prepare these parish celebrations assume that active participation means that those who are celebrating the sacrament for the first time should each undertake an added liturgical role. In some parish settings this has resulted in proclaiming the assigned Scripture readings in parts, or adding more petitions to the Prayer of the Faithful. Some may have witnessed a dramatization of the gospel reading by the class of first communicants. The unspoken reason for doing this likely was that no one would feel left out; that everyone had a part in the Mass. If there were 25 first communicants in a given parish, this meant that all 25 children would be given a special task or liturgical ministry. There even may have been some newly created liturgical roles for the sake of including all of the children.

The preparation and celebration of First Communion and Confirmation in the parish requires a sensible attitude. The primary liturgical role of first communicants and confirmands is the very one which brings them to the celebration of Mass in the first place. Their liturgical role in these instances is to be the recipient of God’s grace ritualized in the midst of the people of God. They should not have to be put in an alternate spotlight on a day that focuses on their reception of the sacrament. This practice does not exclude the possibility of having other children, siblings or school mates to undertake the service ministries in the liturgy. A children’s choir comprised of students in the parish school or religious education classes of the first communicants or confirmands

might be formed to lead the singing of the Mass; cantors may be solicited among the children's choir to lead the psalmody. Children in the parish might be asked to be altar servers or supplement the adult ministers of hospitality.

The *Directory of Masses with Children* (1973) distinguishes two circumstances that require sensitivity to the presence of children at Mass. The first is Masses with adults in which children also participate. This would include the parish sacramental and Sunday celebrations. The second includes Masses with children in which only a few adults participate. This latter circumstance would be descriptive of Masses celebrated in Catholic school communities or, as the *Directory* indicates, are celebrated during the week. Each of these circumstances provides their own liturgical care and protocol. Further, the *Directory for Masses with Children* reminds those who prepare parish liturgies involving children that: "It is always necessary to keep in mind that such Eucharistic celebrations must lead children toward the celebration of Mass with adults, especially the Masses at which the Christian community must come together on Sundays" (art. 21). Innovations that detract from the premiere liturgical event on Sunday, especially during the Masses when First Holy Communion and Confirmation are celebrated, should be reviewed. If the First Communion Mass or Confirmation Mass serve as a hybrid liturgy all their own, are we not setting a future course of liturgical illiteracy from a tradition that has proven it can stand on its own?