

Called to Discipleship: Sacraments Send Us Forth

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As catechetical leaders, at times we experience frustration when some families show up only for those programs and grade levels that correspond with sacramental celebrations. Lately there's a question that keeps popping up in the back of my mind: are we "telling" them that?

- Do we give them the idea that the sacramental times are really what is most important?
- Are we reinforcing their belief?
- Do our practices, programs, and procedures give this message?

The RCIA process has reinforced for us the reality that mystagogy is what it's all about: we are never finished. The renewal of the sacraments called for in Vatican II reminds us that sacraments are not ends in themselves. The Christian life is about discipleship; it is about carrying out the mission of Jesus in our everyday lives, in our Church and our world. Sacraments are the celebration times in everyday life which call us to and empower us for this discipleship. Sacraments are not one-time things that are over and done with once they are celebrated; sacraments are not things "to get." Sacraments equip us, empower us, and sustain us for ministry, for discipleship.

Do the children, youth, adults, and families always recognize and understand that? We know that we believe it and try to communicate it. Yet, at times, do our practices, procedures, and programs "say" something else: that "getting the sacrament" is what's most important?

In the last thirty-five years, the catechetical ministry in the United States has done a phenomenal job of creating intensive sacramental programs. That is something that should be celebrated -- and continued.

At the same time, we always need to look at the flip side of things (often that tells us what we still need to do). Because we have designed wonderful sacramental programs, have we subtly said to parents that getting their children there for sacraments is what it's all about? That's not what we were saying, but is that what they hear?

- When do you have the most communication and interaction with parents? During sacramental years -- or all the time?
- What information and activities are covered in your parish Sunday bulletin? Sacramental program activities -- or activities from all age groups?
- When do you remind the parents that they are primary educators in faith formation for their children? During sacramental years -- or all the time?

Are we -- subtly and unknowingly -- reinforcing the erroneous belief of "get the sacraments and then we're done" because our sacramental programs are so extensive, well-organized, and comprehensive?

The answer, of course, is not to diminish or decrease in any way the faith-filled programs of sacrament preparation. Are there things we can be doing (or not doing) within our parishes, faith formation programs, and sacramental processes to enable people to see that we are called to a life of discipleship, not only a life of “getting sacraments.”

Some Things to do within faith formation programs

- What happens during sacramental times to involve the parents and families? Do we have parent meetings, family home activities, parent-child retreats, special liturgies and prayer services, service opportunities? Is it possible to incorporate these worth-while methods and activities with all age levels, not just the sacramental programs?
- Children and families belong to the parish, not just to a religious education program or a school, or only to “this year’s First Communion class.” All that we do in faith formation programs and schools should incorporate children (and their families) into the life of the parish, helping them to experience that their faith is about much more than just going to class, more than just learning in an academic setting, more than only getting a sacrament. This participation in the life of the parish -- in all its aspects, activities and ministries -- will, hopefully, remind them that the Christian lifestyle is about being disciples everyday of their lives.
- Frequently when there is discussion at parish leadership levels (Catechetics Committee, School Board, Education Commission, Committees working with homeschooling families, Parish Pastoral Council, etc.) regarding the faith formation programs for children, they only center on the sacramental years. This is an ideal time to stretch the thinking. Broaden the discussion to look at what happens after the celebration of sacraments. Help them to see that all ages, each year of faith formation, is important. Remind them that the Christian life is about discipleship -- the living out of what the sacraments call us to.
- Communicate with parents all the time (not just at sacramental times) in as many ways as possible: phone calls, home visits, letters, email, articles in the bulletin, newsletters, parent meetings, workshops, family celebrations, prayer times.
- Empower families to be homes of prayer -- always. Sacramental years are not the only time of family prayer and study. Can we give them as many ideas for family rituals and discussions each year - as we do during the sacramental years?
- When the “person in the pew” reads the Sunday bulletin and parish website, what do they find out about the parish’s program for faith formation with the younger members of the community? Do they only read about the activities of the sacramental programs, or are the activities and projects of every age level featured on a regular basis?

Things to do within the programs of sacrament preparation

- Think about the language that we use to talk about the celebration of sacraments. (Language, very subtly, but powerfully, educates and forms us.) Sacraments are not “things” we get. They are celebrations; they are actions of the community. They empower us to live our lives in a different way. We celebrate sacraments; we don’t just: - “get confirmed” (That sounds very passive.)

- “receive Communion” (That doesn’t begin to address the mystery and challenge of being the Body of Christ.)
- “make Reconciliation” (That sounds over and done with.)

All of the language we use needs to stress the reality of sacraments as calls to discipleship and as actions: participative and ongoing. We don’t get or receive sacraments; we celebrate them and the celebration affects (or should affect) our lives forever.

- During sacramental preparation times, do all you can to minister to/involve the entire family. The whole family, in one sense, is the candidate for the sacrament, not just the one child. This will illustrate for the family that sacraments aren’t the end of things; they are the empowerment to our everyday, on-going call.
- Frequently people see the sacramental programs as something very different than the rest of the catechetical program. They don’t see a connection. The sacraments are in this “box” and have no relationship to the rest of faith formation. All that we do in catechesis is about sacramental living: about baptismal, reconciling, or Eucharistic living, for example. If we are studying about the importance of Jesus in our lives, about ways to pray, about ways to serve, we are “studying” Confirmation (or Eucharist or Reconciliation, etc.). The sacraments are about living our Christian commitment in every part of our lives; they’re about Christian Catholic living. To study about the sacraments, we study about Catholic living. When studying about Catholic living, we are studying about the realities we say we want to live when we ask to celebrate the sacraments. All that we say and do needs to remind parents and young people of this -- it’s not just about getting a sacrament over and done with.
- Involve the whole parish as much as possible with the sacramental candidates. Hopefully, this involvement of faith-filled, active Catholics with the candidates and their families will “say” that this is about everyday life, not just about getting something “done” because it’s the year to do it. The service component of many sacramental programs would be an example of this. Do we just plan opportunities for the sacramental candidates, or do they participate in the parish service outreach? Do they join in service with their parents, sponsors, families, older members of their parish community?
- Provide well-grounded adult faith formation as part of the sacramental programs. Enable the adults to take time for reflection on the meaning of the sacrament for their lives, not just adult sessions that address: this is what the children are learning; this is what the children should wear, etc. Adult sessions that are planned for the adult’s faith growth “says” to them: the sacraments you have already celebrated call you to a life of discipleship.
- At times, people look at the components of sacramental programs as “the list of things I need to do to get the sacrament.” Nothing could be further from the truth. The components of sacramental programs are simply (but deeply) an introduction to (or deepening of) the living out of the Christian life -- the life we are called to everyday for the rest of our lives.

Everything we say and do needs to help families understand that community living, prayer and worship, catechesis and service are not just things we do because we're preparing for a sacrament. They are the way we live the Christian life.

If children (and their families for them) are asking to celebrate the sacraments of initiation, they are "saying" that they want to be Catholics with a living, conscious, and active faith. As they prepare for the celebration of a sacrament, our programs attempt to involve them in living what they are asking/promising to live for the rest of their lives.

- Perhaps we should be careful of how we talk about the components of our sacramental programs. Service is certainly a component, because it is a given of the Christian lifestyle. Is it always best to attach a specific number of hours (and perhaps penalize them if they don't reach those hours)? What does that really say? They are called to service for the rest of their lives, but is there a "guideline" which everyone has to achieve every year? - will we be judged on how many hours we squeezed in each year?

If the purpose of asking children to participate in a very deliberate way in all the aspects of being Christian as they prepare for the sacraments is to allow them to experience and grow in the life they will be living every day for the rest of their lives, perhaps we need to be sure that our "requirements" for sacraments are real but not restrictive, are challenging but not a burden, are empowering for discipleship rather than authoritarian.

- Don't stress the celebration of the sacraments as a goal or an end. Sacraments are introductions, an initiation into a way of life. They really don't have anything to do with finishing a book or completing the components of the program. The learning, the prayer, the service, the participation in community continues. What does it say when we give a schedule and have the celebration of the sacrament as the "last thing" on the schedule? When giving families the schedule, be sure to include events/happenings that occur after the celebration of the sacrament. For instance, if Confirmation is celebrated in junior high, include all the events of on-going high school youth ministry. It might also mean ensuring that the celebration of First Eucharist is not the last event of the year; that it is scheduled at a time that allows for continued faith formation sessions and family events following the celebration.
- Don't make the first celebration of the sacrament something that it's not. First Communion is just that; the first of many. To talk about First Communion as "the big day" (and some textbooks even do that!) puts all the stress on that one moment, rather than on our continual discipleship and living out of the Eucharist mystery in our lives. When children and families talk about "making my reconciliation," it sounds as though we only do it once.
- Don't overemphasize externals (such as dress, practices, pictures, etc.). Do we spend more time on these details than we do on reflection on living the Christian life? Do they receive lots of direction on these things from us -- and then never hear from us again after the celebration is over -- perhaps giving the impression that that moment is what is most important rather than directing their focus and attention to the challenging call we have to be Christ in our world everyday of our lives?