





A PARISH-BASED APPROACH

HOW TO

Welcome,
Include, AND
Catechize

Children with Autism
and Other Special Needs



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Sacraments

Sacraments are at the heart of Catholic life, so it's no surprise that learning about the sacraments and preparing children to receive the sacraments is a major part of the adaptive religious education program. Often, young people come into the program because their parents want them to receive First Eucharist and Reconciliation. Students complete the program by receiving the Sacrament of Confirmation.

The first challenge is to establish the fact that children with disabilities can receive the sacraments. Baptism is seldom an issue, but many Catholics, including some pastoral leaders, mistakenly believe that children with disabilities don't need the Eucharist, Reconciliation, and Confirmation, or that these children can't meet the minimal requirements for receiving them. Sometimes it is said that they are in a separate spiritual category—"God's special children"—and don't need the sacramental graces available to other Catholics. I started our program to challenge just such an assumption when the two boys with autism were denied First Eucharist.

Some pastoral leaders and parents have honest doubts about the ability of children with autism and other disabilities to grasp the meaning of the sacraments with sufficient depth to receive them. These misgivings are almost always unfounded. According to the USCCB, all that's necessary to receive First Eucharist is for "the person to be able to



distinguish the Body of Christ from ordinary food, even if this recognition is evidenced through manner, gesture, or reverential silence rather than verbally.” According to the guidelines, all that’s necessary for a person to receive Reconciliation is a “sense of contrition . . . even if he or she cannot describe the sin precisely in words, the person may receive sacramental absolution.” And the USCCB guidelines state that baptized Catholics “who properly and reasonably request” the Sacrament of Confirmation can receive it if they are “suitably instructed, properly disposed, and able to renew their baptismal promises.” The guidelines continue, however: “Persons who because of developmental or mental disabilities may never attain the use of reason are to be encouraged either directly or, if necessary, through their parents or guardian to receive the sacrament of confirmation at the appropriate time.” Virtually all children with developmental disabilities are capable of preparing to meet these criteria.

That doesn’t mean that sacramental preparation is without its challenges. It takes work, considerable creativity, persistence, and acute judgment. Most children with autism are concrete thinkers. They’re drawn to the outward signs of the sacraments—water, bread, wine, oil. But understanding the spiritual truths that these signs signify often comes more slowly. Even though the requirements for receiving these sacraments are few, we are still charged with preparing children as well as possible. Many parishes have developed ways to prepare them, and Loyola Press offers adaptive sacramental preparation kits for First Eucharist, Reconciliation, and Confirmation for children with autism and other special needs in both English and Spanish.

Baptism

Baptism is seldom an issue because most children with autism are baptized as infants or toddlers, long before their disability becomes apparent and is diagnosed. Just to be clear, canon law states that disability

itself is never a reason for refusing or deferring Baptism. Anyone who asks for Baptism can receive the sacrament. People who lack the use of reason are to be baptized if a parent or guardian asks. The only reason for denying someone Baptism is when there is no hope that he or she will be raised as a Catholic.

The Baptism of a disabled adult may occasionally come up. This has happened once in my parish's program. An unbaptized man in his early twenties, severely impaired with autism, approached me with his mother asking to be baptized. He was attracted to the Church by the example of the Catholic caregivers at the group home in which he lived. We prepared him for Baptism using the materials that are part of the curriculum for all students. These materials focus on what the sacramentals used in Baptism signify. The water brings new life; the oil anoints the person as God's special child; the candle signifies the light of Christ bringing wisdom. Faith mentors include the parents in this lesson when they can. Parents bring photos of the child's Baptism, and these are incorporated into the lesson.

When I do Baptisms in my parish, I always include children as much as possible. I invite all the children to the baptismal font to help me. Children hold the book for me, carry the precious oils, and surround me as I pour the water of Baptism on the baby's head. It's a joyous occasion, something I recall when some of the children I baptized come into the adaptive religious education program as students.

Jerry is one of these children. I remember him well because he was one of a set of triplets baptized on a beautiful Sunday afternoon. I remember the beaming faces of Jerry's parents and grandparents as I baptized the three babies. Four years later, Jerry's mother approached me after Mass looking drawn and grief stricken. She started to tell me what was wrong, but she broke down, and Jerry's grandmother had to tell me the story: Jerry had been diagnosed with autism. He appeared to be severely afflicted. The four-year-old had no language,

and he spent his time in motion around the house and waving his hand in front of his eyes in constant stimming. Jerry's mother was crushed. Like all parents of children with developmental disabilities, Jerry's mother had to radically adjust her expectations for her child. Seeing Jerry receive the sacraments was one of the dreams she thought she had to give up.

But Jerry came into the program, and he's made good progress in his preparation for First Eucharist. His mother and grandmother help in the program. Two teen faith mentors work with Jerry. He's learning about God and coming to understand how God comes to us in the bread of Holy Communion. As I watch Jerry work, I sometimes recall the joyous day of his Baptism. Baptism was the beginning of Jerry's sacramental life, not the end.

The Eucharist

The Eucharist is "the summit and the source of all Christian worship and life," as canon law eloquently states. It's fair to say that the Eucharist is the summit of the adaptive religious education program as well. It's the central sacrament, and we devote a lot of time and attention to it.

Again, the USCCB guidelines state that the only criterion for reception of Holy Communion is the same for everyone—"that the person be able to distinguish the Body of Christ from ordinary food." This recognition can be demonstrated by "manner, gesture, or reverential silence." When in doubt, pastoral ministers are to decide in favor of "the right of the baptized person to receive the sacrament." Clearly, almost every baptized Catholic can and should receive Holy Communion.

Our goal is not just to meet these minimum standards but to bring each child to the deepest appreciation of the Eucharist that he or she is capable of. It's often difficult to know when or whether we've achieved

this goal. It's often hard to know what these children know. I tell the teen faith mentors not to be surprised at anything when they start preparing children for the Eucharist. The notion that God comes to us in the form of Holy Communion bread is not an easy concept for children with autism to grasp. They think logically and concretely; metaphors and analogies are confusing; abstract concepts, hints, suggestions, and insights are often out of their reach.

In teaching them about the Eucharist, we need to be creative and persistent. It's important for the children to practice. They need to touch and handle the unconsecrated host. We also invite them to eat the host and taste the unconsecrated wine. Be prepared for surprising reactions. During our first year, we practiced receiving the Precious Blood from the chalice. I filled the chalice with unconsecrated communion wine, lined up the children, and invited them to taste it. One boy immediately spat it out on the floor; he was expecting the taste of red soda. Some children don't like the taste of unleavened bread and refuse to eat it. The bread and wine of Holy Communion may infringe on the strict rules about food that many children with autism have, so techniques such as food chaining may be required to help the child consume the host. Food chaining is a technique used by occupational therapists to transition children from foods that they know and like to foods that are unfamiliar. Changes are minute and typically involve a change to taste, temperature, or texture. Working from a flavor and texture that a child enjoys to one that may be challenging can take patience and time; increasing the variety or amount of food can take months, or even years.

Scott, a child who was at a point in his religious education where he was ready to receive Holy Communion at Mass, would not touch it or go near anyone who distributed it. Very subtly we introduced an unconsecrated host. Formal chaining began with his looking at the host, kissing the host, and taking a small nibble from one. Finally, he

took a large bite and swallowed it. This has taken months, but he has made excellent progress and has now received First Eucharist.

Often, an individual child's rules about food are hard to understand. Children with autism often have different rules for different places; for example, they might eat foods at school that they would never eat at home. Rules change without explanation. I think of Richard, who entered preparation for First Eucharist with great reluctance. Although he appeared to understand that the host at Mass was different from regular food, he was afraid of the host; he watched warily from across the room while the others practiced receiving it. Over time he gradually came nearer and eventually touched the host and tasted it, but then suddenly he withdrew and would have nothing to do with it. This went on for several years. Then one Sunday, quite unexpectedly, he went into the Communion procession with his mother, bowed in front of the Eucharistic minister, received the host in his hand, said "Amen," and consumed it. Richard has been receiving Holy Communion ever since.

I don't know why Richard behaved the way he did. I don't know why he was afraid or why he abruptly decided that Holy Communion was safe. Richard may not know himself. "Why?" is a question you will often ask when working with children with autism. Often, there is no good answer. Rules help children with autism cope with situations that distress them, and there's no question that the continual challenges involved in schooling can be upsetting. It's important to be patient with rules and adapt to a child's puzzling behavior. Eventually, understanding will come. The Holy Spirit finds a way.

Stories are usually effective in teaching about the Eucharist. The teen faith mentors will tell the story of the Last Supper and compare it to supper with their family at home. The mentors will describe the miracle of the loaves and fish. They will help the child draw pictures of these events. I tell mentors to avoid extensive verbal explanation, and

I advise them never to try to persuade a child that the Communion bread is the Body of Christ. Explanations are almost always confusing, and elaborate discussions are usually counterproductive. Stories, pictures, and practicing Communion yield better results. Practice in class is supplemented by carefully observing Communion during Mass. The children are unsettled by unfamiliar and “strange” things, and for most of them, the Eucharist falls into the “strange” category. Practice and repetition make the rite familiar and remove the anxiety and distress.

Persistence is a virtue in an adaptive religious education program. One boy I worked with, Steve, was a very concrete thinker and could not understand how the ordinary Communion bread could become the Body of Christ. This was a sticking point that became an obstacle to his receiving Holy Communion. I tried many ways to explain it. Finally, I began to go to Mass with Steve. At the moment of consecration, I would tell him, “There. That is when the change happens.” For some reason, this satisfied Steve. Knowing when the change occurred satisfied his need for specificity, and he accepted the miracle of transubstantiation.

You will likely have children in the program who are following gluten-free diets because it is thought that this can sometimes reduce symptoms of autism and improve cognitive functioning. You may also have children with celiac disease and other conditions that require a gluten-free diet. For some time, Catholics with these allergies have been able to receive Holy Communion in the form of hosts with a miniscule amount of gluten. Most parishes are accustomed to the protocol for using these low-gluten hosts at Mass. You will have to follow the same protocol when practicing Communion with children on gluten-free diets. These are the rules for handling low-gluten hosts, consecrated and unconsecrated:

- The low-gluten host must never come in contact with typical hosts.

- The low-gluten host must be kept in a separate ciborium both before and after consecration.
- The Eucharistic minister who administers the low-gluten host should never touch a gluten host. If by necessity, the celebrant is the only minister present, he should wear a glove so as to protect the recipient from any exposure from the gluten hosts handled earlier by the minister.

Reconciliation

The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation is received in tandem with the Eucharist. Our usual practice is for children to celebrate Reconciliation first and receive the Eucharist soon after.

Again, the USCCB guidelines state that people with disabilities can receive sacramental absolution as long as they have a sense of contrition for having committed sin. Like the requirement for receiving the Eucharist—that the person be able to distinguish the bread of Holy Communion from ordinary food—this is a minimal standard that encompasses almost every baptized Catholic. As with the Eucharist, we try to bring the child to the fullest appreciation of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation that he or she is capable of.

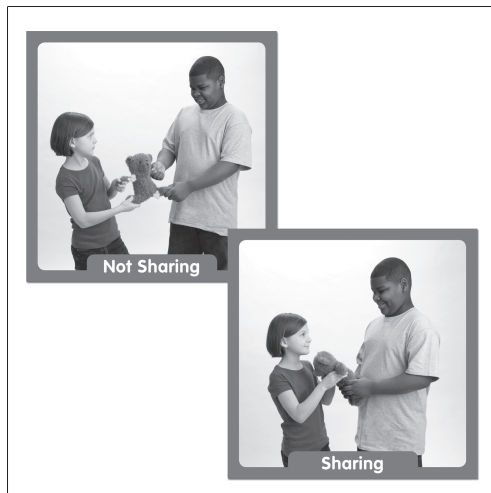
The challenges of preparing these children for the sacrament boil down to three questions:

1. Does the child know right from wrong?
2. How can the child express contrition?
3. How can a child with limited verbal skills (or none at all) communicate with the priest?

Jerry, the triplet child I mentioned earlier, illustrates these challenges in their most acute form. Because Jerry could speak only a few words when he came into the program, he challenged us to think creatively

about how to prepare him for a sacrament that ordinarily depends on verbal communication.

The first task was to help Jerry tell right from wrong. It was difficult to judge how much he knew about this. Although he didn't speak, Jerry often responded when spoken to and seemed to understand many words. Like many children with autism, he gave the impression of knowing more than he let on, but it was impossible to know for sure. We kept things simple. We asked Jerry's mother and grandmother to tell us about things he did at home that were helpful and unhelpful. Jerry's mentors then drew pictures on index cards illustrating these things—for example, fighting with his sisters and putting his plate in the sink after dinner. The mentor played a game of flash cards with Jerry. She showed him a card; he placed it in the "right" or "wrong" pile. In this way Jerry was able to show us that he understood what good behavior is. Our pastor then observed the teen mentor as she used the cards (thus teaching him how to communicate with Jerry) and successfully administered the sacrament to Jerry.



We use variations of this technique for many children in the program. The idea is for parents to identify behaviors at home that the child can understand—things they actually do—and then devise a visual way to present it. This also makes it easier for our priest to understand how to communicate with nonverbal children. Faith mentors sometimes encounter resistance from parents who don't think their child can do anything wrong in a moral sense because of their disability. This question needs to be asked, but our general feeling is that children in an adaptive religious education program can understand, even in a small way, good behavior and bad behavior and can express remorse. In this way, they can receive the healing and grace of God's forgiveness.

The final task is the administration of the sacrament itself. Receiving Reconciliation means that the child must meet with the priest, which is something new and different, the kind of thing that tends to upset children with autism. We make sure that the priest has visited class often enough not to be a stranger. In most cases, the mentor will explain to the priest how the child communicates, what might upset him or her, and anything else that might affect their communication. Watching teen mentors explain these subtle issues to the priest is one of the delights of the adaptive religious education program.

Confirmation

Confirmation is the last of the Sacraments of Initiation—the sacrament by which a Catholic becomes a full adult member of the Church.

We want every student in the program to be confirmed. This goal surprises some people. They assume that Confirmation is out of reach for children with autism or other disabilities because their disabilities are permanent and often severe, making full Christian maturity impossible. But who among us is “fully mature”? The goal for children with autism and other disabilities is the same as it is for everyone—the greatest degree of maturity of which they are capable.

The USCCB guidelines for Confirmation underscore this point. Clearly—as with the Eucharist and Reconciliation—the Church’s attitude toward the sacrament is broad and inclusive. Sacramental graces are for everyone.

In the adaptive religious education program, preparation for Confirmation is an individual matter. We begin to consider the sacrament when the student is twelve or thirteen—the usual age for the sacrament—but there is no rush for it. The aim of preparation is to help the student achieve the fullest degree of maturity he or she is capable of at the time. Maturity is not a static condition for children with autism (or for anyone). The child’s faith will grow and deepen over time, as will his or her participation in the life of the Church. The decision to present someone for Confirmation involves a subjective judgment about the child’s readiness.

Confirmation preparation emphasizes several themes. One is helping the student achieve a deeper sense of belonging to the larger Church. Instruction includes lessons on the global scope of the Church, its history, and its structure. We encourage students to attend Mass regularly and to participate in other parish activities. We help candidates for Confirmation achieve a sense of responsibility for their participation in the Church. Growing in maturity also means being able to take action on one’s own without needing to be told what to do. Finally, preparation emphasizes service. We talk about ways to help other people and to find ways to serve in the Church.

Serving others is especially important and a special challenge. Self-centeredness, a problem for all of us, is an especially strong inclination for people with autism. Everyone who struggles with a disability expends much time and energy meeting his or her own needs. Again, autism and some other disabilities actually impair a person’s ability to recognize other people as individuals with unique identities. Most children need to understand how they can serve others.

Considering the needs of others did not come naturally to Chris, an eighth grader with autism who came into our program to be prepared for Confirmation. Chris was a bright boy who loved to read. He understood God and the basics of the Gospel, and he knew the difference between right and wrong. But Chris seemed entirely focused on himself. He had no friends. Like many children with autism, he rarely acknowledged other people. He was content to do his own thing, and he didn't seem to understand that other people had thoughts, feelings, and needs that were different from his own.

Chris's mentor was a teen who was very active in the parish. He talked to Chris about his youth group, his Scout troop, and serving as an usher at Mass. Chris began to act as one of the Eucharistic ministers in our practice sessions with unconsecrated hosts. Then the faith mentor brought Chris together with Jason, a younger boy in the class who had no verbal skills.

Jason liked Chris. They began to sit together before and after class. One day Chris picked up the book *Winnie the Pooh* and began to read. Jason looked up, smiled, and then began to laugh. The more Chris read, the harder Jason laughed. Jason laughed so hard he fell off his chair. Since then, Jason and Chris have developed a close relationship. Chris was confirmed, but he didn't leave the program. He has stayed on as an assistant faith mentor, working primarily with his friend Jason.

This sounds like a small thing. But for a boy with severe autism, it's a big thing. Chris is being transformed from a boy confined to the prison of the self to an adult Catholic who is attuned to other people, interested in their well-being, and willing and able to help them. It's a miracle of grace—the grace of the sacraments—which are meant for all.