

PREPARING AND CELEBRATING THE

# Sacraments of Reconciliation and Holy Communion

FOR THE FIRST TIME

Guidelines and Discussion Document for  
Homes, Parish Communities and Schools



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# Contents

Introduction	5
The Home	6
The Parish	7
The School	8
Points for Discussion at Home, in Parishes and in Schools, and Some Suggestions for Consideration	10
A. Sacramental Preparation for the first celebration of the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Holy Communion	10
B. Sacramental Celebration	19
(1) Reconciliation	19
(2) Holy Communion	23
C. Ongoing Engagement	27
Additional Reading	32





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# Introduction

*Share the Good News: National Directory for Catechesis in Ireland*, outlines how, in preparing children baptised as infants for their first celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation and their first participation in Holy Communion, there are three partners: the home, the parish and the school.

This document is primarily a resource for parishes. It is hoped that it will assist parishes to engage further with parents/guardians and schools. This material can be adapted by dioceses and parishes seeking to develop their own guidelines and resources in this area.

Schools may also find these guidelines helpful in understanding their role in assisting parents/guardians and working with parishes in the sacramental preparation of children for their first celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation and their first participation in Holy Communion.


The Catholic school contributes an indispensable amount of expertise and resources to sacramental preparation and celebration. It has been, and will remain, a vital partner in this area, as well as in the religious education of children more generally. The work done by parishes with Catholic children in other schools and with the parents/guardians of these children also needs to be acknowledged and supported.

The role of the Catholic school and its teachers is to support families and their parishes in the Christian initiation of children, not the other way around. There is broad agreement that greater balance is needed, one that encourages and empowers home and parish communities to take on a greater degree of responsibility. For many years, parishes across the country have made great efforts, through programmes like *Do This in Memory*, to ensure this greater balance is achieved. These guidelines are an attempt to encourage further collaboration between school, parish and parents/guardians and families in the area of sacramental preparation and celebration.

Finally, permeating these guidelines and discussion points is the hope that future generations will share the joy of knowing Jesus, and the joy of belonging to Christ and his Church. These guidelines reflect the vision of *Share the Good News: National Directory for Catechesis in Ireland*, which reminds us that the sacraments 'are the gifts of Christ to regenerate the whole of life. Each sacrament has its own particular place, but the Eucharist is the high point of communion with God in Jesus Christ, and with one another in the Church.' It is hoped that the need the person living in contemporary society has for connection with others and with the world, the desire we share to be lifted up by beauty and grace, and the hope we have for meaning beyond the humdrum activity of daily life, can and should find rich expression in faith in our homes and in our parish communities, especially in our celebration of the Eucharist.

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## The Home



**‘The family is the place where parents become their children’s first teachers in the faith. They learn this “trade”, passing it down from one person to another.’**


*Amoris Laetitia, The Joy of Love: On Love in the Family, Pope Francis*



The parish community is a family of families, all living in different circumstances and situations. Each of these is a ‘family Church’, a precious and intimate experience of what ‘Church’ is all about. Ideally, family is where prayer is first shared. In its experiences of reconciliation and shared meals, it anticipates the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Holy Communion. Family is where the seed of faith begins to grow.

In baptising their children, parents/guardians express their desire for them to be disciples of Christ. As part of the Christian community, they seek to help their children grow in faith. The preparation for and first celebration of Reconciliation and first participation in Holy Communion can be a very special time of rediscovering the joy of faith at the heart of family life.

From the very first day that their child starts in a Catholic school, the role of parents/guardians in their child’s religious education is vital. Parents/guardians are the first educators in faith of their children, as they are in all other areas of their child’s life. Ideally, this education in faith begins long before a child even enters a Catholic school. Therefore, parental involvement is not and should not be confined to times of sacramental preparation, although many parents/guardians become more conscious of their role at this time.



**‘The home must continue to be the place where we learn to appreciate the meaning and beauty of the faith, to pray and to serve our neighbour. This begins with Baptism.’**

**Pope Francis**



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## The Parish

The parish is the bigger family where faith continues to be nurtured. It is called to be a place of welcome, where families feel they belong, where they feel affirmed, where they experience nourishment and support.

The welcome extended to families when they present their children for Baptism is also extended every Sunday by the gathered community, as well as at other important moments in the growing child's life. The challenge for parishes is to invest time and energy in all Sunday gatherings to ensure the welcome children and families receive is authentic and sustained, and leads to celebrations that give life to the community and meaning to all that it seeks to do and build together in faith. First Reconciliation and first Holy Communion in this context are not 'one-off' moments, but rather an expression of the desire of the community to welcome the child and his/her family into their gathering every Sunday, as they take up their place at the altar, a place given to them at Baptism.

Along with his/her celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, a child's first celebration of Holy Communion is a very important moment in the life of the parish community. They are events that happen to the community and not just *in* the community.

The pastoral situation regarding the Sacraments of Christian Initiation has been changing for some years now. Those in parish ministry have been trying to adapt and respond as constructively as they can, and in so doing work ever more effectively to support parents/guardians in their primary duty of bringing up their baptised children in the faith. It is important to acknowledge the hard work and commitment that parishes have demonstrated in encouraging greater cooperation and collaboration when preparing children for their first celebration of the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Holy Communion.

There are, of course, significant wider questions for parishes in terms of the sacramental preparation and celebration of first Holy Communion and first Reconciliation. *Share the Good News* emphasises the ways in which the celebration of the liturgy and the sacraments, as well as service of our neighbour – especially the poor – must encourage belonging and participation. Across the country, time, energy and resources are being invested in our Sunday liturgies. However, the challenge remains in ensuring every Sunday liturgy is welcoming and uplifting. In addition, careful consideration needs to be given to the training of lay leaders in support of this important work.

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**‘The Church assumes a valuable role in supporting families, starting with Christian initiation, through welcoming communities.’**

**Pope Francis**

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## The School

The Catholic school is understood here as a further experience of Christian family and community. It is called to partner home and parish in the child's journey of initiation. It contributes an indispensable dimension to the work through its commitment, expertise and resources. It supports parents/guardians and partners with parishes in bringing the child to the sacraments in a way that enables them to understand as fully as they can the place of the sacraments in their life. The parish also seeks to support the parents/guardians of Catholic children in others schools and, as appropriate and as agreed, will work with these schools in ensuring adequate preparation for the sacraments takes place in the lives of these children and their families.

The primary religious education programme, *Grow in Love* (Veritas) supports the implementation of the *Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland*. In *Grow in Love*, the thrust is towards catechesis on the sacraments, which is spread out over the years. The *Grow in Love* religious education programme for the years in which the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Holy Communion are celebrated for the first time place a particular emphasis on catechesis about these two sacraments.

It is hoped that the *Grow in Love* series will encourage conversations to take place between home, parish communities and schools about the model of sacramental preparation and celebration that is currently in operation in parishes. These conversations may lead to a decision to change from models that are overly and exclusively reliant on the school (e.g. where first Holy Communion is perceived as a 'school event') to one in which each partner – home, parish and school – can be encouraged and enabled to take their own share of the responsibility.

### **How might families, parishes and schools reflect together and make changes to their current practice to ensure the above vision is met?**

The following steps, or moments, seek to engage families, parishes and schools in this important conversation. Parishes may devise their own process or adapt these steps according to their own needs and circumstances.

1. The parish calls an initial meeting. A core group comprising a parent/guardian representative(s), a parish representative(s) (e.g. the parish priest/chaplain/parish catechist) and the school principal(s) and relevant teachers meet and have an initial conversation on this document and all the discussion points contained within it. This group will seek to steer the process using a combination of this document, in particular, the discussion points below, and any other additional materials they might find useful. Decisions regarding any proposed changes to the parish's provision for the preparation and first celebration of the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Holy Communion are made by this core group.
2. A meeting with parents/guardians is called by the parish priest/chaplain/parish catechist, with the support of the school, to which all parents/guardians would be invited. Schools would also be represented at this meeting. During the meeting, the plan for the preparation for, and first celebration of, the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Holy Communion for the parish for that year is presented, with reasons given for the suggested approaches to be taken, using, as appropriate this and other resources and material. It is worth noting that in some parishes, once this process is established in the parish, the invitation to this kind of meeting is extended by parents/guardians on behalf of the parish.
3. The agreed changes are implemented, and, after one cycle, a review meeting organised by the parish priest/chaplain/parish catechist with parents/guardians, principal(s) and relevant teachers takes place.
4. The core group (parent/guardian representative[s], parish representative[s], and the school principal[s] and relevant teachers) meet again to review the feedback and to decide on a plan for the following year,



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and, as necessary, to begin the engagement outlined here again. Decisions around ongoing support and engagement for the current group of parents/guardians and their children are also agreed upon.

It is recommended that this process begins as early as possible, ideally in May/June, in advance of the work beginning in parishes with parents/guardians and schools in September.

Part of the planning and the work done throughout the year should focus on sustaining involvement of families in parish life. As previously stated, the practice of children participating in the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Holy Communion as ‘one-off’ moments in the child’s faith journey needs to be looked at honestly by parents/guardians and families, parishes and Catholic schools. Ultimately, what is hoped for is that children and families will understand that they are being invited into the life of the community for the rest of their lives, because as baptised Christians their presence contributes to the celebration of the Eucharist every Sunday and sustains and develops their own faith lives.

### **Discussion Points**

The various suggestions for consideration contained in the remainder of this document all come from *Share the Good News* and/or real initiatives being implemented in parishes across the twenty-six dioceses of Ireland. These suggestions will speak to different parish contexts in different ways, depending on things like the size of the parish, the numbers of children presenting for the first celebration of the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Holy Communion, and what provision is already in place for this kind of engagement with parents/guardians and their children. The suggestions for consideration are listed to encourage dialogue and to allow parishes to consider what additional steps might be taken in supporting parents/guardians in preparing for and celebrating the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Holy Communion for the first time. The parish can adapt this document, and in particular these suggestions, to its own particular reality, as it sees fit.

Finally, in terms of any of the suggestions provided, all activities involving children should be conducted in accordance with the requirements of local diocesan child safeguarding and protection policies and procedures.

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# Points for Discussion at Home, in Parishes and in Schools, and Some Suggestions for Consideration

## A. Sacramental Preparation for the first celebration of the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Holy Communion

### HOME PERSPECTIVE

How can parents/guardians become more involved in the preparation of their children for the first celebration of the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Holy Communion?

#### **Some suggestions for consideration**

- Parents/guardians and families reflect together on whether or not they wish to continue to present their child for the Sacraments of Initiation (namely Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Communion), in line with the promises they made in faith at their child's Baptism.
- Reaching the age of reason (seven or eight years old), children are invited into conversation with their parents/guardians and families to talk about the sacraments that they are preparing for.
- Parents/guardians continue to bring their children to the celebration of the Eucharist (Mass).
- Parents/guardians and families continue to pray together.
- Parents/guardians engage in the home pages from the *Grow in Love* Children's Book.
- Parents/guardians continue to read the *Children's Bible* with their children.
- Parents/guardians engage constructively with their own questions around the sacraments and their faith, asking for help from the parish as necessary, and engaging if and when they can with that help when it is offered.



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## PARISH PERSPECTIVE

How can our parish further support parents/guardians in their primary role as the educators in faith of their children, particularly as their children prepare for their first celebration of the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Holy Communion?

### Some suggestions for consideration

- The parish establishes a core group (see page 8) to lead in the preparation for and first celebration of the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Holy Communion.
- This core group organises a meeting at the beginning of the school year for parents/guardians and school representatives.
- This core group writes to all parents/guardians, encouraging them to participate in the Eucharist and any parish initiatives for families.
- Parents/guardians and families are invited by the parish to participate in a sacramental preparation programme like, for example, the *Do This in Memory* programme.
- The core group organises a group to visit the homes of families whose children are preparing for first Holy Communion.
- The core group organises a meeting in preparation for the first celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, during which the theology and spirituality of the sacrament is explained.
- The core group organises a meeting in preparation for the children's first participation in Holy Communion, during which the theology and spirituality of the sacrament is explained.
- The core group offers parents/guardians and families regular opportunities to gather together for inputs and discussion on the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Holy Communion, and on other questions relating to faith in their family that might arise.
- Parishioners are encouraged to understand the importance of welcoming children and their families to the Eucharist every Sunday.
- The parish leads in ensuring a review of provision takes place with parents/guardians, principal(s) and relevant teachers to ensure ongoing support for young people and their parents/guardians in the years following their first celebration of the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Holy Communion.



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## *Our Experience*

*Newbridge Parish, County Kildare*

Every year in Newbridge parish, almost three hundred children celebrate Holy Communion for the first time. These children attend seven primary schools, and are from very different backgrounds. The size of the parish and the anonymity of many of its members led some of us to reflect on ways we might reach out to families whose children were preparing for first Holy Communion. Was there something more that we, as a parish, could do to connect with and support them?

In May 2007, the parish established a small group consisting of two parish team members and four lay people. The team met to discuss various possibilities of reaching out to families. We decided to pilot a visitation programme in the parish, where lay people, priests and religious would visit the homes of children who were preparing to celebrate Holy Communion for the first time. In all, sixteen people volunteered for this ministry. As with any new venture, we were apprehensive. A big concern was whether or not we would be accepted by families. We held four training sessions, which included sharing hopes and fears, exploring benefits to families and the visitation team ourselves, developing listening skills, operating principles, and prayer and group support. Team members paired off and each pair received a folder with names and addresses of families, items of information about the first Holy Communion programme in the parish, and a small gift for the children's prayer space such as Rosary beads, holy water, or an icon of the Holy Family. The team were also asked to invite all the families they visited to participate in the Sunday Eucharist.

The ministry has been extremely successful and has been warmly welcomed by the parish community ever since. It is a real, tangible way for 'ordinary' parishioners to play their part in reaching out to families at this important time in their lives. We encourage other parishes to consider this ministry.

*Brian Clarke*

Member of the First Holy Communion Visitation Group,  
Newbridge Parish, County Kildare



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## *Our Experience*

*Newtownards and Comber Parish, County Down*

In the Down and Connor Diocese, first Reconciliation and Holy Communion are celebrated in Primary 3 and Primary 4 – that's First and Second Class in the Republic of Ireland. In my experience this gives the two sacraments their own rightful space. We have lots of initiatives in place in our parish to support children and their families in preparing for these sacraments. In preparation for first Reconciliation, we hold sacramental meetings for the parents and their children. This is organised in consultation with the two parish schools, which have now been brought together in a new body called the Inter-Parish School Faith Development Group. The sacramental meetings consist of stations at a number of tables, dealing with the elements of faith, with the parents and children rotating. The children lead the discussion and so help the parents to remember the faith language. The meeting concludes with prayer, and this involves the children with a sacred space in the centre. The meeting lasts about one hour but is effective. It normally takes place in the school and sometimes the church. After the celebration of first Reconciliation there is an invitation for parents and families to bring their children to parish celebrations of Rite II of the Sacrament of Reconciliation during Advent and Lent. I no longer hear Confessions in the school or take a class up to the church for Confessions, as I believe this undermines the responsibility of the parents/guardians. It is important that the parents are given back that responsibility. They are now asked to accompany their children on this journey.

In preparation for first Holy Communion, we encourage the parents to bring the children to Mass each week rather than once a month. In addition, we find that the visitation of the classes in the school is most important. Discussion with the children about the Eucharist is to be encouraged so that they have the language that is being set down. We find that children are often young catechists to their parents! Regular visits to the church during school time and the experience of prayer services, not simply in the classroom but also in the church, have worked well in our experience.

*Fr Martin O'Hagan*

Newtownards and Comber Parish



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## SCHOOL PERSPECTIVE

How can the school support parents/guardians in their primary role as the educators in faith of their children, particularly as children prepare for their first celebration of the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Holy Communion? How can schools best work with parishes in order to offer this support?

### **Some suggestions for consideration**

- Religious education time is given its full allocation each week and across all years in the Catholic school.
- Classroom teachers send home the *Grow in Love* Children's Books on a weekly basis.
- Parents/guardians and families are invited to the end of theme prayer services that are part of the *Grow in Love* programme.
- Relevant teachers are invited to the core group to discuss ways in which they might support greater parental and parish involvement in sacramental preparation.
- Teachers welcome visits from the school chaplain and the parish team.
- All activities involving children should be conducted in accordance with the requirements of local diocesan child safeguarding and protection policies and procedures. Such visits only take place following the approval of the school's board of management.
- Teachers encourage parents/guardians to participate in parish sacramental preparation programmes.
- Teachers encourage children to participate actively in the life of the parish community.
- There may be occasions where children who are preparing for first Holy Communion are brought to the parish morning Mass once a month in preparation for the celebration of the sacrament. They might also be introduced to the sacristy, vestments, chalices, etc. They are informed about what is happening and why, and are helped to feel at home in the church.





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## *Our Experience*

*Waterpark National School, Waterford City*

I've been teaching Junior Infants for a number of years now, and this year we started to use the new *Grow in Love* programme. In our school, we decided to send the *Grow in Love* Children's Book home once a week so that the parents and their child can do some work on that week's lesson together. It's not hard homework – it might be to put in a photo of their family, or to read a poem or a story together. I think it's good for the parents to see what's being covered in school. The book also gives them something to chat with their child about, and a prayer to say together. I think it's really important that parents engage with their children about their faith, especially in a Catholic school, where the children will be preparing for the sacraments. *Grow in Love* makes it possible to do that.

*Aileen Moriarty*

Waterpark National School,  
St John's Parish, Parnell Street, Waterford City







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## *Our Experience*

*Kilcock and Newtown Parish, County Kildare*

Over the past four years, the parish of Kilcock and Newtown has moved towards a more parish-based approach to children's first celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Rather than each school organising their own ceremony, as a parish we organised five parish Reconciliation services to which the whole community, including children who are celebrating the sacrament for the first time, were invited. We have five Catholic primary schools in our parish, so coordination and cooperation between the parents, schools and parish was vital in making sure all of this ran smoothly. Our parish choirs sang at these services, our Ministers of the Word proclaimed the Word and members of the parish pastoral council welcomed and organised children and their families. Parents were also invited to celebrate the sacrament alongside their children.

This move has given us a shared sense of community and parish, and has given the celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation an added dimension for us all. We have created a space where our parishioners (many of whom have already reared their families) can now pray with and support our children in a very real way. Each year we learn something new from our participating parents, and make great efforts to ensure that we continue to evaluate the programme and make changes that will enhance the sacramental experience of our young children.

*Eimear White*

Kilcock and Newtown Parish Pastoral Council



## **SCHOOL PERSPECTIVE**

How can the school support parents/guardians in the celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation for the first time?

### **Some suggestions for consideration**

- Teachers support the parish team in making parents aware of any details pertinent to their children's first celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, for example by distributing notes on behalf of the parish through the school.
- Teachers support the parish team in inviting and welcoming parents to the celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation.









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## *Our Experience*

*Arklow Parish, County Wicklow*

I have been in this parish in Arklow, Co. Wicklow, for the last five and a half years. Since 1999 there has been a tradition of having children celebrate their first Holy Communion as part of the Sunday Eucharist, and this year these celebrations were spread over five Sundays. The smallest group we had receiving their first Communion was approximately ten children, and the biggest was one hundred. The school helps the parish with organising the Sunday celebration of first Communion.

I think it continues to be a really positive experience for the parish, and we are still learning from and building on it. For me, the main advantage is that it celebrates the sacrament with the whole parish and that's where it should be celebrated, I think. After all, the children, their parents and their families are part of the parish.

The witness of the whole Christian community is also really important for the children. We would have been doing the parish *Do This in Memory* programme, which is organised and run by the parents with the help of the school for the previous year, so it makes sense then for the parishioners to see them for their special day. It helps the children zone in on how important their faith community is and can be for them. I think it makes the experience of first Holy Communion even more special for the children, their families and for the parish.

We are still growing and learning as a parish. So, for example, this year, for the first time, we invited parents to participate in first Reconciliation. We had small numbers of parents taking up the invitation but we'd be hopeful that that would grow over the years ahead.

*Fr Michael Murtagh, PP*

Arklow, Co. Wicklow

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**‘The Eucharist offers us intimate communion with Jesus Christ and committed communion with one another, a tender but radically life-changing embrace.’**

*Share the Good News*

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## C. Ongoing Engagement

In order that the celebration of first Holy Communion is meaningful and authentic, young people are helped to understand that the celebration of the Eucharist is a weekly Sunday celebration carried out by the parish community, in which they now participate fully. Children's love of the Eucharist can thus be encouraged and developed.

Some consideration needs to be given, in particular by the family and the parish, as to how the child's faith development can continue to be actively supported by the parish and his/her parents/guardians.

### HOME PERSPECTIVE

#### **Some suggestions for consideration**

- Parents/guardians continue to bring their children to Mass.
- Parents /guardians continue to pray with their children and chat together about faith using the *Grow in Love* Children's Book.
- Parents/guardians engage constructively with their own questions around the sacraments and their faith, asking for help from the parish, as necessary, and engaging when they can with the help that is available and offered.
- Parents/guardians seek to animate the local parish community and its celebrations by their presence, witness and involvement in the life of the parish.



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## *Our Experience*

*Maynooth Parish, County Kildare*

My name is Liam Tilly. My wife Susanne and I have three children. I was coordinator of the *Do This in Memory* programme in Maynooth parish last year, when Alex was making his first Holy Communion.

One of the things I enjoyed most about being involved in the programme was the incredible sense of teamwork. Working with the priests of the parish and the four schools was great. All of the four schools were really proactive in terms of helping. The schools facilitated regular visits from the two parent representatives on the *Do This in Memory* team from each school.

This year, I've stayed very involved in the parish by helping to follow up with the Third Class pupils. We're welcoming them to Masses in the parish every month, just to try to keep them involved. The best thing about it for me has been the sense of being part of the community. I wasn't involved in the parish beforehand really. I'd have always considered myself a spiritual person, but my involvement in *Do This in Memory* has really rekindled my involvement in the Church. And I've kept involved and really enjoy it.

*Liam Tilly*

Maynooth Parish, County Kildare



## PARISH PERSPECTIVE

### **Some suggestions for consideration**

- Organise a review meeting with the school and with parents/guardians to discuss how the children and their families experienced their first Holy Communion and first Reconciliation in terms of the changes made. At this meeting, discuss also the requirements of parents/guardians in terms of their ongoing engagement in the faith development of their children.
- The parish provides all parents/guardians with an evaluation tool in which they can reflect on their own engagement with the sacramental preparation of their children, as well as on what they have learned in the process, what they need into the future in terms of their own and their children's faith development, and how they as individuals and as a family might like to contribute to building up the parish community into the future.
- The parish organises a parish visitation group to visit the homes of families whose children received first Holy Communion to discuss their experiences and hopes for their child's ongoing faith development, as set out in the evaluation form on the previous page.





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## Additional Reading

- *Grow in Love Series*, Dublin: Veritas Publications, 2015, 2016.
- *Share the Good News: National Directory for Catechesis in Ireland*, Irish Episcopal Conference, Dublin: Veritas Publications, 2010.
- *Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education for Ireland*, Irish Episcopal Conference, Dublin: Veritas Publications, 2015.
- [www.veritas.ie](http://www.veritas.ie)