

# Raising your children within the Catholic faith

As parents you are the ones who make most of the day to day decisions in your young children's lives. In the early stages you choose what they wear, what they eat and so on. Many of you have made, or will make, the choice to raise your children within the Catholic faith.

Often as parents, we don't always know what is really required of us in this task, or quite how to manage it. The following is a brief guideline to help. Some things are more important than others – in fact some are absolute requirements (i.e. the sacraments), whereas others are mere suggestions.

- At home, parents are the first teachers of their children in everything – this obviously extends to the area of faith too. You are the role model, the example for your child. Do you talk to God regularly? Does God have any place in your life? Do you have a relationship with God? This may be an area you have neglected or are struggling with, but it's an area that needs your attention, if you hope to be a positive faith influence for your child. Sometimes working at the same level as your child i.e. simple conversations with God, saying traditional prayers, can be a great help for renewing your own faith life. Being a parent of a young child is an excellent opportunity to rekindle your own faith.
- Even young children can begin to pray with your help. They can be encouraged to thank God for the good things in their lives, and turn to Him in times of need. They can begin to learn traditional prayers and the Sign of the Cross. Prayer can become a regular part of their day, at meal and bedtime for example.
- It's helpful if each child has a copy of the Children's Bible so they can become familiar with simple stories and characters. The more they hear about God, the more they will begin to see him as a real part of their life.
- Marking and celebrating the main events in the Church year and teaching children the meaning of each occasion can be a really special time for a family. There are lots of excellent family reflections and activities which can help you to do this.
- As parents it is important to try and set a good example to your children, in the way you interact with each other and the rest of the community. It's hard to always live our faith, we are not perfect people, but as in any aspect of parenting we need to try and lead by example as much as we can.



- Most Catholic parents will, if possible, ensure their child attends Catholic school so they can take part in activities to learn about and live out their faith. Catholic schools should have God at the centre of everything they do – religion should not just be an additional element, but an integral one that impacts everything else.
- It is **so important** that Catholic parents bring their children to Mass each Sunday. The Church welcomes babies / toddlers / children / teenagers – they are not just our future Church, but through Baptism, they are full members of our Church today! Obviously parents with very young children need to be sensitive to the needs of others to pray and worship but even small children should be made to feel welcome within the Church and feel that they belong there. They should also feel encouraged to participate actively in the Mass. Once again, your example is crucial here. If you don't sing, they probably won't either. If you don't pray and join in the responses, they probably won't either. If you don't appear to enjoy or value Mass, they probably won't either. If you want your children to get any more out of the Mass than you do at present, then once again you will probably need to make an effort and lead by example. Perhaps invest in a Missal so you can follow the Mass, to try and understand it a little better. (Children's Missals are available too).

As Catholic parents you are the natural leaders of your children to the faith. The parish and the school help you to fulfil this task, but ultimately you have to be involved in the faith life of your child. This is not something the parish, or the school can "do" for you.

One of the most important things that you can and should do as a Catholic parent is to support and prepare your child to receive the Sacraments. This can initially feel very overwhelming for parents. Perhaps you are not quite sure about what it all means, you are not sure what is involved, and you don't feel that you are where you need to be in your own faith journey to lead your children in this way.

The following information is intended to make the topic of "Sacraments" a little clearer and to help you work out how best to help your child. Remember that the school and the parish WILL support you with this, they just can't do it all for you.



# The Sacraments

A sacrament is something that simply brings us closer to God. God loves us, and his love never stops or goes away, no matter what we do. Our job as Catholics is to try and become more aware of God's love in our lives – to accept the gift that He wants to give us. Sacraments celebrate God's love and our ability to accept His love at different points in our journey. Although God is always with us through the Holy Spirit, in the Sacraments we meet God in an even more powerful way. Meeting God like this helps us to receive strength and guidance – and hopefully it means we live our lives in a better way.

The Catholic Church celebrates Seven Sacraments:

**Baptism; Eucharist; Reconciliation; Confirmation; Anointing of the Sick; Holy Orders; Marriage**

The following information provides you with a brief explanation of the ones most likely to affect you as a parent:

## Baptism

This is the first of the Sacraments of Initiation and without Baptism a person cannot receive the other sacraments. At Baptism a person becomes a full member of the Church and becomes closer to God, as they receive His Holy Spirit within them. In the Catholic Church it is usual for babies to be baptized in the first few months of life – for this reason the choice and the responsibility for this sacrament rests naturally with the parents. The parish offers classes to parents so before baptising their child they fully understand the significance of the sacrament and their responsibility to raise their child within the Catholic faith.

## Eucharist

Through this sacrament we actually receive the body and blood of Jesus. Unlike many other Christians, Catholics don't believe that the bread and wine is a *symbol* of Jesus' body and blood, or that we are just *remembering* what Jesus did for us. We truly believe that the host is no longer bread – it may look like bread and taste like bread, but a sacred transformation has occurred. It is no longer bread, but the *actual* Body of Christ. Similarly it is no longer wine, but the *actual* Blood of Christ. Obviously this is a difficult concept for even adults to understand fully. Before children are allowed to receive the Sacrament of Eucharist they must be able to understand that the Eucharistic bread is different from any other, and they must also want to receive Jesus. For this reason, traditionally Grade 2 has been seen as the acceptable time for receiving this sacrament for the first time. Once again, the parish provides support to parents to help them prepare their children for this sacrament, and to help them understand why it is so important to continue to receive the Eucharist each week at Mass.



## Reconciliation

Because we are not perfect people, we make mistakes, we hurt others and we make decisions that move us away from God. The good news is that even though at times we reject God and turn our back on Him – His love for us is unconditional. He loves us no matter what, and He desperately wants us to turn back to Him, to have a relationship with Him. The Sacrament of Reconciliation is the turning back to God. He welcomes us with open arms of course, but we still have to make the decision to turn back to Him. It has to be our own free decision. To receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation we have to be capable of choosing to turn away from God, and of having some moral responsibility. For this reason Grade 2 is the earliest age this sacrament can usually be received, but many parishes recommend receiving it later than this. Once again, the parish provides support to parents to help them prepare their children for this sacrament, and to help them understand why it is so important to regularly receive Reconciliation.

## Confirmation

Confirmation is the final Sacrament of Initiation and means that the person has fully joined with the Catholic Church. Through this sacrament, God, through the Holy Spirit, gives us the grace we need in order to develop our faith and live a Christian life. Confirmation joins people more closely to the Church as they have chosen to live in the way the Church teaches. During the sacrament the person *confirms* the vows their parents made for them at Baptism. They make a public declaration of faith – they *confirm* that this is their faith and that they want to be a full member of the Church. Grade 6 is usually the earliest the Sacrament of Confirmation is received in the Diocese of Calgary. Once again, the parish provides support to parents to help them prepare their children for this sacrament, and to help them understand the commitment they are choosing to make.

If you decide to raise your child within the Catholic faith, you have chosen to accept certain responsibilities as outlined above. At times those responsibilities can feel a little overwhelming. You may feel ill equipped in your own faith life; you may feel you do not have the knowledge that is required. You may also feel that you have already missed the recommended grade level with regard to your child's sacraments. There are lots of factors which may keep you from truly committing yourself to raising your child within the faith – however please know that as a school division we are able, and very willing, to support you in this role, as are our local parishes. It may feel overwhelming, but there are people and resources available to guide you through. If your child has missed the grade levels mentioned above, it simply means that they are a little older and will probably have a more mature understanding – it is certainly not a barrier, or a missed opportunity. If you or your children would like to know more about receiving the sacraments please contact your local parish for detail.

In addition to the support provided by the parish, as a school division we will also try to help you in any way possible. If you would like any further information regarding scheduling, resources or guidance please contact either the parish or the Religious Education Coordinator, Amanda Crowley at 403.502.8359 or alternatively via email [amanda.crowley@mhcbe.ab.ca](mailto:amanda.crowley@mhcbe.ab.ca).