



Beyond the Sacraments



Catholic

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Cultivating Lifelong Catholic
Connections for Families





A recent Pew Research study has some Catholics—and parishes—concerned. While this stat will not surprise you, it will perhaps confirm what we've seen happening for a while now: Only 35% of parents with children under 18 say it's important or extremely important that their children share their religious beliefs. Among Catholic parents, 34% say it's "not too" or "not at all" important for their children to share their religious beliefs.

Parishes may experience several outcomes from this ambivalence. Families may disconnect from the parish after their child's baptism; they may not enroll their child in religious education or assist in their preparation for the sacrament of First Holy Communion. Parents of older children may not encourage them to be Confirmed or may give up the fight if their teen just isn't interested. Parents who are marginally practicing the Catholic faith themselves may see the sacraments as something like a secular "rite of passage" versus what the Church teaches, namely that "The sacraments are efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us" (CCC 1131), and "...the sacraments strengthen faith and express it" (CC 1133).

The increasing secularization of society doesn't help. The busy and demanding nature of contemporary life can overshadow regular participation in parish activities. Families often find it challenging to balance work, school commitments, and extracurricular activities; ultimately, parish life is cut.

An ongoing challenge for parishes is maintaining a connection with families before, during, and after their reception of the sacraments. A key to addressing this challenge is to emphasize the relevance of the Catholic faith beyond the milestones of the sacraments, creating opportunities for families to deepen their engagement, participate in the life of the community, and nurture a sustained connection with the parish throughout their—and their children's—faith journey.





Baptism Beginnings

We love to see babies being baptized, surrounded by family and friends, parents and godparents beaming with joy, and a tiny baby at the center. It is a beautiful moment. But it is more than the moment. This sacrament is for life! The child becomes a part of the Body of Christ and is Catholic. "Through Baptism, we are freed from sin and reborn as sons of God; we become members of Christ, are incorporated into the Church and made sharers in her mission: 'Baptism is the sacrament of regeneration through water in the word'" (CCC 1213).

Some Catholic parents may question why most Catholic parishes require preparation before their child can be baptized. Preparation is one of the keys that can reinforce the importance of the parents' understanding of and participation in their child's sacrament. They should know that in the early years of a child's life, their influence plays a crucial role in shaping their child's



perception of life as a follower of Jesus and as a member of the Catholic Church. Although a child is initiated into Christianity through Baptism, faith, and living it out is a lifetime journey. This can be a mighty challenge for parents but one in which parishes can come alongside, offering guidance, prayer, and resources to help them.

Here are some strategies that parishes could use to help parents stay connected before and after their child's baptism.

Before

Long before the baptism is celebrated, parishes can use their church management tool, such as MinistryPlatform, to make connections and share in the joyful anticipation of the expectant parents. A gift from the parish, such as a journal, could be sent when parents check in at the welcome center or by using a QR code to alert the priest of the news. Once the parish is aware there's a baby on the way, send pre-written, personalized check-ins with expectant parents. Use the emails to connect them with pre-baptism resources so that they can prepare.

After

Keeping in touch with families post-baptism is proven to be the best hope in ensuring baptized children receive future sacraments. Because the children are as yet too young to participate in parish activities, there can be a gap in communication. With your ChMS and some creativity, you can close that gap between birth and preschool and help parents nurture their child's faith (and perhaps grow in their own).

Plan a focused post-baptism series of emails and gifts that can be mailed or picked up after Mass. Personalized emails about twice a year from the parish priest or deacon, and we suggest a series like this:

- ✧ Building your domestic Church - emphasizing the role of parents in shaping their child's understanding of faith
- ✧ Parenting in faith—reflections on the joys and challenges of raising children in the Catholic faith and offering support and encouragement
- ✧ Living liturgically—exploring ways to celebrate and observe the liturgical seasons, enhancing the connection to the Church calendar
- ✧ Praying together—offering suggestions for family prayers and devotions that can create meaningful moments as a family
- ✧ Navigating challenges—give insights on addressing common challenges faced by Catholic families and strategies for overcoming obstacles while staying close to the parish





The goal of both before and after strategies is to help Catholic parents see and embrace the relevance of the Catholic faith in everyday life and see the parish as a welcoming space that resonates with the diverse realities of contemporary Catholic families.



First Communion Connection

A Child's First Holy Communion is another "Kodak moment" for many families, marked by pretty dresses and thoughtful gifts, but its significance extends far beyond the aesthetics of the occasion. This sacramental milestone represents a profound step in a child's spiritual journey within the Catholic faith. It is a sacred moment when children partake in the Eucharist for the first time, receiving the body and blood of Christ.





Beyond the external trappings, the occasion underscores the child's growing understanding of the centrality of Jesus in their faith and the communal aspect of the Church. It is an opportunity for families and the faith community to actively nurture the child's evolving relationship with God and instill a deeper sense of belonging within the Church. Thus, the "Kodak moment" is a snapshot of a significant and transformative step in a child's spiritual development, emphasizing the enduring importance of faith formation beyond the surface celebrations.

The richness of the sacrament may be lost on some parents, however. A lack of meaningful and relatable engagement during their child's sacrament preparation can make families feel detached. On the other hand, if parents are involved but perceive the preparation to be too formal, didactic, or disconnected from their everyday lives, they may struggle to see its relevance. And this could signal a near end to the child receiving future sacraments and, specifically, confirmation.

Before

Most parishes have well-planned preparation programs for First Communion using sound materials for children and adults. Considering the objective of involving parents who may be away from the faith, we suggest some strategies that may invite their participation. One way to do this would be to use your ChMs to send invitations to a welcome and orientation event, providing an overview of the process, introducing key personnel, and creating a sense of community. Create a resource page on your website where parents can access information, the materials used, and other resources related to preparing for First Holy Communion. Another pre-prep idea that could help parents feel more connected with the process is establishing a family sponsorship program where families with children who have received the sacrament can guide and support those new to the process. A big bonus is that the sponsor family can share their own faith with the parents!





After

This can be another dropoff point for families, particularly if the parents are not regular Mass attendees or are away from the faith. Similar to the tactics suggested for post-baptism, a creative, pre-written series of communications (via email or snail mail or, ideally, both) can be a way to help parents know that they are valued members of your parish community and that you are invested in their faith journey as well as their children's. In this case, we recommend a newsletter approach.

A parish newsletter tailored for Catholic parents whose children have received their First Holy Communion can serve as a vital communication channel, offering a consistent source of relevant information, spiritual resources, and updates on parish events. By addressing the specific needs and interests of these families, the newsletter fosters a sense of community, provides ongoing support for their faith journey, and reinforces the importance of their continued involvement within the parish.

Newsletter theme ideas to take and make your own:

- ✧ Parenting in Faith—addressing specific aspects of parenting in the Catholic faith. Topics could include instilling values, navigating challenges, and fostering a spirit of generosity and compassion within the family.
- ✧ Continuing the Conversation—a regular exploration of how families can sustain the spiritual growth initiated through First Holy Communion, including practical ways to integrate faith into everyday life.
- ✧ Living Liturgically—Offer insights into upcoming liturgical seasons, feast days, and traditions within the Catholic calendar. Provide suggestions for how families can actively engage and celebrate these occasions together.

In every issue, you might include some regular features such as:

- ✧ Upcoming Parish Events—include Mass schedules, confession times, family-focused activities, and educational opportunities
- ✧ Parish Volunteer Opportunities—highlight various ministries, service projects, or events and encourage participation
- ✧ Faith Formation Resources—link to relevant articles can aid parents in deepening their understanding of Catholic teachings and spirituality
- ✧ Family Prayer Suggestions—provide suggestions for family prayers, rituals, or devotions that parents can incorporate into their daily routines.
- ✧ Saint of the Month—include information about a different saint each month, along with practical insights on how families can learn from and emulate the virtues of that saint.



The goal of both before and after strategies is to help Catholic parents continue to be connected, at least partly, to the parish so that they will be open to helping their child complete the sacraments of initiation with confirmation.



Confirmation Motivation

When it comes to children going through Catholic confirmation, there's a touch of lighthearted sentimentality that can't be ignored. It's like witnessing a mini-milestone, complete with proud parents, excited relatives, and a dash of chrism oil drama. We might find ourselves reminiscing about the days of their First Holy Communion and wonder when these kids suddenly transformed into young adults. There's a certain charm in seeing them navigate the maze of liturgical rituals with a mix of reverence and teenage nonchalance.

But while Catholic confirmation is often perceived as a spiritual "graduation" for adolescents within the Church, there is a risk that if the family focuses on the ceremonial aspects, they risk missing the profound significance of the sacrament itself and the grace it imparts.

Emphasizing the transformative nature of confirmation is crucial, as it marks the culmination of a child's initiation into full membership in the Church and the strengthening of their commitment to the Christian faith through the Holy Spirit. It is essential to shift the narrative from a mere rite of passage to a deeply spiritual and ongoing journey, reminding both the candidates and their families that the true



value lies in the enduring grace and spiritual empowerment that confirmation brings. By maintaining this perspective, the sacrament is approached with a reverence that extends beyond the symbolic and resonates with the profound spiritual growth intended by the Church.

Before

From registration and orientation to religion ed classes and retreats to sponsorship and formation to service projects and workshops, parishes are well organized and prepared to help children prepare for the sacrament. Naturally, parents are involved early on to get their children registered, and this is a good time to establish regular communication with them. A series of email (or regular mail) letters from the pastor can be a welcoming touch in addition to the standard communication.

This is an excellent time to remind parents of confirmands that living the faith day-by-day at home as a family is one of the best ways to help the child prepare for the sacrament. Parents who are infrequent Mass attendees or do not practice the faith may not understand or necessarily agree. Ongoing, personalized emails to the parents of confirmands before preparation could address these issues. Sent as letters from the priest, a series of emails might include:

- ✧ What is my role in my child's confirmation?
- ✧ How do I help my child find a confirmation sponsor? (And what are the qualifications?)
- ✧ What if my child asks me a question I can't answer?
- ✧ Why should we go to Mass every Sunday?
- ✧ What if my child isn't interested in receiving the sacrament?
- ✧ Why is going to confession important?
- ✧ How can I encourage my child in their faith?

After

For many Catholics, preparation for confirmation is the last formal religious education they receive. That's just one reason why it is so critical for parishes to remain in contact with newly confirmed adolescents and their families. Another is that the parish is central to the life of the church.

"The parish is where the Church lives. Parishes are communities of faith, of action, and of hope. They are where the Gospel is proclaimed and celebrated, where believers are formed and sent to renew the earth. Parishes are the home of the Christian community; they are the heart of our Church. Parishes are the place where God's people meet Jesus in word and sacrament and come in touch with the source of the Church's life." – *Communities of Salt and Light: Reflections on the Social Mission of the Parish* (USCCB)





It all starts with a commitment to regular communication. Maintaining consistent communication through newsletters, emails, social media, an app, and a dedicated section on the parish website keeps families informed about upcoming events, resources, and opportunities for involvement. Here are some ideas for both the newly confirmed and their parents that you can take and make your own.

For the Newly Confirmed

Encourage young Catholics that confirmation has just opened the door to a rich and beautiful life of faith and empower them to be active in their faith journey by offering them some options such as:

- ✧ **YOU can be a lector, cantor, or altar server!** Participation in the liturgy helps newly confirmed adolescents feel like an integral part of the faith community—and allows them to use their gifts in service to the parish.
- ✧ **We need your help! Volunteer!** Service was a part of their confirmation journey. Keep that enthusiasm for serving others alive by inviting them to volunteer to help at the food pantry, soup kitchen, or other parish outreach programs.
- ✧ **Join our "no kids allowed" study group!** Emphasize the importance of going "all in" on learning about and growing in the faith. Create an age-appropriate study group led by a young adult to keep it relatable.
- ✧ **Get a Disciple Mentor!** Pair newly confirmed adolescents with adult mentors within the parish. These mentors can provide guidance, support, and a consistent connection for the adolescents as they navigate post-confirmation life.

For the Parents

As a second track for families post-confirmation, invite parents to go deeper into their own faith and into the parish community. It's important to reach out and stay connected, even if the parents are not active. Regular communication could open the door to their re-engagement with the Catholic faith.

- ✧ **Who me? A youth minister?** Encourage parents to help out with youth ministry initiatives. This involvement not only supports the youth but also strengthens their connection with the parish. Reassure them that "no experience is necessary."
- ✧ **Join a book club!** Initiate a book club or reading group focusing on related literature related to parenting, raising faithful children, or even Catholic fiction. This can encourage ongoing learning and provide a platform for discussions among families.
- ✧ **Let's check in.**—Conduct periodic check-ins with parents of newly confirmed children to assess their family's needs, interests, and concerns. Use surveys or feedback sessions to tailor parish programs to better meet their expectations. Soliciting feedback can help parents feel their opinions matter and connect them with the parish.





Take a look at all your ministries—youth groups, adult faith formation, Bible studies—through the lens of what can keep children and their families engaged with the faith. Leveraging MinistryPlatform's robust email and text features, parishes can establish a sequence of communications and invitations. By integrating MinistryPlatform with Growth Method, the platform can initiate personalized interactions and offer additional opportunities for parish participation. To further enhance parishioner connectivity, utilize the PocketPlatform app to keep teens and adults informed and engaged. Extend invitations to join groups and deliver spiritually enriching content such as daily devotions, prayers, feast days, videos, and more. All these elements seamlessly integrate with and can be managed through MinistryPlatform.



Now more than ever, it is crucial for parishes to actively support families in cultivating lifelong connections to the Catholic faith. By fostering a sense of belonging and providing ongoing spiritual guidance, parishes play a pivotal role in ensuring that families not only embrace their faith during key milestones but also sustain a meaningful and enduring connection throughout their lives. This commitment strengthens the fabric of the faith community, creating a supportive environment where families can draw inspiration, share experiences, and continue to grow spiritually together over the course of their lifetimes.





Can parents "force" their children to be confirmed?

The short answer is "no." The Code of Canon Law states that to receive confirmation, the person must be "suitably instructed, properly disposed, and able to renew the baptismal promises (CIC 889)." Forcing a child would mean they are not properly disposed to receive the sacrament.

However, the CIC also states, "Parents and pastors of souls, especially pastors of parishes, are to take care that the faithful are properly instructed to receive the sacrament and come to it at the proper time" (CIC 890). So it's important that parents, as primary educators, explain why it is to the child's benefit and to the benefit of the entire church that they receive the sacrament.

"It must be explained to the faithful that the reception of the sacrament of Confirmation is necessary for the completion of baptismal grace. For 'by the sacrament of Confirmation, [the baptized] are more perfectly bound to the Church and are enriched with a special strength of the Holy Spirit. Hence they are, as true witnesses of Christ, more strictly obliged to spread and defend the faith by word and deed.'" (CCC 1285).

Choosing the right ministry partner matters.

The know-how you need from experts you trust.

ACS Technologies is the original pioneer of Church Management Software (ChMS). But we know and care about more than technology and software; we know how to help you put it to best use to keep parishioners engaged, feeling welcome, and tending to their pastoral needs. We are evolving and changing to meet the changing needs of the Church. We're with you every step of the way.

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Let's Talk

We know the challenges of switching or implementing new technology—it can be intimidating! But we also know the unbelievable changes that have happened within churches that have partnered with us. Let's connect and see how we can assist you in the greatest thing you do - proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ.

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