

SACRAMENTAL PREPARATION IN THE PARISH OF ST ALBAN & ST STEPHEN

Dear Parents and Guardians

I am write to say something of the sacramental preparation for First Reconciliation and First Holy Communion here in the parish of St Alban & St Stephen.

It's a good many years since the preparation for First Reconciliation and First Holy Communion was moved out of our parish schools and into the parish. For parishes that transition represented a real challenge involving the recruitment of both employed and volunteer catechists, as well as the development of parish based programmes. For our own parish, with more than one primary school, and a good many young people attending non-catholic schools, there was also the challenge of the sheer numbers involved, but there was also the advantage of bringing all the children together and the emphasis, whether or not your child was at one of the parish schools, of their being members of one parish community. However, as with the school based programmes, parish based programmes co-ordinated by a catechetical co-ordinator and staffed by volunteer catechists, can leave parents on the side-lines - engaging the young people preparing for the sacraments, but not their parents and family.

One of the key aspects of the sacramental preparation here at St Albans is the emphasis it places on parental involvement. It relies on every parent being actively involved in their child's preparation for both First Reconciliation and First Communion. If our sacramental preparation is to address the needs of every child, progressing at their speed rather than the speed of the group where they can be swept along, this parental involvement is crucial. You know your children better than anyone else. You are better able to ensure that the process of formation and preparation is done 'with' them as opposed to 'to' them, and to help your children make that vital connection between what they have learned and their daily lives. Indeed, before anyone else it is from you that your child will learn; that they will see what it is to live the life Christ has called us to live. 'Parents', as the Catechism of the Catholic Church puts it, 'are given the awesome privilege to evangelise their children, to help them fall in love with Jesus by engendering a way of thinking - that they need him in their lives, want to worship him and be like him'.

Oftentimes a parent's last concrete experience of faith formation may have been their own first communion or confirmation, so I can appreciate that an approach to sacramental preparation which relies on parental involvement can be a challenge for parents, but I am also minded that in presenting a child for baptism every parent has accepted the responsibility of raising their child in the practice of the faith, commissioned, as the lighted candle is presented to them, to keep the flame of faith alive in their child's heart. As a parish, I want us to help you live out the commitment you have already made.

Our parish's vision for sacramental preparation is not its own. It is what the church envisages. Mindful that a child's formation in the faith belongs first and foremost to a child's parents, the directory on catechesis, on how people are to be formed or taught, says that 'the church is called to co-operate with parents through suitable pastoral initiatives,

assisting them in the fulfilment of their educational mission' to become above all the first catechists of their own children'. (Please see extracts below). In placing a greater emphasis on parents, the family and home it is this invitation, to help you as parents live out your vocation, to be the first and primary teacher in the ways of faith, that we are responding to.

In addition to what we ask of parents, the sacramental preparation here at St Alban and St Stephen places a great emphasis on the Sunday Mass. We are more than willing to work with families who have yet to establish a regular pattern of Sunday attendance, but we do ask, before beginning the immediate preparation for First Reconciliation and First Communion, that a family have established a regular pattern of attendance at Sunday Mass. Why?

Every parish is a community of communities – it has its schools, its various interest groups, its families. Here at St Alban and St Stephen, we are no exception. In fact we have more schools and more families than a good many parishes, but what makes us a parish, what stops us from being a loosely connected set of groups or individuals, is our celebration of and participation in the Sunday Eucharist. It is in the Sunday Eucharist that we give voice to our being baptised members of the church, that we are united - through him, with him and in him - to one another, and become what we receive, the one body of Christ. Indeed, it is in the Eucharist, where we encounter Christ in word and sacrament – listening to him in the Scriptures, feeding on him in the bread and wine become his body and blood - that we receive the nourishment, the fuel, we need to be the body of Christ.

So, as you begin to think about your child's First Reconciliation and First Communion, I would like to encourage you to get to know your parish community by making Sunday Mass a weekly part of your family routine, so that when your child celebrates his or her First Communion, it will be a true celebration of the whole body of Christ - in a place where your child feels at home, as part of a liturgy in which your child can fully participate, and in the midst of a parish community where you and your child are known.

‘For Christian parents the mission to educate, a mission rooted, as we have said, in their participation in God’s creating activity, has a new specific source in the sacrament of marriage, which consecrates them for the strictly Christian education of their children’. Believing parents, with their daily example of life, have the most effective capacity to transmit the beauty of the Christian faith to their children. ‘Enabling families to take up their role as active agents of the family apostolate calls for ‘an effort at evangelisation and catechesis inside the family.’ The greatest challenge to this situation is for couples, mothers and fathers, active participants in catechesis, to overcome the mentality of delegation that is so common. According to which the faith is set aside for specialists in religious education. This mentality is at times, fostered by communities that struggle to organise family centred catechesis which starts from the families themselves. The church is called to co-operate with parents through suitable pastoral initiatives, assisting them in the fulfilment of their educational mission’ to become above all the first catechists of their own children.

(Directory of Catechesis, 2020, no.124.)

Education in the faith by the parents should begin in the child’s earliest years. Family catechesis precedes, accompanies, and enriches other forms of instruction in the faith.

(*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2226.)

Parents are given the awesome privilege to evangelise their children, to help them fall in love with Jesus by engendering a way of thinking - that they need him in their lives, want to worship him and be like him. Parents are called to accompany their children into adulthood helping them to consciously decide to become disciples of Jesus, to accept the invitation to be a part of God’s family of families, the Church and to strive ‘to live in conformity with his way of life’.

(*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 2221-2233.)