



From A Bishop's Journal (758)

A Taste for the Eucharist (4)

In this year's pastoral letter on the Eucharist I recounted the stories of the first communions of Saints John Mary Vianney, Bernadette Soubirous, and Theresa of the Child Jesus. I also talked about our own children's first communion. To make one's first communion is to celebrate the sacrament of the Eucharist that creates between Jesus and the communicant the most intimate relationship that can be.

An Exceptional Journey

The prerequisites for the disciples receiving the Eucharist were not really specified, in the Gospels: it was their whole journey with Jesus, leading them to the Last Supper. The dioceses decided to specify certain conditions for "making one's first communion:" some requiring maximum preparation, and others require only basic formation. For some, regular Sunday Mass attendance is part of the experience required by the Church for reception of the Sacrament, besides catechetics and even a spiritual retreat. When fewer than twenty percent of adults attend Sunday Mass regularly, can we make this an obligation for our first communicants? It is sad to realise that some parents even forbid their children from attending Sunday Mass. Regarding catechetics and the retreat, there may be differences!

Sufficient Knowledge

We find this in the *Canonical and Pastoral Guide for Parishes* (4.1.1): "Children must have demonstrated sufficient knowledge of the Eucharist, have been prepared and have made their first confession. Parents and pastor must see to it that the children who have attained the age of reason be admitted to the Eucharist; before preparing the child to receive communion, one must ascertain that he/she is a Roman Catholic."

A Sense of Wonder

In the Diocese of Edmundston, it is already ten years that we let each parish organise its own sacramental preparation programmes for the sacraments of Forgiveness, the Eucharist, and Confirmation. I am amazed at everything parents, catechists and pastors do to make each sacrament meaningful, to have it celebrated after adequate preparation, especially if the first three years of family- or parish-based catechetics are devoted to the sacraments of Forgiveness and of the

Eucharist. The sharing that parents have with their children on these sacraments enhance the sacramental preparation. When parents share with their children the joy they feel at receiving Jesus in the Eucharist, a big step is taken by the child. Some parishes also offer Sunday celebrations with the children more involved in the liturgical act. Before receiving communion for the first time, the children must have developed friendship with the Lord Jesus. They must realise that taking communion involves more than coming up to receive the host. It is walking with Jesus and being fed with his presence. The preparation offered can prepare the child for an unforgettable experience of First Communion. In the months to come guidelines will be issued regarding the preparation and celebration of the sacraments of Forgiveness and of the Eucharist. However, we can say that before preparing for First Communion, the child must have gone through the first two levels of family- and parish-based catechetics as approved for the Diocese, or their equivalent. Adults wishing to receive the sacrament of Eucharist for the first time are to be accompanied in their faith journey to the Christian life (catechumenate). Care shall be ensured that they come to this sacrament and its celebration according to preparation adapted to their age.

The Kindness of God

First Communion preparation also includes an experience of the sacrament of Reconciliation. Even though our assemblies have been preparing as a community for over thirty years for the sacrament of Forgiveness, the children must recognise the God's kindness to them, and the repercussions of good and evil on their neighbours. The Church requires that this sacrament be received prior to First Communion as it can have an eminently pedagogical and evangelical impact. Besides, First Communion preparation takes place within the framework of several especially prepared meetings that include recollection and time for special prayers.

Role of Parents and Sponsors

Parents are usually invited to attend information sessions to prepare for First Communion. In this way they can help the child prepare, encourage him or her, answer questions, and show the child the importance of the event. Some Christian communities ask the parents to say a few words of welcome or a prayer; they can express their happiness, give thanks to God, and hope that this first communion will touch the heart of their child, and that it be for the child a day of happiness and peace. They can also commit to helping their child live in the faith and in love of God, and ask the Lord to help their child progress in the Christian life. It is also a good idea that they thank the catechists for all they have done for their child, and thank those who helped the child in a special way prepare for First Communion. As regards the sponsors, it is good that they accompany the child in his/her journey of faith, and that they take part in the celebration: the child's greatest gift is to see his/her sponsor share the same bread of life with them.

+ François Thibodeau ym

+ François Thibodeau, C.J.M.
Bishop of Edmundston

07-23-08