

Parents and Sacrament Preparation: Evangelizing Opportunity for Every Parish

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This fall I had a chance to model an approach to parent sacrament formation at our DRE deanery meetings. I offered the example of how I approach forming parents on the Sacrament of Eucharist as their children are being readied for their First Communion. The feedback seems to indicate that these sessions were helpful and appreciated.

Admittedly, there are many different ways to conduct parent faith formation sessions, be it sacrament prep or otherwise. I have particular stories that I use and an approach that has evolved over the years of doing parish parent formation events. My hope was that these modeling sessions would, yes, provide some structure and even content that could be replicated to a degree in our parishes. But even more, my hope was to spark the imaginations of our talented catechetical leaders to what they would like to provide for parent formation and also begin a conversation among us that gives parent formation the central emphasis it deserves.

I'd like to offer here 15 convictions and suggestions for parent sacrament preparation (and other forms of parent faith formation):

1. Sacrament prep sessions need to be mandatory, with parents (at least one parent) held accountable for attending. (Video-taping the session is helpful in this regard. This also lessens the need to conduct multiple make-up sessions.)
2. Develop attractive marketing material and over-communicate about it.
3. Whatever parent formation we provide (especially that which is mandatory) must be good. Actually, permit me to raise the bar. It needs to be *excellent!*
4. Parent faith formation and sacrament prep is really today more about evangelization than catechesis. This means that we speak to their hearts as well as minds... that we are offering spiritual formation as much as theological. Let's call it *evangelizing catechesis*.
5. Sacrament prep sessions need to keep the logistical stuff (deadlines, forms, attire, fees) to a minimum. Spend as few minutes on this as possible, as there are other ways to address these issues.
6. A session less than 90-minutes does not allow for the formation to go into any adequate degree of depth. (Parents...and families... can tolerate even much longer sessions, as long as they are engaging.) Longer sessions can become more retreat-like (less meeting-like) and this is a good thing.
7. Tap into the gifts of parish staff and parishioners to provide a transformative session. Know what your gifts are (and are not). Have multiple voices helping to lead the session, and especially some great witness of parents in the parish who can attest to the blessing of knowing God personally, of Catholic faith, and of the parish. (Parents will listen to authentic parent witnesses before all others.)

8. Get parents talking to one another...about their lives. It's the perfect way to get energy going in the room and get them engaged. Then start showing them connections between their lives and Catholic faith. Most people in our society today, sadly, see a false disconnect between life and faith.
9. Do not assume much in terms of where parents are at in their faith life. Indeed, an increasing number are even inclined toward some degree of atheism. Meet them on their terms, with joy, passion and conviction of Catholic faith...but *not* judgment.
10. Use a variety of modalities...private reflection (and writing), small group/dyad sharing, large group discussion, presentation, panel sharing, personal witnessing, liturgical prayer, use of AV resources, etc.
11. Attend to the environment. Provide a comfortable setting and hospitable experience, including refreshments and possible break-time.
12. Invest in this ministry because the payoff of bringing families (back) into the life of the parish is incalculable (including a financial benefit). Budget and plan for the provision of great sessions. Hire a presenter to lead an impactful session, if that is what is required.
13. Parent faith formation is not the same as family faith formation. Parents need to be nourished, spiritually and theologically, in their own right...apart from their children, where the focus will always naturally gravitate.
14. The goal will always be, in my words, to *foster conversion* in parents, as adults, to Christ Jesus and to discover the grace and blessings of Catholic faith. Our mantra to them should be "You can't give what you don't have."
15. Call the Holy Spirit down upon this ministry and your efforts. Leave room for the Spirit to move and breathe in and through you!

Now, sacrament preparation sessions are not the be-all and end-all for fostering conversion in our parents. There should be other opportunities for parent formation, both gathered and through resources (paper and digital). There is family formation (within which parent formation can occur.) There is the life of the parish, especially (but not confined to) liturgy. There are service opportunities.

Countless are the ways adults move toward a living and active faith. We should work to help our parents come to faith (or deepen faith) by any and all such means. However, a great starting point is parent sacrament formation. This is a way to reach the low-hanging fruit. Rather than wrack our brains for how to reach and engage with young adults, we have tons of them right there (in our schools and religious education programs) and we have access to them through our sacramental processes...each and every year!

Doing parent faith formation is no longer optional. (In truth, it hasn't been for a long time.) Nor is doing it well...excuse me...really, really well. I've talked with parents who have been impacted by evangelizing parent formation. It can be a difference-maker, for them and their family! Many of our parents are just primed and waiting to be inspired and enlightened by the good news of Catholic faith!

So move the needle, make a difference. Parent formation is one of the "high-impact" opportunities that we simply need to be doing better and better if we hope to stem the massive erosion going on out there. As goes the parents, so goes the children...at least to a meaningful degree. And the earlier we

can impact parents, the greater the potential impact on the family. (Frontloading our ministry attention invites us to seriously revamp baptismal ministry...but that's another story for another day.)

(If you are interested in seeing taped sessions of me leading Reconciliation and Eucharist parent sessions, they are accessible through www.dioceseofjoliet.org/reo. Additionally, if you go to YouTube and enter "Tom Quinlan" and "Sadlier" you will see some of my webinars there, including the two-part consideration of parent formation for First Eucharist. There is also one on First Reconciliation entitled "Encountering God's Mercy: First Reconciliation Prep as a Family Conversion Opportunity.")