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3.4 RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND SACRAMENTAL PREPARATION

Preparing Catholic children for the completion of their sacramental initiation is a major concern for families, parishes and Catholic schools. Because of the legitimate diversity in pastoral practices concerning the order of these sacraments and the appropriate age at which they should be celebrated, this policy document cannot establish expectations specifically geared to this most important task.

Moreover, changes over the past decades have led to new questions. No longer is it typical to see a single school linked to a single parish. Many schools serve more than one parish, and many parishes see their children served by more than one school. Greater mobility and the regionalization of school boards mean that teachers of religious education often do not belong to the same parish as their students. Religious men and women who used to combine both the roles of parish-based catechist and school-based teacher of religious education have practically disappeared. This requires parishes and schools to clarify their respective roles and to set up structures of collaboration and mutual support in this area.

It should be noted that preparation for the reception of sacraments takes place on two levels, *initial preparation*, which involves an ongoing education in the sacramental life of the Church, and *immediate preparation*, which involves catechetical and practical preparation in the weeks and months leading up to the reception of a particular sacrament. The former, in Ontario, is primarily the responsibility of Catholic schools. The latter, *immediate preparation*, is parish based and is usually coordinated by the parish priest and parish catechists. This does not mean that home, school and parish work in isolation. In the best case scenario, cooperation between home, school and parish under the direction of the priest and local bishop, leads to the best results.

What then is the role of teachers when it comes to immediate and initial preparation for the sacraments? Teachers fulfill their responsibilities for initial preparation when they teach the content of the religious education programs and in particular that content that focuses on knowledge and understanding of the sacraments. Their witness to the children in word and action is also important as is their repeated emphasis on the importance of Sunday Eucharist for a Christian life and its connection with the other sacraments. (Archdiocese of Toronto)

Although *immediate preparation* takes place primarily at the parish level, it is best if parish and school establish a sacramental team consisting of the school principal, vice principal, teacher, parish priest, catechist, and/or sacramental coordinator. This could promote a

³⁰ Catholic Update: The Liturgical Year: Simple Facts, Deep Truths. Fr. Thomas Richstratter, OFM.

positive experience for all those involved. Catholic schools can participate with the local parish or parishes by:

- meeting with the parish priest or his delegate to coordinate religious education and catechetical programs with regard to the sacraments;
- using the school newsletter to inform parents about upcoming meetings and other relevant information as requested by the parish priest(s);
- informing parents as to the role parish and school play in the preparation of their children;
- participating in or, if requested by the parish priest, conducting a retreat for those preparing for Confirmation;
- providing space in the school for parish meetings if the parish does not have an appropriate space;
- working in cooperation with the parish to prepare students with special needs for the sacraments;
- participating in enrolment ceremonies, parent sessions and the celebration of the sacraments, as requested by the parish priest.

This understanding of the collaborative role of Catholic schools and parish has a direct affect on the development of expectations and programs for religious education. To accommodate the difference in age for reception of sacraments, education in the sacraments is included in the *Celebrating* strand for each grade. Students are educated about the sacraments at an age appropriate level so that what they learn will link harmoniously with the catechetical programs provided for *immediate preparation* at the parish. After receiving the sacraments, religious education curriculum continues to deepen their awareness of the significance of these sacraments in their lives and in the life of all Christians. Programs developed from these expectations will need to address this same concern. Education in the sacraments needs to be seen as a lifelong process that can result in a desire for a sacramental understanding and approach to life.