

## Author's Introduction

Welcome to the *God's Greatest Gift* First Eucharist Program. In the next few pages I'll be explaining how the program works and how to mold it to fit the needs of your particular parish.

The first thing you should know is the attitude with which we approach children. We want to acknowledge and tap into the child's natural sense of the sacred and interior disposition of joy. One only has to observe a child in prayer to recognize how profoundly absorbing can be the child's encounter with mystery and readiness to respond with an equally profound interior sense of joy. We want to avoid wrapping our instruction in efforts to have a good time and thereby risk trivializing the liturgical signs and biblical imagery with which children resonate so naturally. So do we pray with Jesus: "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children" (*Matthew 11:25*).

*God's Greatest Gift* involves the entire parish while giving parents a key role in preparing their children for communion. The format was born out of my experiences leading first communion programs in many parishes. By taking into account the different needs, special traditions and amazing latent talent, I was able to formulate a structure that would work in a variety of circumstances, one that was complete yet very flexible, one that would unleash the talents of all those involved. My own experiences in using the program, as well as the comments I've received from others who have used it, have all been very positive. I hope your experience will be positive, too.

Now, here's how it works.

### FAMILY & PARISH WORKING TOGETHER

Each child is prepared for communion through the efforts of three different but related groups of people: 1) the child's own family; 2) specially designated members of the child's parish — the catechists; and 3) the parish community as a whole. The members of these groups, each with special experiences of what the Eucharist means in his or her own life, all come together to attend to the way our children experience the

Church's rich liturgical tradition of celebrating the Eucharist. While doing this, we need to keep in mind that *children already have a relationship with God*. As Jesus observed, the Kingdom of heaven belongs to those who are as children (*Mark 10:13-16*). So we approach our children as a source of grace for the entire community. We need to keep in mind, therefore, that as our parish community prepares our children for communion, so do our children help to renew the entire parish community's participation in the Eucharist.

In keeping with the Vatican's *Directory for Masses With Children* published in 1973, we need to be aware that our liturgical rites can profoundly enrich or undermine the child's relationship with God. Every catechist should be familiar with these guidelines for celebrating the Mass with children. As the authors of the *Directory* point out, "Even in the case of children, the liturgy itself always exerts its own proper didactic force" (Paragraph 12). Similarly, the *National Catechetical Directory* points out: "Fruitful participation in catechesis calls for the spiritual enrichment that comes from liturgical participation" (No. 36). Moreover, the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* states that active participation in liturgical celebrations is the "primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit" (No. 14).

Only in the life of the eucharistic community — in our individual families and our larger parish family — will our Christian faith make sense to our children. In these relationships our children personally meet the poor, the sick, the lonely, the suffering — all those whom Jesus came to serve and save. When our children receive communion, they share more fully in the mission — the life and work — of Jesus in our world today. This is why celebrating the Liturgy of the Word with children is so central to any effort to prepare children for full participation in the Eucharist — the celebration in which we praise and give thanks to God for the many gifts we enjoy through power of the Spirit of Jesus.

### THE GIFTS

A good way to help our children understand the mission Jesus shares with us and celebrates with us in the Eucharist is to explore with them the many gifts that God has given to us and to commit ourselves to use these gifts to bring glory to God. The *God's Greatest Gift* program rests upon the foundation of Jesus himself. We come to know who Jesus is through sharing in his life and work. In other words, we learn to become followers of Jesus by respecting the many gifts God gives us, by taking care of them, and by sharing them with others.

The “gifts” we focus on in this program are:

**Creation, Life, Baptism,  
God's Word, Friendship, Forgiveness,  
Peace, Joy, Love, Thankfulness**

## THE SESSIONS

The program is designed to be completed in eleven sessions. This includes one introductory session and then one session for each of the ten chapters. In each of nine chapters we explore with children a particular gift we have received from God, and what we might do with that gift. The ninth chapter, “The Greatest Gift,” focuses on Jesus in the Eucharist, the gift of Love. The tenth chapter and session comes *after* the children have received communion because it focuses on our response — *our* gift — to God.

Within each session of the program, four different events take place: 1) Children's Gathering; 2) Parents' Gathering; 3) Family Gathering at Home; 4) Parish Gathering for Eucharistic Celebration.

### 1. CHILDREN'S GATHERING

The children preparing for communion meet in small groups — ideally 6 to 8 children per group. Each group has at least one catechist. Together they explore each theme (gift) through art, drama, discussion and prayer.

The *Catechist's Guide* provides a framework of activities for the catechist. Remember that these activities are just suggestions. They may trigger your own ideas. If they do, that's great. Use the suggestions you'll find here, along with your own ideas, to construct a session that suits your time and resources and the spiritual needs of your children. I would only ask that you keep the *objectives* and the *framework* in mind, both of which you will find spelled out at the beginning of each chapter.

#### *Show and Tell*

It is my experience that the children do not all arrive for their scheduled session at the same time. This provides you with a chance to spend time with children individually. In *Show and Tell*, as the children arrive, they are invited to show their *Children's Workbook* to the catechist. They can also share their work with each other, or spend a few minutes working together on some pages.

A word of caution. Some children may not have done much work in their book. Be sensitive to this. A child in this situation may feel very uncomfortable about showing his/her book to you or to the other children. Be encouraging to the child. The *Children's Workbook* is central to the home preparation. If a child consistently comes in without having done any work, then the parent(s) need to be approached — with sensitivity and special care. There could be any number of reasons why parents may not be working through the book with their child. Your approach in this situation should be to find out how you might help. Never look at the workbooks as though you are checking up.

#### *Starting Activity*

This is an art project that the child can tackle right at the beginning of the session with very little supervision. It may then be brought into the *Friendship & Prayer Circle* to initiate discussion. The children might take their artwork home at the end of the session or they may make a display of it for the larger parish to enjoy at church.

#### *Friendship & Prayer Circle*

The *Friendship & Prayer Circle* is central to each session. It is here, in a small group, that the children share with each other their experience of the gift. This section is laid out as a series of questions to facilitate discussion and to help the children reflect on various aspects of a particular gift.

The children then listen to a story from the Bible. It is here that the children see, through the teaching and example of Jesus, how to thank God for the gift they have been given and how to share the gift with others. We read and reflect on the scriptures following the model of the Liturgy of the Word with children. This is a prayerful reading and sharing of God's Word.

This process emphasizes that at Mass we celebrate God's presence in Word and in Eucharist. Moreover, celebrating the Word is the way we prepare for receiving the Word-made-flesh in the Eucharist. This is a vital part of our preparation not only for *first* communion but for every reception of communion. If we have not heard and accepted the Word in our lives, we risk making our reception of the Eucharist a hollow ritual or a sort of magic. In the Liturgy of the Word we reflect on how we might share in the life and work of Jesus in our lives; thereupon, in the Liturgy of the Eucharist, we celebrate the Word fulfilled — the Word made flesh. So, as we eat the Sacred Food, *we commit ourselves to be transformed into the Bread of Life for the world today.*

We end this session with a children's Prayer of the Faithful.

After the *Friendship & Prayer Circle*, the children could be given some refreshments before starting the next part of the session. In a sense, this is like a “little eucharist”.

### **Activity**

In each chapter, four activities follow the *Friendship & Prayer Circle*: 1) display board, 2) frieze, 3) tree of life, and 4) an action. The activity is a way for the children to explore and express their understanding of the gift through art, movement or role playing. Choose one activity.

### **Remind the Children**

This section serves as a reminder to the catechist to make sure that, before the children go home, they are aware of any special instructions for the forthcoming Eucharistic celebration, or anything else they need to know.

### **Song**

Music is a powerful part of *God's Greatest Gift*. Songs not only help children remember but also celebrate the message of each session. You might sing at different times during the session or close with a song. Singing provides children with a way of expressing their natural sense of joy. Singing also helps to build identity within a community.

### **Eucharist**

Some ideas and suggestions are provided for the catechist on how each particular gift could be incorporated in a celebration of the Eucharist following the session.

## **2. Parents' Gathering**

In order for the parents to properly support their children as they prepare for first communion, it is very important that they know about and understand the things that the children are learning. Therefore, while the children gather for their lessons, the parents also gather in a different room to explore the themes on an adult level, through discussion and prayer, and with the support of the other parents whose children are in the program. Also, the parents are given ideas at this time on how to carry on with the children's preparation at home.

To lead the parents' sessions, choose a catechist who is experienced in facilitating adult groups and who can create a safe place for parents to express their concerns and insecurities about “teaching their children religion.”

## **3. Family Gathering at Home**

The importance of this part of the program cannot be over emphasized. In the home, children most intimately *experience* the things they are learning in their group sessions. It is with their families that children first see the gifts of peace, of joy, and of love actually lived out as Jesus taught us. This is not to say that there aren't struggles and failings in family life. But it is in the *striving* for the ideals that children see the Spirit of Jesus at work around them in their individual families and parish as a whole.

A child's preparation for communion requires the family's conscious support and involvement. Moreover, the Spirit within the communion child can lead the entire family through an experience of renewed dedication to the life and work of Jesus celebrated in the Eucharist. This is why we recommend that families reflect each week on the Sunday readings, particularly the Gospel, with their children. The *Family Journal* provides the Gospel with simple reflection questions following the process used in the sessions with children. The *Journal* also includes suggested prayers and family rituals that relate to the readings. The Liturgy of the Word is the primary preparation for the Eucharist, not only for first communicants, but for the entire parish.

(*Note: With its focus on the Liturgy of the Word in the Journal and the design of the Children's Workbook and Parent's Guide, the GOD'S GREATEST GIFT series is ideally suited for parishes in which families prepare their own children for first Eucharist. In these parishes, parents meet periodically to help support one another, to review the material covered in the child's book, and to resolve any questions that might arise.*)

## **4. Parish Gathering for Eucharistic Celebration**

First communion is also an important event in the life of the whole Eucharistic community. Since the children are being prepared to be further initiated into the local parish, that parish needs to be aware of and involved in the children's preparation. Therefore, each gift that we explore with the children is celebrated with the whole parish at a Sunday Eucharist.

You do need to take into account the time restrictions and particular sensitivities in your own parish, but in my experience this practice has been a beautiful opportunity for parish members to recall the gifts in their own lives and recommit themselves to following Jesus' directive to share those gifts. As in the family, the communion children can have a far-reaching and enriching influence on the entire parish's encounter with Christ in the Eucharist.

## WHO CAN BE A CATECHIST?

It is the entire Christian community — the families and people of the parish — who pass on the tradition of the Eucharist. From within this community, any of the faithful in the parish — parent, interested adult (*young* adults, too!), school teacher — can be a catechist. The catechist should be a committed Christian, able to work happily and supportively with others, and to give the time needed for the sessions and to prepare for them. The catechist should be a companion, a friend, a guide for the children while on their journey. From the catechists, as well as from the parents, the children will share in the faith-experience of the “elders” in the community and hear the stories of those who have already come to know Jesus “in the breaking of the bread.”

## CAN I MODIFY THE LESSONS IN THIS BOOK?

Of course! The children’s sessions in the *Catechist’s Guide* intentionally accommodate people with limited experience or who may have never led a first communion session before. So you’ll find lots of really basic instructions throughout — “Now tell the children . . .”, “Invite the children to . . .” Experienced catechists will need less direction.

You will also find suggestions that are less directive and that encourage you to follow the children, particularly when reflecting on the Word with children. The *inquiry process* that we use engages the children’s imaginations and helps them learn the skills of reflecting on their lives in light of God’s Word. This process uses open-ended questions to which there are no right or wrong answers. Catechists who use this process have discovered that they themselves grow in knowledge that is not just *about* God but that is *of* God through the children. Recall again the prayer of Jesus: “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure” (*Luke 10:21*).

As your catechists become more familiar with the lessons and activities in this book, they should feel free — *encouraged* — to change, modify, insert and delete. They should do anything they need to be more effective and more authentic in exploring with children their natural relationship with God. In other words, we do whatever is to the spiritual advantage of the child. As Maria Montessori learned from a child: “Help me to do it by myself.” You’ll find space throughout the book for your notes. Make the program one in which you and the children “do it by yourselves.”

## THE CATECHETICAL COORDINATOR

Each parish should have a person assigned the responsibility of coordinating and monitoring the entire first communion program. If your parish provides a Sunday Liturgy of the Word celebration for children, the coordinator of the communion program should work with the children’s liturgy director. Engaging children in celebrating the Word is integral to initiating children into full participation in the Eucharist. In keeping with the guidelines of the *Directory for Masses with Children*: “A fully Christian life is inconceivable without participation in the liturgical services in which the faithful, gathered into a single assembly, celebrate the paschal mystery. Therefore, the religious initiation of children must be in harmony with this purpose. (8) . . . For this reason all who have a part in the formation of children should consult and work together toward one objective: that even if children already have some feeling for God and the things of God, they may also experience in proportion to their age and personal development the human values that are present in the eucharistic celebration.” (9)

In addition to integrating communion preparation with children’s Liturgy of the Word, the coordinator is responsible for choosing the catechists, facilitating their training and supporting them throughout the program; for scheduling the various events in the program (children’s sessions, parents’ sessions, parish celebrations of the Eucharist); for initiating and maintaining communication between the various groups in the program; for coordinating session venue requirements (comfortable meeting areas, necessary equipment and materials, refreshments and hospitality) — in general, to insure the quality and smooth operation of the program. While the coordinator is *responsible* for everything, he or she doesn’t *do* everything. The coordinator is an “enabler” and an “encourager.” A team approach should be taken in getting all the different tasks done.

## GETTING STARTED

It is important that the coordinator gather all the catechists regularly to work as a team in planning each session. Volunteer catechists will need to know that they will be expected to attend regular planning sessions. Such planning also serves to reassure parents that the team is taking a responsible and professional approach, and that each small group of children will have the same input. Before each planning session ends, everyone should be clear about what needs to be done and who is going to do it.

## ACTIVITY RESOURCES

As soon as a decision has been made to use the program, start collecting materials for the activities — art materials, photographs, magazine pictures, music, and so forth. You will find a “Materials List” for each activity in each chapter. If you plan ahead, you can save a lot of money on art materials by collecting and saving shoe boxes, cereal boxes, wrapping paper, and so forth. In two of the parishes where I work, the catechists get together (sometime before the program begins) and spend a Saturday morning working on the resources they will need in the weeks to come. Some paint rolls of old wallpaper in a variety of different colors with powder paints. Others cut out shapes — fish, flowers, leaves, hearts, stars, and so forth. Still others take the letter stencils and prepare several sets of brightly colored alphabets to use for making banner headings. We all bring a packed lunch to share when we’re finished. Several catechists bring their children to help. It’s always a fun morning and we all have a great time.

## ADVERTISE

Another thing you’ll need to prepare in advance is adequate publicity. Use the parish bulletin to advertise the first communion program. Mention the program during the announcements at Mass on the Sundays during the enrollment period.

Invite parents to enter their child’s name on an enrollment form. The advertisement should state a closing date for the enrollment forms to be completed and handed in. At some point, before the closing date, there should be a parents’ information evening. This gives parents an opportunity to find out about the program.

## PARENTS INFORMATION EVENING

Plan the evening at a place and time that is convenient for most parents. If possible, supervised care should be provided for brothers and sisters so that parents can be on their own during the session.

At this time the program coordinator explains how the program works and what the benefits will be for the parish in using this particular program. The parents must be told clearly of the commitment that is being asked of them: attendance at the sessions for parents, doing the home preparation with their child, attending the Eucharistic celebrations, any fees related to the cost of the program. Parents need time to plan ahead. They should be given a list of dates for the various events in the program.

Take time to introduce all the catechists. Have a break for refreshments and a time for parents to meet and mingle with the catechists.

Come together again and allow time for the parents to ask questions and make comments. Some parents may want to hand in enrollment forms at the end of the session. Have one or two catechists available to help with this, and to issue receipts if any money is being collected for books or fees.

## EVALUATE

Once all the children have received communion, invite the parents to comment on the program. You might do this during the final session (“Our Gift to God”) through discussion or a questionnaire. Also, hear what the children have to say about the program. A format for this has been suggested in the guidelines for the last session.

It is important that the catechists get together to review the program. There are different ways to do this but I always try to organize a Catechist’s Review Day. We all get away from the parish and spend a day looking back over the program. We cover every aspect and try to be very honest about our feelings. The coordinator makes out a schedule for the day, allowing people to state their likes and dislikes about planning sessions, children’s sessions, parents’ sessions, Eucharistic celebrations, communication among the team. We also discuss feedback from the children and their parents. At the end of the day we write down our recommendations and prepare guidelines for next year’s program. Every year we find ways to improve.

## FINALLY

Again, I want to urge you to make the program your own. My task has simply been to provide you with some strong foundation blocks upon which you can easily build *your* parish’s communion program. As you do, take into account the innate spirituality of children, the needs and traditions of your parish community, as well as of the individual families that make it up. Take into account your particular staffing resources and time restrictions and modify your approach accordingly.

But most of all, be clear in *yourself* about the message of the Gospel, the innate spiritual life of children, and how we can give praise and thanks to God for the many ways God has gifted us with unfailing love. For in the end, it is not the program, but the Spirit of God *in each of us* that enables us to fulfill our responsibility: to nurture our children’s natural relationship with God by drawing them into the life and work of Jesus through the celebration of God’s presence in Word and Eucharist.

*Bernadette Wilson*