



WORSHIPLIFE

Guidance for Parents about First Communion

Martin Luther said: "Parental authority is the source and type of all other human authority. (Gotta like that!) From parental government all other government takes its rise... **The father [parent] is ruler and priest in his own family.**"

In Holy Baptism parents make promises to the community, among them, to faithfully bring their child to the word of God and the holy supper.

That's where we begin with faith formation and our practice of inviting children to the Lord's Table: with Baptism, and with the parents. As a community we support parents as they seek to fulfill these promises made at Baptism. All our Children, Youth and Family Ministries arise from this congregational support.

But the parents remain priests (pastors) of their own family. They guide, teach and set the timetables. They are the primary teachers, preachers, catechists and sacramental instructors.

We know that **Baptism is full and complete initiation** into the community of faith. Nothing more is needed. (First communion and Confirmation are but affirmations of this Baptism.) Some Orthodox Christians (who also baptize infants) offer first communion to infants on their Baptism day - with a small spoon of wine.

In the Western church, in the Middle Ages, there arose such a fear of the holy "substance" of the bread and wine being abused that the bread and wine were completely withheld from infants and children. The wine was even withheld from adult Christians for centuries. Vatican 2 (1962) corrected this practice for the world's Roman Catholics. Before this, it's likely that infants in the Western pre-Reformation Church received wine as their first communion on their Baptism day, like the Orthodox in the East. (Newborns did not receive bread because, of course, they could choke on it.) When wine was withheld from the whole assembly, **infant and children Christians were effectively "excommunicated"** or removed from communion table fellowship.

Luther restored participating in the Communion to the whole assembly using both bread and wine. But the practice of waiting to commune infants and children remained; the reason usually given was that they should wait until some "age of understanding." That "age of understanding" keeps dropping... confirmation age; 5th grade; 2nd grade...

it's rather arbitrary. When does the child understand the mystery of the Lord's Supper? When does an adult? Sacraments are symbols with many meanings, and we all spend our whole lives of faith discovering and deepening our understanding of these symbols of grace and favor.

So when to commune our children? "Parents are the ruler and priest in their own family." They know their children best. So we let them decide this important question in their family. General guidance is that when the child begins to understand they are being left out of something that others are receiving/participating in, then it's time to start thinking about first communion. (I've seen kids fussing because they want some of that, or literally say: "Give me some Christ." That's pretty good understanding!) Other children I've met are afraid of the words or experience of Holy Communion and choose to wait until they become more abstract thinkers. So first communion is not so much a Sunday School scope-and-sequence class/grade decision as **it is a family decision**.

Having said that, then, **how do we prepare our children for communion?**

We offer a **first communion workshop** for children of any age when parents decide their child is ready to begin participating in the sacrament. Scheduled with the worship pastor and attended by children and parents, it consists of some Bible stories that introduce and foreshadow the Holy Communion meal; learning about communion practice and vessels; touching and tasting the bread and wine; and then baking bread to use in the Holy Communion.

Communion Instruction

Then along the way, to get everyone synced up, in our CYF Sunday School and Confirmation programming we have built into our curriculum times in 2nd grade, 5th grade, confirmation, and high school times to revisit the theology and practice of Holy Communion as our children grow in faith and understanding. Preaching and teaching about the sacraments continues for adults throughout our life together.

We spend our whole lives discovering and rediscovering the meaning and power of the Sacrament of the Altar. As an experience, it's valuable to reflect upon its meaning after the event. Parents can continue to serve as the chief priest and catechist of their family by inviting regular reflection about the Sunday worship experience each week in the car on the way home, or at the Sunday dinner.