

Author's Introduction

Welcome to the *God's Greatest Gift* first communion program!

The first thing you should know is that this series was designed not only to be instructional, but to be a pleasant experience for both children and adults. I wanted to design a program that everyone could enjoy and enter into fully. And especially I wanted the children to be able to remember this experience with joy, as a new expression of intimacy with God.

God's Greatest Gift is a parish-based liturgy program, one in which parents play the key role in preparing their children for first communion. The design of this series makes it ideally suited not only for group preparation but also for parishes in which parents prepare their own children for the sacraments. The format was born out of my experiences leading first communion programs in several parishes. By taking into account the different needs, special traditions and amazing latent talent that I found in the many parishes where I worked and visited, 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 comments I've received from others who have used it, have all been very positive. I hope the experience will be enriching for you, too.

Now, here's how it works.

— FAMILY & PARISH WORKING TOGETHER —

Each child prepares for communion through the efforts and influence of three 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 personal experiences of what the Eucharist means in their own lives, all come together to engage children in the community's life of faith and the church's eucharistic liturgical tradition. Engaging children in the life and work of Jesus is done by families and parish communities together who are themselves following the way of Jesus.

The Eucharist — indeed, the whole of our faith — will only make sense to a child in the context of his or her own family and community. In these relationships children experience first-hand the poor, the sick, the lonely, the suffering — all those whom Jesus came to serve and save. When children receive communion, they become more intimately engaged in the mission of Jesus; they share in the Bread of Life so that they may be as Bread to a hungry world. This is the mission Jesus shares with us. Our children learn this mission by becoming more deeply engaged in the Liturgy of the Word, in which we reflect on and participate in the life and work of Jesus. When we care for one another as Jesus did, the Word of God is already taking flesh in our lives. This is what we celebrate in the Liturgy of the Eucharist when we gather at the Lord's Table to eat and drink the Sacred Bread and Wine.

— THE GIFTS —

“Eucharist” comes from a Greek word that means thanksgiving. A good way to help young people understand the mission of Jesus is to explore with them the many gifts that God has given to us, and how we might respond *in gratitude* for these gifts. *God's Greatest Gift* is based on this notion: we share in the mission of Jesus not to gain rewards but *to express our gratitude* for the gifts God gives us. So our purpose is not simply to learn about Jesus. Rather, we gather to deepen our commitment to Jesus and the work of the Gospel. We learn to become followers of Jesus by respecting the gifts we have been given, by taking care of them, and by sharing them with others.

The “gifts” we particularly focus on here are:

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

— THE SESSIONS —

The program consists of ten chapters. Nine of the chapters provide the children with an opportunity to explore a particular gift they have received from God, and what they should do with that gift. (The ninth chapter, “The Greatest Gift,” focuses on Jesus in the Eucharist, the gift of Love.) The tenth chapter, which is dealt with *after* the children have received their first communion, focuses on what their gift to God might be.

The program is designed to be completed in eleven sessions — the introductory session, plus one session per chapter. With each session of the program, four different “events” take place:

1. CHILDREN'S SESSION

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

2. PARENTS' SESSION

In order for you as a parent to properly support your child during preparation for first communion, it is very important that you know about and understand all the things that your child is learning. Therefore, at the same time as the children gather for their lessons with the catechist, 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.

3. HOME SESSION

The importance of the home cannot be over-emphasized. It is the children's time at home when they most intimately *experience* the things they are learning in their group sessions. For it is with their family that the children first see the gifts of peace, joy, love, gratitude and so forth actually lived out as Jesus taught us. This is not to say that families do not have to struggle or do not often fail to live as Jesus lived. But it is the *striving* to follow Jesus that is important for the child to see in a family context, and ultimately in the whole parish as well.

A child's preparation for first communion should not, indeed, *cannot* take place without the support and involvement of the child's family. Moreover, preparation for communion is not just for a one-time event in the child's life; it is the deepening of the family's on-going engagement in the life and work of Jesus in our world today.

4. EUCHARISTIC CELEBRATION

Communion preparation is also an important part of the life of the whole Eucharistic community. While the community influences the spiritual life of our children, we need to keep in mind that our children are a source of grace for the community. Since our children are being further initiated into the life and work of Jesus as embodied by the local parish community, that parish needs to be aware of, involved in, and open to the influence of children upon the community during this period of preparation. Therefore, each gift, as it is explored by the children, is celebrated with the whole parish at a Sunday Eucharist.

— THE MATERIALS —

You'll need a few items on hand in order to make the most of the preparation time with your child.

1. THE CHILDREN'S WORKBOOK

Your child's workbook is central to the home session. It is here that your child records the story of his/her faith journey with you. Each chapter explores one of the gifts we mentioned earlier. As you go from chapter to chapter the story of God's love for your child will begin to unfold.

2. THE PARENT'S GUIDE

This guide helps you make the most of your home sessions. It contains suggestions to help you and your child progress through the workbook, as well as activities that involve the whole family. You will progressively explore more fully the many gifts God has given to us.

3. FAMILY SUNDAY LITURGY JOURNALS

The *Family Journals* provide a simple way for family members to reflect on the Sunday Gospel and share their insights. In keeping with the *Rite of Christian Initiation* (#82) and the *Directory for Masses with Children* (#14), following the Sunday readings is the primary way to initiate your child into the eucharistic community. Create a family keepsake of memories, especially during this year preparing for the Eucharist. When you keep a journal regularly for the three years of the liturgical cycle, you can return every three years to look back at where you were three years ago. Each *Journal* includes ideas for prayer and simple rituals.

4. A BIBLE

If you don't already have a Bible, this is the time to acquire one. As St. Jerome observed, if we do not know the scriptures, we do not know Christ. The edition you buy need not be expensive. You may also wish to acquire a children's Bible. Children have the right to hear God's Word in language they understand. That is why the church recommends inviting children to participate in a separate Liturgy of the Word on Sundays. The *SUNDAY Liturgy of the Word* materials (Treehaus) provide the resources you need to celebrate the Word in a way that engages children. Such celebrations are essential to the child's preparation for the Eucharist.

— THE PROCESS —

Each chapter in the book has been divided into five sections. Together these sections form the framework for exploring each gift. Within each section there are: a) guidelines on using the *Children's Workbook*, b) discussion points, and c) activities for the family that will help you focus on the particular aspects of each gift.

1. NAMING THE GIFT

This section introduces the gift. The purpose of describing the gift is to help your child understand the nature of the gift you are exploring. For example, in what sense is forgiveness a gift? Or friendship?

2. EXPERIENCING THE GIFT

Your child is invited to reflect on and share personal experiences of the gift. For example, when has your child shown forgiveness or been forgiven within the family or among friends? What was that like for your child? Your family? How do friends treat one another? What is like for you to have a friend? To be a friend?

3. THANKING GOD FOR THE GIFT

We can thank God for the gifts we have been given by using them to give glory to God. In this section your child is invited to discuss with you how he or she might thank God in action. We can also thank God in prayer. You will find in each chapter a simple prayer that your family can say together.

4. SHARING THE GIFT

Here your child is encouraged to look outward, to consider how to respond to Jesus' command: "Love one another as I have loved you." It is also an opportunity for family members to use this rule to measure the quality of their relationships with one another.

5. CELEBRATING THE GIFT

It's important that you help your child recognize places in the Mass where we acknowledge the presence of each gift in our lives. By doing this, you will be helping your child grow not only in understanding but also in a deepening appreciation of the Eucharist.

— SOME HINTS —

- Read the *Children's Workbook* yourself before you start working on it with your child. Keep in mind that children already have a natural relationship with God.
- Plan to spend about an hour a week working on the book together. This is a guide, not a rigid recipe. Each child's needs and experiences are different. Only you can judge what is possible and right for you and your child. This would also be a good time to reflect on the Sunday Gospel with your child, following the suggestions in the *Family Sunday Liturgy Journal*.
- Encourage a spirit of enthusiasm! The *Children's Workbook* should be a pleasant and stimulating activity.
- Don't forget to involve the entire family, as well as family friends. There's always room for more help when it comes to generating ideas, coloring in, cutting out magazine pictures, and so forth.
- The *Workbook* continually asks your child to reflect on a particular point before recording a response in the book. Don't press your child to come up with an answer immediately. It doesn't matter if it takes a few days. Discuss the point from time to time, on the way to school or to the store. With your patience and guidance, your child will find the response appropriate for your child.
- Encourage your child to make the *Workbook* as beautiful and as personal as possible. In years to come, you will find it a source of fond memories.
- If praying together has not been part of your family's routine, you will find in each chapter several suggestions that might be worth trying to help make praying easy and relaxed. For example, you might say the prayer in each chapter as a prayer at mealtime. Also, the *Family Journals* offer suggestions for weekly prayers and simple rituals based on the Sunday readings.
- Family schedules often leave little time for members to share with one another. For some families, mealtime and bedtime are best. Others use the time while riding in the car together. Whatever may be the best time for your family, it is important to reflect with one another on your family's experiences of the gift currently being explored. It is equally important to reflect on the Sunday readings with your child, as the Liturgy of the Word is the primary preparation for all of us before receiving the Eucharist.

— FINALLY —

The activities in this book are only suggestions. But I hope that these ideas will stimulate your own and enable you to construct rich and rewarding times at home with your child, ones that suit your particular family. Take time to talk to other parents whose children are in the program. Share and compare ideas — and give each other support.

But most of all, be clear in yourself about the message of the Gospel and how we can serve one another with the many gifts we have been given. Ultimately, it is you, not the program, that will enrich your child's innate spiritual life and nurture in your child gratitude for God's greatest gift.