



CATECHETICAL SUNDAY

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United States Conference of Catholic Bishops



First Communion Retreat: Embracing Jesus' Loving Sacrifice Present in the Eucharist

*by J. David Franks, PhD, and Angela Franks, PhD,
The Theological Institute for the New Evangelization
of Saint John's Seminary, Boston*

Purpose

This three-hour retreat is meant to provide spiritual, catechetical, and personal formation for children preparing to receive First Communion and for their parents. It focuses on bringing the retreatants into a deeper knowledge of the sacrifice of the Eucharist and of the real presence.

Materials Needed

- Bible
- T-shirt
- Liturgical vessels, especially the paten and chalice, waiting in the church
- Photocopies of a children's and an adult's examination of conscience
- Picture of St. Thérèse of Lisieux from the Internet or a book
- Supplies for sacrifice beads: 11 beads, a 25-inch length of cord (such as that used for rosaries), a crucifix, and a medal of St. Thérèse for each child, OR a repurchased kit
- Optional: photocopies of a coloring page showing a scene

- from the Binding of Isaac (Gn 22:1-19) and crayons

Preparation

- Mark the Bible at Genesis 22:1-19.
- Procure a T-shirt.
- Arrange to have the liturgical vessels available in the church.
- Find and print out or purchase children's and adult's examinations of conscience for each retreatant.
- Have snacks ready in the parish hall.
- If doing optional coloring activities, find pictures of the Binding of Isaac and of St. Thérèse and photocopy them.
- Print out a picture of St. Thérèse from the Internet, perhaps onto card stock. Select a few facts to tell students about her.
- Order supplies or premade kits for sacrifice beads.
- If not using premade kits, put together supplies for sacrifice beads in boxes, ready to be handed out to each child. Print out instructions for sacrifice

beads from www.thelittleways.com or another source. Make one set of sacrifice beads ahead of time and place with the sacrifice bead supplies.

Overall Schedule

Welcome (10 minutes)
Opening Activity (20 minutes)
Break (10 minutes)
Second Activity (60 minutes)
Break (20 minutes)
Third Activity (40 minutes)
Closing Prayer (10 minutes)

Welcome and Gathering (10 minutes)

Begin with a prayer.

Leader: Eternal Father, who gave your only-begotten Son for the salvation of all and especially for the salvation of little ones, we humbly beseech you to send your Spirit to prepare the hearts of these children here today to receive your Son at their First Holy Communion and to renew the strength of their parents to fulfill their dearest responsibility of nurturing the eucharistic faith of their children. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

All: Amen.

Opening Activity (20 minutes) What Is a Sacrifice?

Lead the children in a discussion of sacrifice, using Genesis 22:1-19. Consult Resource A for a sample dialogue.

Students may color pictures of the Binding of Isaac during the discussion.

Break/Transition (10 minutes)

On the way to the church, encourage the children to explain to their parents (if present) what they have learned about sacrifice.

Second Activity (60 minutes) The Phenomenal Liturgical Time Machine

Ideally, a priest or a deacon will lead this activity. The leader will show the children the sacred vessels used for the Eucharist and discuss how the Eucharist makes Jesus' sacrifice truly present. The real presence of Jesus and the fruition of that presence in the hearts of those who have received him will also be discussed. There will be time for quiet prayer and an examination of conscience. Consult Resource B.

Transition, Break, and Optional Snack (20 minutes)

Return to the parish hall or classroom. Have parents lead groups of students to the bathroom, if needed.

Third Activity (40 minutes): Little Sacrifices Out of Great Love for Jesus

This activity will help children understand how they can carry the sacrificial love of Jesus into the world, focusing on the example of St. Thérèse of Lisieux. The activity involves making sacrifice beads, a strand of ten beads

that can be moved one at a time when the child makes a sacrifice. Students may also color a picture of St. Thérèse. While the activity is going on, or immediately after, confessions may be offered. Consult Resource C. If it could be arranged, eucharistic adoration would make a most fitting conclusion.

Closing Prayer (10 minutes)

Settle the children and be sure that they have their materials to take home.

Leader: Eternal Father, who this day has led these children more deeply into the heart of Jesus, we humbly beseech you to fashion us all into ever more splendid tabernacles of your Son in the world, to make us all shine brightly with his sacrificial love, and to prepare these children to receive the Body and Blood of your Son at their First Communion. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

All: Amen.

Resource A: What Is a Sacrifice? (20 minutes)

Optional: Pass out pictures of the Binding of Isaac for the children to color while you discuss. Do an Internet image search or consult a Web site such as www.silk.net/RelEd/lessonplans4.htm. Parents are encouraged to be present and to sit with their children. One of them might be invited to read the Bible passage.

1. Have children reflect on the meaning of “sacrifice.” Ask them questions such as these:

a. Have you ever given anything up for Lent? Was it hard? Why was it a good thing to do?

b. Are there other times you have done something hard for the sake of someone else? [Explain that sacrifice is something that overflows from our love for parents, friends, Jesus, our heavenly Father. The more our desire is healed, say, through Lenten sacrifices, the more easily we can do the right and beautiful thing. Examples: obeying parents or teachers right away even when it is unpopular or frustrating for your plans; letting a sibling have a toy that you were having fun with; without being asked, putting down a video game you are playing or a book you are reading to help your mother by playing with a sibling who is getting fussy; doing a chore that needs to be done, but doing it secretly, so that only God knows the good you’ve done; putting some of your money in the St. Vincent de Paul box.]

c. What are the hardest things to give up? [Help children to see that these are things we love the most. Examples: our own plans, things that make us happy.]

d. Summarize: What is a sacrifice? [Answer: giving up something or doing something difficult for the sake of love.]

2. Read Genesis 22:1-19.

3. Discuss:

God the Father wanted to show us how totally Abraham trusted in him and how completely obedient Abraham was to his will. Other religions at Abraham’s time sometimes involved sacrificing children to idols. This is an abomination to God; that is not at all what God really wanted from Abraham. He wants us all instead to see the sacrifice made by Abraham in his heart: the fact that Abraham was *willing* to give everything

to God, willing to surrender his dear child, in whom were contained all of his hopes and dreams.

But there's more: what God doesn't ask us to do, he does himself! God does not want Abraham to sacrifice his son. But God the Father will sacrifice his own Son, Jesus Christ, for our sake!

4. Read John 15:13: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

Do you know anyone who has laid down his life for every single person in the world? [Evoke responses.] That's right—Jesus did! He loves us despite our sins and gives up everything to make us his friends. He sacrificed all he could give on the Cross when he gave his life for us, when he sacrificed his feeling united with his Father, who is his whole life, in order to love us even in the midst of the darkness of our sins.

5. Read John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life."

How much does God the Father love us? How much does God the Son love us?

Resource B: The Phenomenal Liturgical Time Machine (60 minutes)

If at all possible, this activity should take place within the church, with a priest or deacon leading. When the participants enter the church, they should be reminded to genuflect toward the tabernacle before sitting. A children's examination of conscience can be found online at websites such as the following: www.domestic-church.com/CONTENT.DCC/19990101/S

CRMNTL/kidsexam.htm. An adult examination can be found at www.kofc.org/un/en/resources/cis/devotionals/2075.pdf.

1. Help the children understand liturgical presence, perhaps through the following questions:

a. Have you read books or seen shows involving a time machine? What does a time machine do? [Evoke responses.]

b. Have you ever wanted to travel back in time? Whom would you like to meet? [Evoke responses, from the parents as well.] Have you ever wanted to meet Jesus? Have you ever imagined what it would be like to be present at the Last Supper? Or at the Crucifixion with Mary and John at the foot of the Cross?

c. Well, did you know that you *can* be present at the Cross? It's what happens at the Mass. In the Mass, though, it's an even more amazing, phenomenal time machine: God doesn't move *us* through time; *he* moves through time and makes the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross present right now.

2. Shift the discussion to explore *in what way exactly* the sacrifice of the Cross is made present.

a. But we don't we see Jesus dying on the Cross in front of us. How exactly is Jesus' sacrifice present? [Evoke responses.] [*Please note that saying that Jesus is present "in our hearts"—a likely answer—is insufficient. He is, but only because of his sacramental and real presence in the Eucharist.*]

b. Did you know that Jesus' sacrifice is present in the Eucharist, in what looks like bread and wine? This presence is called the "real presence," because it is more than a spiritual presence in our hearts. Jesus' own Body

and Blood *are* the only reality present after the Holy Spirit changes the bread and wine into the Eucharist through the words of the priest. It tastes like bread, but it is Jesus and only Jesus.

3. Help the children understand this crucial point about the real presence.

a. Start with a reverse example. Hold up a T-shirt. Ask a variety of questions to get students to think about different things that could happen and how they would affect the shirt: What is this? That's right; it's a shirt. Would it still be a shirt if I washed it and shrunk it? [Yes, it would just be smaller.] Would it still be a shirt if it got wet?

b. Such changes in the way the shirt looks or feels do not change the shirt into something different from a shirt. Wet or dry, smaller or larger, the shirt is still a shirt. The reality is the same, even if the appearance is different.

c. The Eucharist is the exact opposite: the reality changes, but the appearance stays the same. The reality of the bread and wine we bring up for our offering *is changed* from bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ. But the Body and Blood of Christ still *look* and *taste* like bread and wine. We cannot do something like that on our own, but God can do it. The almighty divine power of Christ works through the priest when he pronounces the words of consecration. Notice that these words have everything to do with Jesus' total sacrifice of himself: "Take this, all of you, and eat of it, for this is My Body, which will be given up for you."

4. Bring the liturgical vessels to each child, so that he or she can handle them. While doing this, lead them in a discussion:

If the Eucharist *is really* the Body and Blood of Jesus, we want to treat it with love and honor, right? That's why we kneel at important parts of the Mass. It is also why these vessels we use to hold the Body and Blood of Jesus are so beautiful.

5. Next, point out the tabernacle.

a. What is in there? That's right: Jesus in the form of the eucharistic host (what looks like a wafer). That is why we genuflected to the tabernacle when we entered. We recognize and love Jesus, who has sacrificed everything and makes himself present in the humble form of a wafer because he loves us. [*Along these lines, remind children and parents this is also why we bow before receiving Communion.*]

b. The phenomenal time machine of the Mass is continued in the tabernacle: we can come into the presence of Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross any time.

c. Would it be nice to contain Jesus' Body the way the tabernacle does? [Evoke responses.] Think of this: will *you* ever contain Jesus' Body and Blood too? [Evoke responses.] That's right: at your First Communion.

d. Suppose someone is sad and needs Jesus. Can that tabernacle get up and walk down the street to bring Jesus to him or her? [Evoke answers.] So how can all the people in the world who need the presence of Jesus get it? That's right. The tabernacle cannot move around, but you can. You can carry Jesus into the world. Jesus inside you transforms you. He did this at your Baptism, and each time you receive him worthily in Communion, his sacrificial love fills you with the strength of God's own love, so that your actions can become the acts of Jesus: you can say the kind word and do the hard thing

that makes the love of Jesus present to your family and friends and others you come in contact with. You can be a golden tabernacle acting in the world by the power of Jesus.

6. The last step is to point out the crucial role of Mary.

Jesus wants to love others through our actions. In fact, the Church requires us to come to Mass every Sunday because she knows that Jesus thirsts for our presence. He wants to give himself to us in the Eucharist to make us saints. There is a special person we should ask in each Mass to prepare our hearts to receive Jesus. Which person literally carried Jesus inside her? [Evoke responses.] Mary, the Mother of God, is the great Tabernacle. And she is truly your spiritual mother. She wants to make us each into glorious tabernacles of her Son. It is she, in fact, who feeds us when Holy Mother Church feeds us the Eucharist. This is why many people receive the Eucharist on the tongue.

7. Give the children and their parents some time for quiet prayer and an examination of conscience. You may wish to include something along these lines:

Heavenly Father, send your Holy Spirit to lead us to confession when we have sinned so that our souls can be made loving again, tabernacles ready for Jesus. [Pass out examinations of conscience. Read over at least a selection of the questions in the examination and pause after each.]

Resource C: Little Sacrifices Out of Great Love for Jesus

Pictures and biographies of St. Thérèse can be found on the Internet. A

good resource is

www.catholic.org/saints.

1. Introduce the life of St. Thérèse. Pass out pictures to color (optional).

a. Has anyone heard of St. Thérèse of Lisieux? What do you know about her?

b. Hold up a picture of St. Thérèse. Give some facts about her life. Emphasize that St. Thérèse taught that we can all become holy if we focus on doing small things with great love.

2. Introduce the idea of sacrifice beads and note how it relates to St. Thérèse's "little way" of holiness.

3. Make sacrifice beads and perhaps also color a picture.

Handout for Parents: "The Eucharist and My Family"

What Is the Eucharist?

The retreat today went over some basic truths about the Most Holy Eucharist, which your child will be receiving in First Holy Communion. Here are some passages from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), which reinforce what your child was taught today.

1. The Eucharist makes the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross truly present now.

"Because it is the memorial [liturgical enactment] of Christ's Passover, the Eucharist is also a sacrifice. . . . In the Eucharist Christ gives us the very body which He gave up for us on the cross, the very blood which he 'poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins'" (CCC, no. 1365). "The Eucharist is thus a sacrifice because it *re-presents* (makes present) the sacrifice of the cross, because it is

its *memorial* and because it *applies* its fruit” (CCC, no. 1366).

2. The Eucharist is the *real presence* of Jesus Christ through *transubstantiation*.

“By the consecration of the bread and wine there takes place a change of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord and of the whole substance of the wine into the substance of his blood. This change the holy Catholic Church has fittingly and properly called *transubstantiation*” (CCC, no. 1376).

How Can You Help Your Child Prepare for First Holy Communion?

1. Ask your child about the retreat. Here are some good questions:

a. How is the liturgy like a time machine? [Possible answer: Because it brings the sacrifice of the Cross present to us at every Mass.]

b. What did the example of the T-shirt show? How does the Eucharist compare to that example? [Possible answer: We can change the different qualities of the T-shirt, and the reality stays the same—it’s still a T-shirt. The Eucharist is the opposite: the reality is changed from bread and wine to Jesus,

while the qualities of bread and wine that we notice (such as look, taste, smell) stay the same.]

c. What is sacrifice? Do you want to try to use your sacrifice beads?

2. Deepen your family’s prayer life.

a. If you do not attend Sunday Mass regularly, now is the time to start. You and your child are hungry for Christ. Ask God for the grace to be faithful to the most sacred parental duty: to foster our children’s unity with Jesus.

b. During family prayer, include an intention for the child receiving First Communion, that he or she will grow in intimacy with Jesus. Daily prayer together as a family, including at bedtime, builds family unity.

c. Start the day together as a family with a morning offering. (See www.apostleshipofprayer.org/dailyOffering.html for ideas.)

Reference

Catechism of the Catholic Church (2nd ed.). Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana–United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000.

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