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Sacramental Preparation for All Children

Sacraments are grace-filled gifts from God to which all are invited to celebrate. Questions often arise when a child with special needs is in the preparation program for First Penance and First Holy Communion. Will they be able to participate with their class? Can they learn if they are not able to read? Can they possibly understand the mystery of the sacraments?

The answer to all of the above is a resounding YES! When God invites, God provides. And when God provides, grace abounds!

Working with Hector

Two years ago, I had the opportunity to journey with Hector, a fourth-grade student in our parish faith formation program who had been baptized as an infant but because of his special needs, was not enrolled in the sacramental preparation program when he was in second grade. It was the year that our parish program transitioned to a home-based preparation process, with a monthly group gathering for parental catechesis and sacrament-specific activities for the children preparing for the reception of the sacraments.

The group celebration of First Penance was scheduled for early November, so I planned two one-on-one sessions with Hector to determine if he grasped the concept of sin. It was during these sessions that I began to understand that it was much easier for him to respond to questions which could be answered ‘yes’ or ‘no’. I shared this insight with our associate pastor who had expressed a willingness to hear Hector’s first confession. It was obviously successful, as both he and the associate pastor emerged from the confessional with huge smiles on their faces.

After the Christmas holidays, the group began their preparation for First Holy Communion. Again, I planned two one-on-one sessions, knowing this was likely to be more challenging to determine if Hector had a basic understanding of the Eucharist. The day of their retreat drew near, and the children had the chance to create, with the help of their parents,

individual parts of their class banner. Hector's mom's face turned pale when we pulled out all the craft supplies, including glitter and sequins. Hector's eyes lit up! When the group had completed the project, we took time for each child to tell us about the symbols included on the craft. Hector stood up with his glittery sequined craft and walked around the room singing "Jesus Loves Me" to the applause of everyone in the group.

Practical Suggestions

When preparing students with special needs for Communion, creativity and patience are necessary. Here are some specific points to keep in mind.

1. Some students with special needs are unable to sit still for any length of time. Build movement into the session. This is actually helpful for all students and keeps a better overall classroom atmosphere.
2. Textures can be an obstacle to some children and with hosts that look, feel, and taste like cardboard. It is helpful to send a little baggie of unconsecrated hosts home with the parents so they can help the child overcome the issue with its texture.
3. It is also a good idea on the day of First Holy Communion to ask the priest to administer half of a host to these children. The smaller piece will be easier for them to handle, in terms of the texture in their mouths.

Hector's First Communion

The week before the celebration of First Holy Communion was my final opportunity to meet with Hector. I became more and more nervous about his understanding as I asked question after question and he always gave me the 'wrong' answer. Finally I took a deep breath, said a silent prayer, and asked Hector, "Where does Jesus live?" To this day, chill bumps cause me to shiver when I remember his response: he said not a word. He simply put his hand on his heart.

On Saturday, the children all gathered in their First Communion suits and dresses. Hector was no exception. He looked sharp in his white suit. His mother and I had agreed that I would sit with him and walk up with him when he received Communion. During Father's homily, Hector rested his head on my shoulder and whispered, "Jesus loves us."

As we processed up to receive the Eucharist, Hector had his hands folded perfectly. He bowed perfectly. "The Body of Christ," and his "Amen" was perfect (almost everyone in the church heard him). His return to the pew and kneeling in prayer was perfect. And when he

tapped me on the arm - I was ready to put my finger to my lips to remind him to be reverent - he winked at me and laid his hand on his heart. It was perfect.

God invited Hector, and continues to invite people with special needs to partake of His most precious gifts, the sacraments. God provides the grace. It is the perfect gift.

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