

“Born out of more than twenty years of exceptional pastoral ministry, Donna Eschenauer’s *First Communion Liturgies* is a compendium of wise pastoral suggestions rooted in real-life experiences. Collaborative to the core, in an era when individualism too often triumphs, Eschenauer envisions celebrations that are integral to parish life, celebrated in the midst of the gathered assembly and formative for child, family, and parish. Assuming the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults and the Third Edition of the Roman Missal as foundational, Eschenauer handles thorny questions with wisdom and grace, incorporating stories drawn from her rich experience of pastoral ministry. Intended to be read as a whole, Eschenauer’s *First Communion Liturgies* is rich in theology without being pedantic, loaded with fine pastoral suggestions that proved successful, and enhanced by references and recommendations to other resources.”

—Dr. Julia Upton, RSM
Distinguished Professor of Theology
St. John’s University, New York

“This is a very positive and promising work—the enthusiasm of the author for the subject is contagious! The many practical suggestions—along with the clear grasp of the background material, and a pleasant writing style, have all contributed to make this a very encouraging and inspiring ‘read’ for me.”

—Rev. Joseph C. Henchey, CSS
Professor of Dogmatic Theology
St. Joseph’s Seminary, New York

First Communion Liturgies

Preparing First-Class First Celebrations

Donna M. Eschenauer



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To all the children and families
who have motivated my passion for best liturgical practices
for the celebration of First Communion

To all of my teachers and colleagues
who support a vision that has enabled me
to teach, research, write, and practice in a manner
that serves the church well

To my family
who inspires me daily to continue the conversation
toward Traditioning at its best

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Introduction

The sacramental character of faith finds its highest expression in the Eucharist. The Eucharist is a precious nourishment for faith: an encounter with Christ truly present in the supreme act of his love, the life-giving gift of himself.

—Pope Francis, *Lumen Fidei* 44

We are a eucharistic people, and the celebration of the Eucharist reveals, in a unique way, the foundation for what it means to be human. The essence of the Eucharist embodies a profound sense of faith, hope, and love that holds within it the promise to transform the human heart and mind. Ultimately, this highest form of prayer reveals for us wisdom for everyday living and dying. The act of receiving Communion is an action of faith in the presence of God.

This is a book about First Communion liturgies. It is written out of deep concern and love for how we celebrate liturgy with children in the Roman Catholic Church. This interest is influenced by over twenty years of pastoral experience and practice in teaching and preparing the liturgy for First Communion. During that time, my colleagues and I worked passionately to establish celebrations of First Communion that remained consistent with a normative vision for liturgy. Our aim was always to remain true to the prayer

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of the church and never sell out to any form of entertainment. In this same regard, I invite you to consider a liturgical point of view for First Communion.

Experience shows that implementation of good liturgical practice for the celebration of First Communion requires the collaboration of pastors, religious educators, liturgists, and pastoral musicians. In addition, the education of parents, children, as well as the entire parish, is highly effective.

The celebration of First Communion is a moment of great joy, not only for the child and his or her family, but also for the entire parish. Therefore, it ought to be celebrated in the midst of the gathered community of faith. In other words, First Communion liturgies, at best, are an integral part of the liturgical life of the parish.

The pages that follow are written to read as a whole, not in isolation. Each chapter offers sound theology and practical pastoral suggestions for making the experience of First Communion prayerful and memorable, while at the same time in full conformity with the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, as well as other liturgical documents.

The overall purpose of *First Communion Liturgies* is to explore the practice of First Communion, uncover some of the pitfalls associated with it, and offer a practical resource for preparing celebrations that will enrich the lives of children and families, hence bringing them into a deeper relationship with God and the church.

The significance of this book rests in its assertion that maintains: ritual prayer is a formative experience that contributes to the religious development of the child. In general, therefore, if children are to develop awareness of the God who is active and present in all of life, we cannot afford to expose them to liturgy that fosters an eclipse of good liturgical principles. Rather, we must foster an atmosphere that highlights traditioning at its best, and good, prayerful liturgy is traditioning at its source and summit.

First Communion liturgies that move children toward “enchantment not entertainment”¹ are possible, especially when care and collaboration among pastors, priests, liturgists, musicians, parents, and religious educators is a regular, ongoing practice in the parish. This can be accomplished in a manner that benefits not only children and their families but also the entire parish community.

I propose that liturgies for First Communion honor the integrity of liturgical principles. This, in my view, is indispensable for the liturgical experience of those celebrating their First Communion. To better appreciate this proposal, *First Communion Liturgies* offers a reflective examination of one of the most important moments in the life of Catholic Christian children. In chapter 1 I look at the practice of liturgy with children. From there, chapter 2 gives a brief historical perspective of some of the developing patterns for celebrating First Communion through the centuries. Chapter 3 explores the theological context for the celebration of First Communion that serves as the foundation for good pastoral practice. Chapter 4 focuses on an educational process that will enhance the celebration of First Communion and beyond. Finally, based on scholarship and experience, chapter 5 offers practical pastoral ideas for preparing the liturgy for First Communion.

It has often been said that no one writes a book alone. I am very grateful to all those who teach me daily, especially Dr. Kieran Scott who teaches me to imagine that I can accomplish extraordinary things. I am grateful to my colleagues at St. Joseph’s Seminary, particularly Msgr. Peter Vaccari and Fr. Kevin O’Reilly who provide great support as I respond to the vocation to write. Special thanks to those who graciously took the time to read this manuscript and offer many helpful suggestions, especially Paul Eschenauer, Cynthia Harrison, and Fr. Joseph Henchey, CSS. I am indebted to Barry Hudock and Andrew Edwards at Liturgical

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I

Liturgy with Children

The child is the human being who is, right from the first, the partner of God.

—Karl Rahner¹

The heart of the Roman Catholic faith is the celebration of the liturgy, particularly the Eucharist. This chapter takes into account the manner in which we celebrate liturgy with children. Critical to an appropriate approach to celebrating liturgy with children is insight into the religious imagination, the qualities of childhood, the *Directory of Masses with Children*, and the honored place of children within the assembly.

Liturgy and the Religious Imagination

Liturgy is an act of the imagination.² It therefore awakens the religious imagination and discloses rich meaning if we dare to leave the comfort zone of the rational and enter into the seemingly eclipsed, waiting arms of God's embrace. Undoubtedly, best liturgical practices speak to the religious imagination and offer a palpable sense of God's presence.

The church calls us to embrace the memory of Jesus Christ together with a hope-filled future spelled out through paschal mystery. This memory and hope is experienced and made real through liturgy, particularly in and through the Eucharist, which shows us how to live and how to die.

There is a link between the gift and grace of our imagination and the patterns of religious activity, particularly the practice of liturgy. “Imagination,” writes Richard Cote, “can be described as the climate of faith, the condition of its possibility: neither its ground nor its goal of perfection, but a penultimate instrument of grace in a world whose final salvation remains an object of hope. And hope, as we know it, is always based on some promise and therefore on the ability to ‘see’ beyond what meets the eye. As St. Paul says, ‘In hope we are saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen?’ (Romans 8:24). Hope, like faith, requires considerable imagination.”³

Liturgical prayer, then, is the context for healing, shaping, and exercising the religious imaginative process. The pattern and structure of liturgy, that is, Word and sacrament, leads us to see what cannot be seen, and in the end, leads us to alternative realities. In other words, liturgy, the ritual prayer of the church, provides a way of seeing what might be. Through assembly, song, symbol, silence, and gesture, the message of the liturgy takes away all fear and passivity, awakening a new perspective and way of seeing the world. Seasoned in mystery, we can bathe in the presence of God through the images of ritual prayer. These, in turn, invite us to hope again. Unlocking the religious imagination is the hallmark of Christian maturity. The task of ministerial practice with children, then, is to nurture the religious imagination, or we risk mere reverberation.

In his work on religious development, Gabriel Moran writes, “The religious life of the small child is one of unending mystery and unalloyed wonder. The divine is every-

where, manifested in life's daily miracles."⁴ That being said, children are natural mystics who have the natural capacity for wonder. Children are eager to learn and have a natural sense of God's greatness. Educational master Dwayne Huebner provides insight into the meaning of wonder. He writes, "Wonder has at least two meanings. Frequently we associate it with the feeling of doubt, curiosity, inquiry. We say 'I wonder if' or 'he wonders whether' and we associate with it such synonyms as speculate, conjecture, ponder, theorize, question, surmise, imagine. Certainly this is a common meaning, but I have in mind the other sense of the word. The meaning which is more clearly associated with such synonyms as astonishment, amazement, surprise, fascination, awe."⁵

I vividly remember two noteworthy moments from my own early childhood experience. One was while I was walking on the beach toward the beautiful, glistening cloud formations. I imagined I was walking straight toward God. The other occurred while sitting on a backyard swing with my mother. As I deliberately pinched the skin on my leg, I innocently asked, "What are people?" And I wondered why God made us. These childhood moments of wonder, I am convinced, launched my interest in theology.

Nurturing the religious imagination of children brings them closer to the sacred. Liturgy with children must reflect a profound sense of sacred time and have as its goal that all life is imbued with paschal mystery, the heart of Christian faith. And, as Mary Collins writes, "Anything less than a profound liturgical ministry for the young is a betrayal of trust, another form of exploitation of the young at their expense."⁶

Qualities of Childhood

Children capture for us the meaning of sensibility, playfulness, innocence, openness, directness, and vulnerability.⁷

Children are natural at play, wonder, surprise, and trust. Additionally, they have the profound ability to acquire greatness from simplicity. This calls to mind an experience I had with a nine-year-old child who went through the rites of Christian initiation. After the celebration of the Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens, where she experienced the signing of the senses, she exclaimed, “I felt like God was all over me.” Clearly, this child experienced wonder in “participating with the time and being of the other.”⁸

Distinctively, the understanding of what it means to be a child is essential for the practice of liturgy. Furthermore, an understanding of what it means to be childlike is essential for an understanding of adulthood.⁹ The true meaning of adulthood discovered through the metaphor of the child essentially points us toward the mystery of what it means to be human. Significantly, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry writes in *The Little Prince*, “all grown-ups were once children—although few of them remember it.”¹⁰ Each of us, therefore, must come to liturgy with the disposition of a child. This point of view is crucial; for in and through the liturgy we enter a world of paradox, mystery, poetry, and symbol; in and through liturgy we are not independent; we are bound to one another through the common ritual of baptism. In baptism, and recaptured through Eucharist, we enter into relationship with Christ and the church. Children understand this better than anyone. Have you ever observed children on a playground? They welcome the “stranger,” playing with all the inhabitants of that place without a care of their status in life; their only concern is that they are “little” people. The genuine worshipping community welcomes the stranger, and it exists to support its members in a gospel way of life.

Understandably, liturgy with children should not differ greatly from the Order of Mass because its purpose is to

lead children toward celebrating with adults.¹¹ The way in which we prepare liturgy with children will impact a child's sense of God, church, and in the end, an understanding of full, active, and conscious participation in the prayer of the church.

In many ways, we need to bring people to the realization that liturgy is deeply connected to childhood; however, liturgy is never meant to be childish, entertaining, or a diversion from the complexities of life. Julia Upton reflects on the various obstacles to the church's vision of liturgy. One such obstacle, she notes, is unrealistic expectations, "a by-product . . . of having sold our souls to the entertainment industry."¹² Unrealistic expectations may create false impressions about liturgy. This is a major pitfall from which we are struggling to release ourselves. In this regard, Mark Searle writes, "The call for allowing more room to the imagination in liturgy is one that can be (and has been) misunderstood. My point is not that we need to come up with imaginative alternatives to the rites we have received (in the manner of so-called 'creative liturgies'), but that we need to recognize that the language of the rite is primarily directed to the imagination."¹³ Liturgy with children, then, should lead them toward mature faith and an understanding of who they are as the baptized and an experience of how we pray the prayer of the church as members of the household of faith.

Acknowledging the restored connection of faith and worship, liturgy is a formative experience that shapes and reshapes us in our Roman Catholic identity. Therefore, children need to experience liturgy that breaks open the eternal covenant of God's never-ending love made real through the story of a baby born in a manger, the surrender on Calvary, and the triumph of the cross through the resurrection. Children do have the ability to embrace this and make it their own.

A Second Look at the *Directory for Masses with Children*¹⁴

The *Directory for Masses with Children* (DMC) is still relevant. Revisiting it, however, raises questions about its effectiveness, reveals its limitations, and asks challenging questions for pastoral practice with the hope of generating more meaningful possibilities for the future. Regular reference and appropriate interpretation of DMC can ensure that children are shown how to pray in a way that is effective and recognizes them as baptized members of the assembly.

In 1973, the Congregation for Divine Worship issued DMC. It is important to note that the document's inspiration was the Second Vatican Council, especially *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy). Designed to serve as a supplement for the 1969 *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, DMC's goal is to lead preadolescent children to better participation with the adult assembly. DMC also emphasizes the important connection between liturgy and Christian identity. Currently, DMC serves as a supplement to the *Third Edition of the Roman Missal*.

In general, the DMC allows for flexibility in the celebration of Masses with adults where children also participate and in Masses with children where only a few adults participate. Noteworthy is the language used in DMC. Reference to Masses *with* children, rather than Masses *for* children or *children's* Masses, is significant because only one Order of Mass exists. Rightly, liturgy gathers together all God's people.

The final paragraph of the DMC captures its essence: "The contents of the Directory have as their purpose to help children readily and joyfully encounter Christ together in the eucharistic celebration and to stand with him in the presence of the Father" (55). The DMC therefore has as its ultimate goal that children come to know Jesus Christ! Notably, this is also the goal of catechesis.¹⁵

The DMC holds its place as a landmark document in its efforts toward adaptation and ritual flexibility. Special concern for preadolescent children is paramount, and there is a significant shift toward the responsibility of the family. The emphasis on community and liturgical catechesis is also noteworthy.

It cannot be emphasized enough: the DMC cannot be read in isolation. Those who prepare liturgies with children need to be conversant with the fundamental principles and guidelines offered in the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* and other conciliar and postconciliar documents. For example, the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (2011), the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (1988), the *Introduction to the Lectionary for Masses with Children* (1993), and *Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship* (2007) all provide necessary background for the principles found in the DMC.

Chapter 2 of the DMC, “Masses with Adults in Which Children also Participate,” seems to be the inspiration for the practice commonly known as “Family Mass.” The “Family Mass” presumably came about with increased acknowledgment of the importance of the role of the family (DMC 10). DMC 16 highlights the advantage of children participating in the Mass with their family. Permission is given here to use the principles of adaptation on Sundays *at times*. It is therefore the exception, not the norm. Efforts to engage children in various ministerial roles have their place, as DMC 18 points out. Weekly celebrations of the “Family Mass” may fracture the ritual prayer of the community. In the end, the purpose of *Masses with Families* is inclusion of children and adults. Caution should be taken, however, so that in practice it does not promote child-centered liturgy, thereby excluding other members of the assembly. That being the case, a most important, however much neglected aspect of the DMC is found at no. 21: “It is always necessary to keep in mind that these eucharistic celebrations

lead children toward the celebration of Mass with adults, especially the Masses at which the Christian community must come together on Sundays.” Children and families can be recognized on special occasions but not at the expense of anyone else’s full inclusion in the assembly.

Underpinning the DMC is the imperative for *adaptation*. Chapter 3, “Masses with Children in Which Only a Few Adults Participate,” elaborates on the principle of adaptation in the context of weekday celebrations of Mass with schoolchildren (which is the primary intent of the DMC). Key to our understanding is that adaptation should be faithful to liturgical principles. Adaptation is not an attempt to *create* liturgies for children. We need only to use well the gift and grace of the Order of Mass. In addition, assigning themes for Mass is not helpful. There is one theme for every Mass, that is, paschal mystery! Accordingly, in regard to adaptation, DMC 21 states, “Thus, apart from adaptations that are necessary because of the children’s age, the result should not be entirely special rites, markedly different from the Order of Mass celebrated with a congregation.”

The provisions found in chapter 3 of the DMC regarding modifications in environment, music, gestures, silence, and visual elements need to be interpreted in light of the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*. It should be evident that the preparation of liturgy with children requires consistent collaboration among liturgists and catechists. Catechists need to be helped to grasp liturgical understanding of liturgy with children. Chapter 5 of this book will explore these adaptations in more detail, especially in regard to preparing First Communion liturgies.

When considering liturgy with children, as previously stated, children are natural mystics. Developmentally, children experience a profound sense of identity in and through ritual. Young children do not acquire Christian identity from a textbook. Rather, their Christian identity is formed

through ritual activity that appeals to the senses. The Paschal Triduum provides a helpful example. Despite its richness, many adults argue the Triduum is not for children. I wholeheartedly disagree! I find it disappointing that the DMC does not treat feasts and seasons of the church year. Regardless, children appreciate and readily participate in rituals such as foot washing and adoration of the cross.

I am reminded of the time when in the middle of a July barbeque my young son asked, “When do we go to church and they wash people’s feet?” My son’s inquiry affirms that the rituals of the church leave an impact on young children. Additionally, the Easter Vigil is rich in the stories and symbols that teach young and old who we are as a Christian people. Reflecting on this, Thomas Shepard provides powerful insight: “When I was a child, the Easter Vigil was a profound event for me. I didn’t know what was going on, but I did know they were doing everything I liked. They were playing with fire. They were playing with water. They were singing things I didn’t understand. He was blowing on the water! He was splashing the water on people! The air was full of smoke. It was dark and it was scary. It was everything I loved. That was the beginning of liturgy for me.”¹⁶

Ironically, as previously noted, childlike qualities are an important aspect of adult faith. A childlike attitude is essential for full, active, and conscious participation in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. By its very nature, liturgy presupposes a childlike faith that engages the imagination in order to experience the presence of God here and now. In the liturgy, transformation occurs if we be like little children—open to the God of surprises. In reality, everyone is a child of God. An overly strong sense of factions and cohorts should not predominate when the community gathers in faithful companionship around the Lord’s Table.

Critical reflection on the DMC suggests important implications for the celebration of liturgy with children, and for

our purpose here, for First Communion. Therefore, as we prepare the liturgy for First Communion, I suggest serious consideration of the following reflections:

- Have we taken adaptation too far? Does the DMC serve best as a resource for catechesis *toward* liturgy?
- Has the expectation to lead children to participation created an audience of adults with children performing all of the ministries?
- Have we unnecessarily put children on display at Mass? Has inclusion of children and their families led to exclusion of others in the assembly?
- Is there the expectation and acceptance for entertainment at Mass? Have we underestimated the natural tendency of children toward the mystical?
- And most important, have we failed to show children how to pray by focusing on the entertainment of it all?

Careful consideration of the *Directory for Masses with Children* provokes much-needed attention to the role of children in the liturgical life of the church, and, at the same time, much-needed attention to the importance of celebrating all liturgy well. It is the liturgy, after all, that forms us in our way of being in the world.

Children as Members of the Assembly

A common misconception is the reference to children as the future of the church. While this is true in some regard, baptized children ought to be acknowledged as the church *now*. In doing so, we recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit within them. Adults ought to consistently respect the dignity of children, as well as children's place in the church. This reality sheds light on how we view the role of

children in the worshipping assembly. The ideal liturgical assembly, writes Mark Searle, “is a gathering of all God’s people in a given place: men, women, children, the elderly, the sick, representatives of every social group and stratum. This is the church most visible as what she is: the work of Christ, gathering the scattered children of God into one.”¹⁷ This viewpoint leads us toward a deeper understanding and richer experience of our profound religious identity. This identity, particularly for children, then, develops within the worshipping assembly.

There was a time that a parish offered a well-developed preschool catechetical program for four- and five-year-old children. It was scheduled for Sunday mornings at the same time the “Family Mass” was celebrated. Of course, there was the expectation that the parents of the young children would attend Mass while their children attended religious classes. It became apparent, however, that while many were attending Mass, others were dropping their children off, filling the time with other activities such as shopping or a relaxing Sunday brunch. Needless to say, the Sunday preschool religion program was phased out gradually. Alternatively, parents were encouraged to understand that their four- and five-year-old children needed to be at Mass—*with* their parents. There is something extremely formative about families worshipping together that cannot be missed. For example, I once observed a father carefully showing his young child what page to turn to in the hymnal. Regardless of whether the child could read or sing the hymn, the child was learning what we do when we go to Mass.

Many people might remember a time when parochial schoolchildren were required to attend Sunday Mass with their class. The above reflection on DMC illustrates a shift from this practice and with good reason. Together, children and adults shape the worshipping assembly and experience God’s presence among us. Significantly, this is the optimum

way to prepare for the celebration of First Communion, the subject of chapter 4.

Children form an important part of the liturgical assembly; therefore, we need to provide children with liturgies that proclaim and celebrate the mystery of God in our midst. In order to allow this to happen, consistent connections must be made with the liturgical activity of the church and the everyday lives of families. Remember that religious identity is also formed in the home. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) states, “In what might be regarded as the domestic Church, the parents, by word and example, are the first heralds of the faith with regard to their children” (LG 11). This thought-provoking metaphor merits our attention, as it makes clear that families are sacred and holy, while also acknowledging that families are not to exist in isolation. In this regard it may be helpful to recognize, for example, the importance of meals shared in the home. However, we also must be sensitive to the reality that many families are fraught with hardship and obligations every day. They often rush from one activity to the next, skipping meals entirely or providing them on the run or in front of the television. In contrast, a ritual of mealtime may be a sacred time that offers the family an opportunity to come together and listen to one another. One suggestion might be to encourage busy families to have at least one such evening meal during the week, where the whole family comes together and shares its stories. I am reminded of one particular family that made Friday night pizza a special event. In preparation for Sunday Eucharist (as prescribed by the parish catechetical program), they gathered at the kitchen table, lit a candle, said a prayer, read the Sunday readings, and spent the remainder of their meal discussing and sharing thoughts on the readings. They gave particular attention to what the readings were calling them to do. It is interesting to note that this family included four children

from ages six to sixteen and two parents who both worked outside the home and took part in various community activities. Pizza night became a weekly ritual that was meaningful for the whole family.

The “domestic church” forms the eucharistic assembly. Therefore, care needs to be taken not to expose children to Mass that is entertainment-driven, that is geared to appeal to what adults think children will appreciate, that includes homilies focused solely on children (ignoring the adults present), that showcases children instead of including them, and that features music esthetically poor and theologically deficient. Children who are perpetually exposed to what is commonly referred to, although inaccurately, “Children’s Mass” or “Family Mass” will not develop an appreciation for full, active, and conscious participation in its most authentic sense.

Many bishops, priests, teachers, and pastoral ministers validly express the crisis of Catholic identity today. One of the most important ways to “fix” this, in my view, is with ardent attention to how we celebrate liturgy *with* children. Practically speaking, involving children should not be to showcase them but to teach them how to minister. We don’t involve children merely for the sake of involving them; children and adults can minister together where appropriate, for example, as greeters. In order for this to be accomplished proficiently, liturgical education is needed for all who teach, lead, and volunteer in both the educational and liturgical ministries of the church.

Chapters 4 and 5 of *First Communion Liturgies* explore practical suggestions for making these reflections a reality in regard to the celebration of First Communion. To better understand our current reality and how we may need to adjust our practice, let us first turn and place First Communion in its appropriate historical context, the subject of the next chapter.