



Parent Sacrament Formation

Prime Parish Evangelizing Opportunity

Doing faith formation with parents is no longer optional. In truth, it hasn't been for a long time. Nor is doing it well...really, really well. I've talked with parents who have been impacted by evangelizing parent formation. It can be a difference-maker for them and for their family. Many of our parents are just primed and waiting to be inspired and enlightened by the good news of Catholic faith, experienced both theologically and relationally! (Every parish should keep this question in the fore: *Do people believe their way into belonging or belong their way into believing?*)

With this as our context, here are some practical ideas for building more vibrant and impactful parent sacrament formation in your parish:

Vision for Parent Formation

1. Parent faith formation is not the same as family faith formation. Parents need to be nourished, spiritually and theologically, in their own right...apart from their children, to whom the focus naturally gravitates.
2. Whatever parent formation we provide (especially that which is mandatory) must be good. Actually, permit me to raise the bar. It needs to be *excellent*! (However, don't let perfectionism paralyze improvement efforts.)
3. Sacrament formation sessions need to be mandatory, with parents (at least one) required to attend. Recording the session is helpful in holding parents accountable and building a culture of accountability over time. This also lessens the need to conduct multiple make-up sessions. And consider, how even a brief chat with parents after viewing the recorded session allows for good personalized interaction.
4. Invest in this ministry because the payoff in bringing families (back) into the life of the parish is incalculable (including, though less important, increased stewardship). Budget and plan for the provision of great sessions. Hire a speaker to facilitate an impactful session, if that is what is required.

Design of Parent Sessions



1. Parent faith formation and sacrament prep today is really more about evangelization than catechesis. This means that we speak to their hearts as well as minds and that we offer spiritual formation as much as theological. Let's call it *evangelizing catechesis*.
2. More than ever, the primary goal is to *foster conversion* in parents, as *adults*, to Christ Jesus and to discover the grace and blessings of Catholic faith in *their* lives. Our messaging to them should include "You can't give what you don't have." Merely helping parents share with their children a faith they, themselves, don't have is inadequate, if not downright bankrupt. Resist this half-measured approach. (Of course, helping evangelized parents pass on their real and living faith is a worthy additional goal that deserves attention, too. And yes, the process of exploring faith with their children can help to open parents to deepening conversion. The benefits of quality *family* faith formation can flow both ways.)
3. A session less than 90-minutes does not allow for the formation to go into any adequate degree of depth. Let's dispel a myth here. Parents (and families) can tolerate longer sessions as long as they are engaging. (Please note: *Engaging* and *entertaining* are not synonymous.) Longer parent sessions can become more retreat-like (and less meeting-like) and this is a good thing.
4. Get parents talking to one another...about their lives. It is the perfect way to get energy going in the room and get them engaged and even form some organic community *among* them. Listen to what they are saying. Then start showing the natural connections between their lives and Catholic faith. Most people in our society today, sadly, see a false dichotomy between life and faith. Be sure to affirm the goodness and holiness already present in their homes, even in the midst of life's messiness.
5. Use a variety of modalities...private reflection, small group/dyad sharing, large group discussion, presentation, panel sharing, personal witnessing, liturgical prayer, use of AV resources, etc.
6. Call the Holy Spirit down upon this ministry and your efforts. Leave room for the Spirit to move and breathe in and through you and the ministry team. Ask for intercessory prayer to bless this vital ministry. And remember, we don't cause conversion. That's the work of the Spirit. But we can create dynamics to help facilitate it.



Delivery of Parent Formation

1. Develop attractive marketing materials and *over-communicate* for sessions...by multiple means.



2. Pay attention to the environment. Provide a comfortable setting and hospitable experience, including refreshments (and food, ideally) and possible break-time for organic relationship-building.
3. Do not assume much in terms of where parents are at in their faith life. Indeed, an increasing number are inclined toward some degree of unbelief and antipathy toward the Church. Meet them on their terms, even showing awareness and responsiveness to their concerns and doubt. Lean into our discipleship joy and our reasoned confidence in Catholic faith...but *not* judgment toward them.

4. Tap into the gifts of parish staff and parishioners to provide a transformative session. Know what your gifts are (and are not). Have multiple voices helping to lead the session, especially some great witnessing from parents (or other adults) in the parish who can attest to the blessings of conversion in Christ Jesus, of Catholic faith, and of the parish. (Parents will listen to the faith-journey stories of authentic parent witnesses more than anything else.) Be sure to make room for stories of past and current struggle, too. These make life in Christ more relatable and accessible.
5. Sacrament prep sessions need to keep the logistical stuff (deadlines, forms, attire, fees) to a minimum. Spend as few minutes on this as possible, as there are other ways to address these issues.



Parent sacrament formation sessions are not the be-all and end-all for fostering conversion in our parents. There should be other opportunities for parent formation, both gathered and through resources (written and multi-media, adult-oriented and family-oriented). There is family formation (within which parent formation can occur). There is the life of the parish, including (but not confined to) liturgy. There are service opportunities and guided family faith practices and conversations.

Countless are the ways adults move toward a living and active faith. The entire parish should work to help parents come to faith (or deepen faith) by any and all such means. However, a great starting point is parent sacrament formation. This is a way to reach vast numbers of parents still seeking the sacraments for their children. Keep in mind that as we wrack our brains for how to reach and engage with young adults, we have lots of them right there (in our schools and religious education programs), participating in our sacrament preparation processes...each and every year!

So, move the needle, make a difference...and in a large-scale way. Parent sacrament formation is one of the “high-impact” opportunities that we simply need to do better if we hope to stem the massive erosion going on out there. As goes the parents, so go the children...at least to a meaningful degree. And the earlier we can impact parents, the greater the potential effect on the family. A *frontloaded* vision and approach to ministry invites us to seriously reimagine Baptismal Ministry. See my *Six Keys to Evangelizing Baptismal Ministry* article to explore this essential vehicle for pastoral renewal.



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