

My son goes to CCD. Why does he have to go to Mass?



Dear **Father Kerper:** For two years I have sent my son, now in second grade, to CCD classes on Monday nights. This has been a real struggle because of his other activities. Now I'm told that he's expected to go to Mass as well. I don't understand all these extra requirements. He knows some prayers and is attending classes. Why does the Church make it so hard to get First Communion?

I appreciate your good efforts to prepare your son for First Communion and sympathize with your frustration, which many parents experience.

Let's begin by clarifying what First Communion really is. In our society, we often obtain things by fulfilling clearly-defined requirements. For example, most

states require driver's education in order to receive a license. In scouting, a young person must complete specific tasks to receive a merit badge.

Because this practice of linking requirements with "markers of achievement" like diplomas and licenses is so common, we tend to extend it to the sacraments. As a result, some parents — and children — believe that First Communion is a public reward for mastering a set of religious facts. This, however, completely misses the true meaning of First Communion: the reception of the Eucharist by a child marks the beginning of a *new phase* in the child's *relationship* with the *living Christ*. First Communion, then, is not primarily about knowledge but continuous personal experience.

Perhaps the examination of two terms — religious education and faith formation — will help us here.

Some well-meaning people seek only religious education for their children, nothing else. Consider the common but obsolete term CCD, which means Confraternity of Christian Doctrine. Note the emphasis on "Christian Doctrine."

In the past, the Church made a great effort to pass on *religious knowledge* about doctrine, ritual, and moral norms. A person could acquire a huge amount of religious knowledge but not have faith at all. That's why professors of religious studies need not believe in God: they simply study the "data" of religion without reference to their own personal relationship with God. Religion and faith are not the same.

For sure, religious knowledge is very important, but the real purpose of preparation for First Communion is to foster the faith of the child who will experience the Lord in and through the Eucharist *continuously*.

Consider the educational "style" of Jesus himself. He imparted very little religious information to the people he encountered. Instead, he invited people into a personal relationship with himself.

This brings us to the notion of “faith formation.” Whereas religious education touches the mind of a child, faith formation attempts to shape the *whole person*. Moreover, religious education occupies a specific block of time, usually during the school year, especially in preparation of First Communion and Confirmation. Faith formation, however, should continue forever.

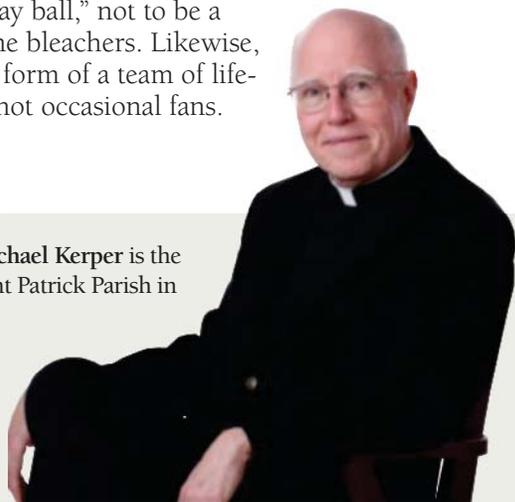
Allow me to use an analogy here. Let’s say that you want your son to become a pitcher for a major league baseball team. You could drill him in the rules of baseball, have him read the biographies of Ty Cobb, Babe Ruth, Cal Ripken, and other great players, and take him to an occasional game at Fenway Park. Perhaps your efforts would foster an interest in baseball in your son, but if he never held a bat, wore a mitt, or tried to throw a curve ball he would never become a baseball player. You would have provided him with lots of *education* but no *formation*.

“The reception of the Eucharist by a child marks the beginning of a *new phase* in the child’s *relationship* with the *living Christ*.”

As to preparation for First Communion, a child needs the continuous *experience* of actual worship, not just an occasional class about the Eucharist. This, of course, must be done by parents, no one else.

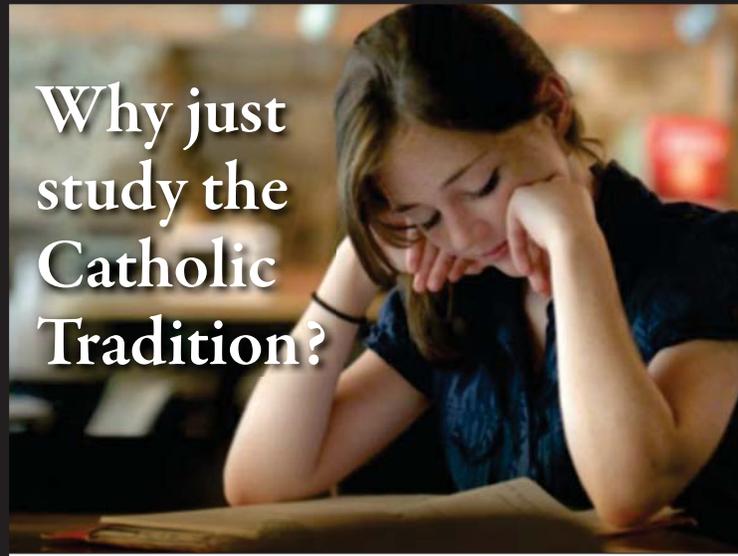
Parents who regularly partake of the Eucharist in the presence of their children powerfully witness to the truth that the Eucharist is the Body and Blood of the Lord. Through their constant example, parents “form” their children in faith and make Church doctrine believable. Without example, faith can wither away and the doctrine, though perhaps known perfectly, is never really believable.

Because you have taken the trouble to prepare your son for First Communion, I trust that you want him to learn to “play ball,” not to be a spectator in the bleachers. Likewise, Jesus came to form of a team of life-time players, not occasional fans.



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