



13 February 2019

Dear Parents,

The Sacraments of the Church

Sacraments are the life-blood of our Church. They celebrate belonging to the local worshipping community through which people belong to the Church of God. In the past most families who attended Catholic Schools were also part of the parish. Families went to Mass on Sunday and School on Monday and priest and nuns taught in the schools to ensure that the faith was passed on.

As time passed priests and religious were replaced by laity. Most were not as qualified as the religious brothers, sisters and clergy, so spirituality was replaced with humanities. Religious education also reflected the social decline in Mass attendance.

Many families stopped coming to Church but still sent their children to a Catholic School believing it is a better education. The Catholic School became a substitute for Parish participation. Parish life and belonging to a faith community became less and less important. The school became the centre of spiritual and parish life for many school families.

Parish life and belonging to a faith community became less and less important. Today I am told that less than 5% of Catholic School families attend church regularly. In what way does a Catholic School really add to the spiritual and pastoral life of a parish? I am left with the following concerns:

- Are the Sacraments becoming just rewards for attending a Catholic school with little or no commitment to parish life?
- Are we devaluing the Sacred Sacraments on the altar of pragmatism masquerading as pastoral care?
- Why is it that parents refuse to come to weekend Mass?
- Why are parents unwilling to take their responsibility as 'first educators in faith' seriously?

Due to many factors some not under its control, the institutional Church has allowed the status quo to continue. Today I am told that less than 5% of Catholic School families attend weekend Mass regularly. The problem is that once people leave the school where is their parish? Where do they belong spiritually and how do people develop their commitment to God and his Church? Parents take their children to sports, to swimming, to music lessons etc. on a weekly basis, but they will not take them to church.

Where have we gone wrong? How can we pass on the faith when people refuse to attend church? The bigger question is why are Sacraments now seen by many as a 'School Celebration' rather than a celebration of deep spiritual significance for the child, the family, and for the parish?

Pastoral concerns & Parishioners response

I met with a parent this week who was upset that we are asking people to be committed to their parish. He/she maintained that because of my decision his/her child/ren will not celebrate their Sacraments as they remain unwilling to commit to their local parish and are not part of this parish community. Obviously, their only involvement is to attend a Catholic School. It is interesting that the blame was placed squarely with me not with themselves for their lack of commitment to the local parish. Why am I responsible for the decision families make?

On the other hand, I have met other parents who have expressed gratitude in my asking people to belong. Some are re-evaluating their commitment to parish life and have thanked me for spurring them to make a greater commitment to their faith. In fact, these have been in the majority and many have said they fully understand and support my concerns.

I have met with several families who live outside the parish. This has given us the opportunity to express our concerns and have so far proved amicable for all concerned. I always take pastoral needs into consideration.

As for those who do not belong to a parish community but wish to avail of the Sacraments, I encourage you to begin to visit your local parish. It is only the beginning of the year and there is plenty of time for your child to participate fully in whatever programme they have available. For those school families living outside the parish, I am happy for you to attend the sacramental programme here with the permission of your local priest, but it is best if your children receive the Sacraments in the parish in which you reside.

The Church requires that people attend weekend Mass.

The Commandments from God are not a request but a Command! The third is to keep holy the Sabbath day. Therefore, the Catechism of the Catholic Church states that in #2181 *Those who deliberately fail in this obligation i.e., to attend weekend Mass, "commit a grave sin."* Footnote: 119. Cf. CIC, can. 1245.

Consequently, the reception of the Sacraments is not a right but a privilege, and a celebration of belonging not just membership. It is for those who take their spiritual life seriously and are members of not only a school, state or Catholic, but of a parish faith community. It is for those who seek a spiritual way of life based on justice but also a meaningful relationship with God. Parents have a 'Duty of Care' to develop the spiritual life of their children. Just attending a Catholic School and the odd school Mass, is not the answer. Remember parents made a promise to God at the Baptism of their child, to bring up their child in the practice of the faith. I ask parents to honour their vow to the best of their ability.

The Sacraments of the Church

Sacraments are not entered into lightly and are a celebration of faith and a re-commitment to the life of the Church. For those who seldom if ever attend church but have the expectation their child has the right to receive the Sacraments I must disagree.

Sacred Heart School is a Parish School. I know that many see it as a stepping stone to other schools in the neighbourhood and leave at year 5. But it is more than that, it is a place where the faith of your child is nurtured. But this nurturing can only be fully achieved by belonging to your local parish and being part of a faith community. Otherwise it becomes merely another subject and the reception of the Sacraments has little or no connection to parish life to hold it together.

As your Parish Priest I want the best for you and for your child. It is a sad reflection on our present situation when so many families are unwilling to give one hour a week to the practice of the faith. It is not too much to ask. As always, the choice is yours.

Conclusion

In conclusion families living within the parish boundaries are entitled to receive the Sacraments at Sacred Heart Kew. I do ask that you attend church in line with my above concerns.

Families who avail of Sacred Heart School but are not committed to a parish faith community will need to contact their local parish regarding the reception of the Sacraments.

I am happy for you to prepare for the Sacraments here, but you will need to attend your local parish for the celebration of the Sacraments.

As a Priest of God, I will always defend the Sacredness of the Sacraments despite any angst and criticism I consequently receive. In my experience this is usually from a small minority. I will not devalue the 'Sacred' to accommodate pastoral pragmatism for those who choose to stay away.

Sincerely Yours

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "John Madden". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above a long, thin horizontal line that extends to the right.

Father John Madden

FYI: When we celebrated the Sacrament of Confirmation in 2018, we invited families to return to the weekend Masses a few weeks later when we would distribute the Confirmation certificates. To my chagrin seven of our parish catholic school families phoned to ask what time the weekend Masses were. Others were too busy to attend.