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Christus Vivit
First Communion
on Sunday:
Reflecting on the
Dublin Experience

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First Communion on Sunday: Reflecting on the Dublin Experience

Donal Harrington

The Archdiocese of Dublin is carrying out a review of the Three Sacraments of Initiation, with a view to discerning and proposing future directions. This article reports on an exercise that was carried out just before the diocesan review began. It provides a kind of 'snapshot' of what the issues are.

The Dublin diocese's *First Communion and First Reconciliation: Diocesan Policy* (2012) recommended the celebration of First Communion at the parish Sunday Eucharist. This article summarises a recently completed review of the experience.

Over 50 of the nearly 200 parishes in the diocese have moved to Sunday and just over 40 of these took part in the review. Parishes were asked;

1. Why did you move to Sunday; what did you hope to achieve?
2. In moving, did you change anything else in the First Communion year?
3. How has it gone; what difference has it made? (overall; parents; school; congregation)
4. Are you glad you did it? Why?
5. If you were starting again, would you go about it differently?

Initial contact was made with priests and almost all of the responses come from them. So the review represents the voice of one group about one issue. At the same time, there was a likelihood that the review would open up to bigger issues, beyond just the move to Sunday. This is what transpired.

WHAT WERE YOUR HOPES?

There was a strong shared sense of purpose in the responses. The desire across the board was to link the sacrament with the

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community. 'To integrate the event into the life of the community.' To make First Communion 'a parish celebration'. 'To make it a parish community event.' 'A moment for the whole community to celebrate.'

Parishes were strong on the rightness of this. 'Sacraments are about Christian community and should be seen and celebrated as such.' 'Because Mass is a Sunday thing.' 'That's where the community is.' 'Faith is about community.' 'Where it belongs.' 'First Communion on a Sunday with the local congregation is proper and ideal.'

Some spoke specifically of a shift of focus from school to parish. 'A community celebration, not just a school celebration.' 'More a parish-based celebration than a school event.' 'First Communion should be a sacramental event in the parish, rather than the parish facilitating a school event.'

Some made specific reference to parents and family. 'For families to have an experience of faith community'. 'To encourage parents to take ownership.' 'To integrate parents into Sunday liturgy, at least sometimes'. 'To provide catechesis for parents.' 'To bring parents to see beyond dependence on school.'

WHAT DID YOU DO?

One parish commented that there is more involved in moving from school to parish than moving the celebration from Saturday to Sunday. This suggests that we see the move from Saturday to Sunday as one component in a larger process. As will emerge, the comment goes to the heart of the matter.

So; were there other components to the move? Some parishes sought to adapt the First Communion celebration itself, to make it more a parish event. This included: parish/choir involvement in the music; dismantling the practice of 'a job for each child'; parents doing readings; the parish taking on preparations and practices for the day. But these were more the exception than the rule. The overall impression is that the actual celebration remained much the same as before.

Nearly all the parishes said that they have some schedule of dates during the year where families are invited to Sunday mass. Usually this is based on the 'Do This in Memory' programme, which parishes tend to adapt to their own circumstances. Most were doing this independently of the move to Sunday.

Some parishes focus more on the family Mass and on encouraging families to come to that. Two parishes said that, rather than highlighting a monthly mass, they encourage parents to regularly bring their child to Sunday (family) mass. A couple of parishes said

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they have some form of 'Sunday school' or 'Communion club'. Some parishes said that parents now register for First Communion with the parish rather than with the school. This is indicative of a growing practice, intended to help parents associate the sacrament primarily with the parish rather than with the school.

Little else was mentioned. A couple of parishes visit the homes. One parish said that the Communion class come to church weekly for morning Mass. A couple said that they made extra efforts to connect with parents.

HOW DID IT GO?

While the experience has been different in different places, there is a clear pattern in the responses. Moving from Saturday to Sunday has made little or no difference in most parishes.

There were positive experiences. 'A real plus'; very satisfactory'; 'very successful'. Some said it works fine, especially where numbers are small. A few said it had become a simpler occasion, more ordinary, less fuss, less trappings, more normal. One described it as 'a special day at a familiar Mass'. Another said that it had made a small difference in highlighting the sacrament-community link. A couple said there was a greater sense of Sunday.

But these were the minority. There were significantly more who spoke negatively about the experience. Most found it hard to see any difference. The main reason given was that people do not come back after, apart from a very few. There is little or no evidence of the move having a significant impact, particularly on parents.

Along with this, many parishes spoke of a negative impact on the existing congregation. When the numbers are big, 'regulars' go to a different Mass. This refers to First Communion days, but also to the preparatory Masses during the year. In this context, one parish remarked that 'what was meant to build community is not working out as intended'.

The comment from one parish put it well. What we want, the comment said, is parish masses where families are present. What we have is 'Do This in Memory' masses where parishioners are present.

A comment from one parish captured what many are experiencing. It said that the idea of Sunday is 'the ideal' but that it is 'utterly foreign' to those coming. 'They are not involved. They are not joining the community. These are great moments – maybe there is something of God for a split second. But let's not make it what it isn't.'

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PARENTS: WHAT DIFFERENCE DID IT MAKE?

Responses suggest that, at most, there has been modest progress in some parishes. There has been some movement towards parents seeing First Communion in the context of parish community – a greater awareness of Sunday reflected in some increased presence at the family Mass. It seems that this is a result of attending the Sunday Masses during the year, rather than due to having First Communion on Sunday.

But this is the smaller part of the overall picture. After initial resistance to Sunday, parents adapted – but no more. Moving from Saturday to Sunday seems to have made hardly any impact on the great majority of parents. A couple of parishes said that what happens in the church does not transfer back to the home. While some parents will gladly be involved in the organisation and practicalities of the year, there seems to be a decreasing openness to any engagement around faith and the spiritual.

With a spectrum among parents, from the very interested to the totally uninterested, most parents tend to the ‘uninterested’ end of the spectrum. And it seems that this is more so each year, as parents grow more distant from practice, making engagement ever more difficult. There was some sense that those who might be receptive are ‘swamped’ by those who are not, making it more difficult to connect with them. From what was said, it seems that those who do engage are nearly all people who were already churchgoers.

The pattern is that (a) parents will do what they have to do in order for their child to have their big day; (b) some will agree to help with the organisation during the year; (c) there is hardly any evidence of parents being interested in anything beyond this; (d) where the family live in another parish, connecting is even harder.

There were many comments about parents’ meetings. Parents will come to the meeting early in the year for the dates. But there is resistance, even hostility, to the proposal of further meetings. Parents ‘dislike meetings and attempts to engage with them’. They do not understand why they have to attend meetings. They will ‘jump through the hoops’, simply to get to the big day. Whatever interaction there is, is around the practicalities.

A small number of parishes – no more – said that they had made a special effort to offer something to parents who might be interested, around their own faith and spirituality. In each case there had been some initial success, but it had not continued with the following years’ groups of parents. One parish spoke of trying approaches other than meetings, e.g. guided prayer, creative rituals linked to feasts and seasons. It worked well, but there was no sense of any of it becoming inserted into the rhythm of people’s lives.

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The overall picture is that very little is happening by way of engaging with parents. Parishes find it hard to devote time to it. It is felt to be very difficult. Parishes feel helpless, at a loss in how to address it.

The comments made by parishes convey a sense of this being perhaps the central issue;

- It is a 'big challenge'
- 'Attempts to engage parents in a meaningful reflective sharing of experience met with a silent response and no success.'
- It 'goes back to the whole challenge of how to be with parents/families through the year'
- It is 'a struggle... needs more reflection, innovation and application'
- 'This, not children, is the big issue'.
- Any kind of active faith is so long ago for parents, they cannot express it. It has become diluted over time. They do not have the language. They do not have the confidence.
- What we do 'has to be around the parents themselves'; trying to get to the parents via the children does not work.
- 'We haven't sufficiently engaged with parents'.

The word 'disconnect' captures it; the sense of a huge disconnect between where church is at and where parents are at, between the perceptions and expectations of each around the sacrament. One parish said that parents 'don't equate communion with practice or with church'. It is a rite of passage, connected with school, with being in second class. And the 'rite' is seen as a 'right'.

One parish recounted a meeting with parents and trying to address the 'elephant in the room', i.e. 'that 80% of you don't go to church'. Their experience suggests that some honest, open discussion with parents could be useful.

SCHOOLS: WHAT DIFFERENCE DID IT MAKE?

Negotiating the move to Sunday with the school did not come across as a huge problem. One parish said a good working relationship had improved. Others spoke of sharing the responsibility and of good cooperation, even where the parish had become more involved in the celebration – and even where the school would prefer how it was previously.

But overall there was a strong sense of not a lot changing. While the 2012 policy spoke of the celebration being spread across the different weekend Masses, this has not happened. Though a small few tried, it appears it has not been possible to break with the class group as the basic unit.

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One parish spoke of the school holding onto Saturday – on a Sunday. Another spoke of resistance to letting go of the big event. Another said that the school does a very good job at the (Sunday) First Communion Mass. Another said that, in moving to Sunday, the school ‘could not allow the parish to take responsibility for First Communion day’. Another described the move as a compromise; fine as long as things stay the same, same jobs for the children, etc.

One parish even described it as ‘a Sunday Mass celebrated by the school’. Another said that for some schools, it is ‘their event that we facilitate’. There was, as well, one comment that the parish can be lazy here and allow the responsibility be taken from them. Not unrelated to this, one parish spoke positively of the school as itself a kind of parish community, with its own spiritual life. Another contrasting comment was that, for the school, it can be more of a ‘production’ than ‘faith-driven’.

The overall picture that emerges is that, in the move to Sunday, the parish has assumed no more than a modest share of the responsibility for the occasion. Even where the liturgy is more of a joint effort, it is still largely moving what happens from Saturday to Sunday. This may well explain why the change has not been more contentious.

CONGREGATIONS: WHAT DIFFERENCE DID IT MAKE?

Here we find the strongest reactions to the move. Parents seem to have adapted to the new situation, without there being much evidence of the change affecting them at the level of faith. Schools seem to have accommodated themselves in a kind of compromise; it is on a different day, but it is much the same event, without a substantial shift from school to parish. But it is congregations that seem to have been most affected.

This is nearly always directly linked to the numbers involved. In many parishes there are large numbers for First Communion. There may be one class group, possibly two, on Sunday. This could be repeated over a number of Sundays. Add in family and friends, and it makes for a quite different focus and feel to the liturgy. The Sunday gathering becomes a different experience for the regular congregation. Mostly the experience was more negative than positive.

Only a small number of parishes said it was a positive experience for the congregation. In some of these cases, it had to do with the numbers being small. There were a few references to the congregation being involved in some way, e.g. praying for the children during the year, faith friends, participating in the music.

But the general pattern contrasts with this, especially where

numbers were large. While some regulars stayed and enjoyed, many did not. The language used was strong. One parish described the day as ‘bedlam’. Another said Sunday Mass had been ‘hijacked’. Others spoke of a sense of ‘intrusion’, of ‘inconvenience’, of ‘distraction’, of ‘hindrance’, of an ‘imposition’. Parishes said that regular churchgoers felt ‘pushed out’. People felt ‘annoyed’, ‘neglected’, ‘resentful’.

What one parish said would be echoed by many others; ‘some of the most committed’ avoid the First Communion and the ‘Do This in Memory’ Masses. Two parishes said that this was reflected in the collections. Another said that people ‘have told us they don’t want to be there’. People wanted advance notice so that they could avoid the Masses. One said, ‘we lose 90%’. Another parish described the move to Sunday as a ‘disaster’.

One remark about all this was that ‘it defeats the purpose’. (A couple of parishes even put on an extra monthly Mass to hive off the crowd.) Another remarked, ‘so much for our sense of community’. Another parish said that the congregation ‘find it difficult to discern any relevance to themselves of ‘Do This in Memory’ and even more of First Communion’. This means, they continued, that there are ‘very few who see themselves as companions on the journey of faith’ to the children and families.

One parish admitted that they had made no effort to invite the congregation and that they were going to address this in the coming year. This links with a sense from other comments of the regular congregation not having been consulted about the change (as was advised in the 2012 policy). Thus, any sense of the move being ‘right’ is not a sense that is widely shared in the congregation.

HOW DO YOU FEEL NOW?

Despite all the negatives, quite a number of parishes were glad they moved. They were glad, not because it works, but because they feel it is ‘right’. ‘This is ‘where First Communion belongs’. It takes away the ‘privatisation’ of the sacrament. To a small extent, it bears fruit. It ‘integrates First Communion into the life of the parish’. It highlights Sunday and community. ‘Sunday makes it more visible.’ ‘A more real experience of Sunday Mass.’

But they were glad ‘theoretically’, not practically. It ‘makes more sense’, and it may go smoothly, but it ‘makes little or no difference’. The overall sense was that ‘it hasn’t worked’ – for the reasons already noted. Where parishes felt it was the right thing to do, they continue to feel frustrated. The frustration is compounded when regular churchgoers have so little sense of the rightness of the move.

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While more were glad that they moved than sorry, a significant number were not sure or not convinced. There were mixed feelings as to whether Saturday or Sunday was better. About six parishes were thinking that a return to Saturday might work better overall (one has already reverted). Mostly this had to do with the numbers, the effect on the regulars and the lack of positive outcomes to offset the negatives.

One parish said that whether it is Saturday or Sunday is 'not that relevant, not the main issue'. All it does, one parish commented, is to show the 'disconnect between families and regulars'. Another parish said they would still do it, 'but families are so disconnected I wonder why we do it at all.'

There were a couple of comments to the effect that the move will be important in the future when the link with the school may be gone. There was also a comment that, as the number of priests continues to decrease, it will become increasingly difficult to provide First Communion Masses on Saturdays.

CHANGE

Parishes were asked, would you do it again? There were different views, but the more frequent response was that they would do it again with some change. Specific changes mentioned included consulting the regular congregation and paying more attention to parents. But mostly parishes talked about radical change.

There was a strong sense coming across that something more is needed. 'It is not working anymore', said one comment; 'we're giving sacraments to people who'll never practise their faith'.

Some parishes envisaged a future with smaller numbers, just those who are really interested and making a deliberate choice. In this vein, the following comments were made;

- Small groups, over two months.
- Let parents choose a Sunday in May in their own parish – making for a simple family and parish occasion.
- No school involvement, invite parents to choose their Sunday, even if numbers decrease; 'I would rather five committed than sixty-five just there for the day'.
- In what is probably the same point, another parish said 'better if not everybody'.
- 'We would do much better with providing the sacraments for those [few] who want them.'
- A 'moratorium' is needed, in order to make a fresh start with those who choose the sacrament (as opposed to it being

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automatic/cultural) and ‘to build a more meaningful process of faith engagement’.

As hinted in the ‘no school involvement’ above, there was a strong sense that the future envisaged would entail a radical reconfiguration of school and parish. Thus the following comments;

- More parish, less school.
- ‘Connecting them to school means that parents don’t connect with the parish.’
- Only little improvements are possible – it needs radical change – we need to get out of school, to break the class system.
- I question having it in school (especially with so many from outside parish). If it were done from the parish there would be a better response
- ‘Connecting sacraments to school is a mistake. If we can see this we can face up to our responsibility as church to catechise our people rather than take the lazy way out.’
- ‘The emphasis of the celebration needs to be parish based and seen as a sacramental celebration within the church.’
- ‘The sooner we have a parish programme the better.’
- ‘If the parish took all the responsibility, I’d encourage parents to present when ready, rather than in second class, where it is seen as a right.’

Some further comments were to the effect that the radical shift goes beyond just this sacrament. One said that it is the same with Baptism, Communion and Confirmation. ‘They are celebrating a wonderful moment in the life of a child which has little to do with God or with the community of faith. We are creating a false reality. It seems right. It seems good. It is right and good. But it is very close to nonsensical.’

Other comments followed the same thread. ‘Communion time is too late.’ It is bigger than First Communion year. It should start in first class. It goes back to Baptism. Change won’t happen through playing around with Saturday-to-Sunday or school-to-parish. ‘The change and the demand is much deeper... deeper work has to be done’.

‘WHERE ATTENTION GOES, ENERGY FLOWS’

In conclusion; moving to Sunday reflects a larger aspiration, the aspiration for the Sacraments of Initiation to be community events and a celebration of family faith. The review brings this out. It suggests that we pay sustained attention to our aspiration, to the

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‘why’ behind all our efforts. That sustained attention can lead us to see where our energy needs to go.

Addressing all this asks for a diocese-wide collaboration, in a spirit of dialogue, where different voices are heard. That includes voices not prominent in the above, particularly the voice of parents themselves, those who are and those who are not churchgoers. Dublin is but one diocese that is currently taking up that challenge. This particular piece of research, while very modest, paints a picture of what the challenge is.

Mystery. Both theology and science are linked to an underlying faith in the intelligibility of the universe. While interrogating this intelligibility, critical realism and common experience suggest that no matter how complete our knowledge is, in either theology or science, there is always room for improvement. No person or institution has “all the answers.” Regardless of how well we comprehend a situation, an element of mystery always remains and recognition of this should be encouraged. Our knowledge of mystery, while based on reality, is of its very nature limited and at best *verisimilitudinous*. Mystery is not a quicksand in which all enquiry ends; rather, the opposite, it is the pull to know more. As new knowledge and insights are critically examined, proposed to and accepted by the community, deeper insights into Mystery and mysteries can be anticipated.

– JIM MALONE and JOHN MCEVOY, *Mystery and the Culture of Science*, (Cambridge Scholars Publishing) p. 10.