



## Communion for the First Time

**Gerard Condon**, parish priest of Killavullen, County Cork, and a diocesan adviser for religious education explores the changing face of 'First Communion'.

In early May, you may notice an unusual number of bouncy castles in your neighbourhood. The parents of some children linger a little longer at school entrances. Up and down the country invitations to an important family event have been issued. First Communion day is around the corner! This year's celebration will be anticipated with greater joy as COVID-19 restrictions have been eased and normal social gatherings can again take place. Grandparents, who suffered the repeated lockdowns more than most, will relish the opportunity to be part of a family reunion.

For parish personnel, the joy of First Communion day is tempered by the knowledge that, for most families, the priority is the day itself rather than an ongoing commitment to the community of faith. The mantra of one colleague that, 'your one hundredth Communion is as important as your First Communion' rarely strikes a chord. The lavish spending on dresses, receptions and gift giving (estimated at more than €900, on



average, per child), is at odds with the true meaning of the Eucharist. There are anecdotes told of a remotely controlled tiara lighting up as one girl received her First Communion, of stretch limousines waiting at church gates and of children missing the actual Mass because of hairdressing appointments. It seems that nothing can stem the tide of our secular age, with its penchant for milestone celebrations, eye-catching entertainment and the trappings of celebrity.

Parishes have experimented with various remedial strategies, tapping into the goodwill of parents who desire the best for their children in every way, including the ways of faith. Parish-based programmes like *Do this in Memory* and *The Bridge* assist families in preparing for First Communion



© Images Shutterstock

by inviting them to monthly Sunday Masses or meetings in the year leading up to First Communion. However, that commitment rarely continues afterwards. Regular Mass-goers can be annoyed by the inconsistent presence of a large group of young families at their Mass. First Communion challenges all of us with questions about Eucharistic hospitality.

More recent developments may prove more effective. *Grow in Love*, the programme for religious education used in primary schools, prepares children for attendance at every Mass, rather than a single, highly choreographed big day. The teacher's guidelines for the celebration state that the Liturgy of the Word should be proclaimed by parish readers and the music led by the parish choir, not

the children themselves. Communion for the First Time, as it is now known, should retain the dignity, the prayerful atmosphere and the reverence that characterises any parish Mass. Indeed, many priests and people appreciated that greater simplicity of First Communion Masses celebrated during the pandemic. Suspending the social expectations around First Communion Day put the focus back on the Mass itself.

Much more could be done to improve the quality of our Sunday liturgies and make at least one of them family friendly. That would engage a greater number of Catholic families as participants in their parish for the long term. And we have over-relied on schools for the religious formation of children. The ministry of catechist, announced by the Vatican last year, envisages a greater role for parish personnel in assisting families in their responsibility of handing on the faith. The catechist, it is envisaged, will accompany families in the context of the parish's life and worship and will model the Christian faith in a way that is no longer possible in our state-funded schools.

I hope that parishes will continue to welcome all baptised children to grow in the Christian faith, even when that is not properly nurtured by their families. The flame of faith is fragile at the best of times. At the same time, we have a duty to be true to the character of the Mass as an encounter with the risen Christ among the communion of his disciples. ❤️