

# Liturgy of the Word with Children



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*Bishops' Conference of England & Wales*

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## FOREWORD

**T**his document is intended to encourage all involved in the ministry of the word with children. It may be particularly helpful for priest and people to reflect on it together, sharing their experiences, insights, and any difficulties.

These guidelines for the preparation and celebration of this liturgy may need adapting to local pastoral needs and circumstances. This recommendation is already found in the *Directory for Masses with Children*, an official Roman document produced in 1973 to supplement and adapt the principles for good celebration found in the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* and in the *Introduction to the Lectionary for Mass* (revised 1981). It is strongly recommended that these guidelines be read in conjunction with these important documents on which they depend.

*[In Masses with adults] it is necessary to take great care that the children present do not feel neglected because of their inability to participate or to understand what happens and what is proclaimed in the celebration. Some account should be taken of their presence: for example, by speaking to them directly in the introductory comments (as in the beginning and the end of Mass) and at some point in the homily.*

*Sometimes, moreover, if the place itself and the nature of the community permit, it will be appropriate to celebrate the liturgy of the word, including a homily, with the children in a separate, but not too distant, room. Then, before the eucharistic liturgy begins, the children are led to the place where the adults have meanwhile celebrated their own liturgy of the word.*

Directory for Masses with Children (DMC), 17.



## INTRODUCTION

**O**n Sunday the Church comes together to celebrate in word and eucharist the mystery of our Lord's death and resurrection, the paschal mystery. The gathered assembly of the baptised is one of the ways Christ is present: *For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them. (Matthew 18:20)* Our celebration must include everyone: young and old.

In many places, children together with parents and leaders celebrate the liturgy of the word in a separate place. Some parishes have been celebrating like this for a number of years. In other places a liturgy of the word with children is in its infancy or at the planning stage. These guidelines seek to make clear and encourage what is good practice and to affirm and develop the ministries involved in this celebration of God's word.



## GENERAL PRINCIPLES OF LITURGY

- + Liturgy is the praise and worship of God.
- + Liturgy is the source and summit of the Church's life and our lives.
- + It is the right and duty of all the baptised, both children and adults.
- + The function of liturgy is to build up the members of Christ's body, to strengthen us in preaching Christ.
- + Liturgy is action and symbol; it speaks to the whole person, it involves all the senses: sight, touch, sound, taste and smell.
- + Participating in liturgy forms our habits because we are ritual people and learn through repetition and copying.
- + In liturgy we discover the riches of prayer, through word and gesture, silence and stillness.
- + The purpose of adapting liturgy for children is to lead them into full, conscious and active participation in the liturgy of the parish.
- + Liturgy with children, as with adults, demands dignity, clarity, and simplicity.

## ELEMENTS

### *The Liturgy of the Word*

**T**he liturgy of the word at Mass contains the following elements: readings and chants from scripture, the homily, profession of faith and general intercessions. The word is proclaimed in three readings on Sundays and festivals. The first reading is from the Old Testament (or the Acts of the Apostles in the Easter Season). It is followed by a psalm; itself part of God's word, the psalm also forms the assembly's response to the first reading. The second reading is taken from an apostle, either a letter or from the Book of Revelation. The gospel is greeted in song with an acclamation which often accompanies a procession with the Book of the Gospels. Christ is present in his word.

Throughout Ordinary Time a gospel is read over the course of a year. In Year A: the gospel of Matthew; B: Mark; C: Luke. The gospel of John is read during the seasons of Lent and Easter; it also features part way through the year of Mark.

Each Sunday, the first reading from the Old Testament is chosen to harmonise with the gospel passage. The second reading on the other hand follows one or other letter from the New Testament on its own cycle; it is independent of the gospel and you should not expect to find a link.

During the other seasons of the year (Advent-Christmas, Lent-Easter), there is usually greater harmony between all three readings.

The homily is an integral part of the liturgy. In the context of the season or feast, it develops some point of the biblical readings or of another text of the Mass. It explores the mysteries of faith and the standards of the Christian life. The homily leads people from the liturgy of the word to celebrate the liturgy of the eucharist wholeheartedly so that, nourished by God's word and by the body and blood of Christ, the assembly is strengthened to proclaim Christ in lives renewed.

The profession of faith and the general intercessions are part of the assembly's response to the word of God proclaimed. We call to mind the teachings of our faith before celebrating the mystery of our faith in the eucharist, and then in common prayer we intercede: for the Church and for the world, for all in need and for the local community.

In celebrating a liturgy of the word with children the structure can be outlined as follows: proclaiming the word, responding to the word, and intercession.

## *Proclaiming the Word*

*Since readings taken from holy Scripture “form the main part of the liturgy of the word” even in Masses celebrated with children biblical reading should never be omitted. (DMC 41)*

Books containing the word of God proclaimed in the liturgy remind the hearers of the presence of God speaking to his people. They are signs and symbols of the sacred and so care must be taken to ensure that they are worthy and beautiful. The official introduction to the lectionary for Mass insists that the books from which the word of God is proclaimed must not be replaced with other “pastoral aids”: for instance missalettes, hand missals, or preparation books for leaders.

Three passages from scripture are given in the lectionary for Mass. If they are not suitable to the understanding of children two may be omitted (DMC 42), but the gospel is always proclaimed.

Brief introductory comments may precede a reading in order to help the children appreciate its biblical context, to listen attentively and make the Scripture their own.

Christian communities discover and deepen their faith by sharing the stories of salvation proclaimed in the scriptures and relating them to their own lives and situations. Story is a way to everyone’s heart and understanding; children especially become involved and enjoy stories of all types. The way in which we pass on biblical stories to children will influence the way in which they will hear the message of the scriptures proclaimed in the liturgy.

Other forms of proclamation can be used to enhance the reception of the scriptures e.g. mime, drama, song, or choral recitation.

## *Responding to the Word*

*All the elements that will help explain the readings should be given great consideration so that the children may make the biblical readings their own and may come more and more to appreciate the value of God’s word. (DMC 47)*

Leaders will need to prepare carefully what they will say, perhaps drawing on one of the many resources available. In time they will become confident in their own reflections and in the response of the children.

The introductory comments to the scriptures and the reflection that follows the proclamation are the most important and maybe the most daunting aspect

In a liturgy of the word with children, the reflection serves the same function as does the homily described above. In the context of the season or feast, the concerns of the gospel writer can be unfolded and the point of the particular passage related to the children's lives. The scriptures are not just stories of the past but are signs of what God is doing here and now in this assembly. The reflection will probably be a dialogue between the leader and the children, and can incorporate other forms of communication such as song, story, and image.

Bear in mind too that, in the Mass, the liturgy of the word is not an end in itself but leads into the liturgy of the eucharist. The reflection is a pivotal point in the movement of the Mass.

Be wary of replacing the reflection with activity alone, lest others perceive this gathering as a containment exercise or Sunday school rather than an act of worship.

### *Intercession*

Liturgy is the prayerful action of the whole assembly. Children share in the prayer at their own level, absorbing the pattern and movement of the action.

As we pray with the children they learn; they adopt pattern and structure naturally: the sign of the cross, intentions for prayer, and most of all silence are absorbed into the manner of praying.

Parents, leaders and helpers will have their own prayer-life. This will communicate their regard for prayer to the children: their silence, joy and sadness, their respect for person and place, will nurture the children's prayer and allow them to express their natural sense of awe and wonder.

### *Silence*

Silence or stillness is another integral element of liturgy. The whole way in which liturgy is celebrated should foster reflectiveness. In addition, the dialogue between God and his people which happens through the power of the Holy Spirit requires short intervals of silence. The *Directory for Masses with Children* reminds us that children are capable of reflection. They will need some guidance so that they will learn how to recollect themselves, meditate briefly, or praise or pray

## *Music*

Music is integral to all liturgy and it is therefore integral to a liturgy of the word with children. It expresses and highlights the liturgical action; so we use music at the important moments in our liturgy: at the gospel.

An acclamation greets the gospel, a psalm can be sung in response to the word, and other responses can help express intercession and prayer. Particular songs and acclamations can be repeated throughout a liturgical season.

Recorded music can help create a prayerful atmosphere; it can also provide a useful accompaniment.

Movement to songs can help children take to heart their message and the words. Simple actions can be easily created.

There are many opportunities for music and singing within the liturgy but it is not necessary to sing everything. It is better to sing a few items well, focusing on the key points of the liturgy.

## *Environment*

The *Directory for Masses with Children* speaks of a separate, but not too distant room (DMC 17). The place should be appropriate for liturgy: comfortable and bright, near enough to the main assembly so that valuable time is not taken up by overlong processions; far enough away so that each group can celebrate without impinging on the others' worship.

Arranging the worship space is a ministry. The space should be well prepared before the children arrive.

A focal point for the liturgy is essential, in this case a place for the proclamation of God's word rather than an altar, a place of honour for the lectionary or other book of the scriptures. A candle may be lit and colour or decoration should be used appropriate to the liturgical season or festival. Images and symbols can attract and focus the children's attention; they can be used to reflect the themes of the scriptures, the season or the feast.

Avoid arranging the worship space like a classroom with children in rows etc. Experience indicates that this is not ideal for this kind of celebration.

## MINISTRIES

**A**ny liturgy is the action of the whole assembly, so celebrations with children also involve the adults who are present. Within the assembly, and to serve the community's worship, some people have specific roles and ministries. They should be chosen for their ability, competence, and example, since children learn through imitation. How ministers act will both enhance the celebration and show the Christian ideal of service. All involved in ministry will need to meet regularly to prepare, and to evaluate both the liturgy and their own ministry.

### *Leader*

The leader's ministry is to open the hearts of the children to the word of God and allow them to respond to God's word in prayer and life.

The leader:

- + presides over the celebration,
- + welcomes the children,
- + may proclaim the Gospel,
- + leads the reflection on the scriptures,
- + introduces and concludes the intercessions,
- + facilitates the smooth running of the liturgy.

### *Reader*

The word of God must be proclaimed audibly, clearly, reverently, with faith and understanding. The lectionary for Mass recommends that each reading be proclaimed by a different reader.

A reader:

- + proclaims the scriptures,
- + understands what he/she is reading,
- + communicates well,
- + is aware that God speaks to his people in this proclamation.

## *Musician*

The musician:

- + leads the children in song,
- + enables them to pray through song,
- + encourages able musicians among the children to share in this ministry.

It is not always easy to find someone to lead the music. If none of the adults have the confidence to begin a song or acclamation, the children themselves may be capable of starting. It is easier to include music in liturgies of the word with children if some of the items are used regularly and so become well known.

## *Priest Celebrant*

The priest celebrant presides over the entire liturgy of the Mass, he is a sign of the union of all the baptised in the one body of Christ. So that the separate liturgy of the word with children is seen as part of the one celebration it is important for the priest celebrant to:

- + recognise the children as members of the assembly in the introduction,
- + send the children and leaders with dignity to their liturgy of the word.

It can also be useful for the priest celebrant to speak to the children during the liturgy of the eucharist, for instance before the eucharistic prayer begins and at the concluding rite.

The support and encouragement of the priest to the children and to the whole worshipping community can foster a sense of ministry among the leaders.



## CELEBRATING LITURGIES OF THE WORD WITH CHILDREN

### *A model*

1. Children gather with their families in church for the introductory rites of the Mass. After the opening song and the greeting the children, together with their leaders, are called forward.
2. A book of the scriptures is presented to a child or leader.
3. All process to a nearby place. (In some places this happens after the opening prayer.)
4. When the children have gathered the leader introduces the scripture of the day.
5. Before the gospel is proclaimed an acclamation is sung.
6. The scriptures are explored through reflection discussion and other appropriate activity.
7. There is a time of intercession for the Church, the world, those in need and the local community.
8. All return to the main body of the church for the liturgy of the eucharist.

## *Commentary*

1. To emphasise the unity of the whole assembly the children gather in the church with their families for the introductory rites of the Mass.
2. The book of the scriptures can be presented in these or similar words:  
*Receive this book of readings  
and proclaim God's word faithfully  
to the children entrusted to your care.*  
or  
*My dear children,  
you will now go to hear God's word,  
to praise God in song,  
and to reflect on the wonderful things  
God has done for us.  
We will await your return  
so that together we may celebrate the eucharist.*
3. Processions are integral to our ritual, and so the children are led by the Book which may be accompanied with candles, singing or music. Depending on the space and leaders available, the children may divide into age groups. To sustain the children's attitude of prayer the gathering action may need to be continued; this can be done through sign and gesture, song or a prayer. (There is no need for a second sign of the cross and greeting.)
4. The focus of the liturgy of the word is the proclamation of scripture. The gospel is always proclaimed but the other riches of scripture found in the Old and New Testaments should be introduced to children when appropriate. The readings are proclaimed in ways appropriate to their content and the age of the hearers. A brief introduction may be helpful.
5. The gospel is greeted in song with alleluias or, in Lent, with another appropriate acclamation. This is the musical priority of the whole liturgy

6. There should be time after the gospel for reflection and discussion of the reading(s). This should involve the children's own experience. The reflection does not have to be limited to words alone; silence, song, drama or other activity can all help the children understand the message of the scriptures and applying it to their lives and experience.
7. All liturgy is prayer and it is right that a liturgy of the word with children should end with a time of intercession. The prayer may arise from the children's reflection but it is always concerned with the needs of the whole Church and the world. It is important to remember that the petitions are invitations to pray not the prayers themselves, so a short phrase that invites the children to pray is better than a long or detailed list of concerns. This model of intercession is easily learned by children.

### Examples

#### **Introduction**

The prayer of the general intercessions is made to the Father through Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Our introductions can help express this.

- A We know that God loves us,  
so let us pray for ourselves and for others.*
- B We are God's family, filled with the Holy Spirit,  
together let us pray.*
- C Jesus has told us to ask God for what we need,  
so as God's children we pray.*

#### **Intentions**

It is sufficient to state the intention, pray in the silence and respond together, for instance: *Lord, in your mercy; hear our prayer*

*For all God's family  
so that we may share the Good News with everyone.*

*For God's beautiful world  
that we look after it with loving care.*

*For all who are hungry or sad, lonely or sick,  
today we pray for...*

*For the people who live in our road*

### **Concluding Prayer**

The concluding prayer is a general expression of trust in God's goodness. It should be short and simple, be addressed to God (the Father) and be made through Jesus Christ our Lord.

*A Loving God,*

*we ask you to listen to these prayers*

*which we bring to you today*

*in the name of Jesus the Lord.*

*Amen.*

*B Father,*

*may your love be with us always*

*and bring peace and joy to our families.*

*We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

*Amen.*

*C God of tender love,*

*you always hear our prayers*

*we ask you to grant us what we need*

*through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

*Amen.*

8. A system is necessary to inform the group when to return to the church. An usher signalling that the homily is finished should give enough time for everything to be drawn together. The children and leaders rejoin the whole assembly for the liturgy of the eucharist.



## PREPARATION

**P**reparation is essential to good liturgy. Individual liturgies should grow from reflection on the scripture of the day, how it relates to the faith experience of the people involved, and how best the gospel can be shared with the children.

The seasons of Advent, Christmas, Lent and Easter have their own rhythm. Each Sunday should be planned as part of the whole season. The scripture readings of the Sundays of Ordinary Time also have a pattern which, with forward planning, helps the preparation of individual liturgies.

Forward planning over a season also means that those Sundays and festivals can be identified when it may be more appropriate for the whole assembly to celebrate the liturgy of the word together. The great feasts of the Church's year, Christmas, Easter etc. are times for adults and children to stay together. It is a challenge to prepare liturgies that involve all the baptised.

A planning group for liturgies of the word with children involves all who have a ministry.

Together,

- + they will be able to reflect on and evaluate liturgies already celebrated,
- + to prepare through prayer and discussion future liturgies and co-ordinate the various tasks.

A good planning group will:

- + help with the ongoing formation of its members,
- + provide the opportunity to encourage potential leaders,
- + and nurture the faith development of all.

## CONCLUSION

**T**

he *Directory for Masses with Children* speaks of aims and benefits of liturgy with children in this way:

*Various kinds of celebration may also play a major role in the liturgical formation of children and in their preparation for the Church's liturgical life. By the very fact of such celebrations children easily come to appreciate some liturgical elements, for example, greetings, silence, and common praise (especially when it is sung together). But care must be taken that the instructive element does not become dominant in these celebrations.*

*Depending on the capacity of the children, the word of God should have a greater and greater place in these celebrations... [This] will help greatly to develop in the children an appreciation of the word of God.*

*While all that has been said remains true, the final purpose of all liturgical and eucharistic formation must be a greater and greater conformity to the Gospel in the daily life of the children.*  
(DMC 13-15)





## APPENDIX:

## DIRECTORY FOR MASSES WITH CHILDREN

*(A Summary)*

*Issued by the Congregation for Divine Worship, 1 November 1973. See Documents on the Liturgy 1963–1979: Conciliar, Papal and Curial Texts, p. 676; ## 2134–88. Edited by ICEL. Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 1982. Reprinted in The Liturgy Documents: A Parish Resource. Edited by Elizabeth Hoffman. Chicago IL: Liturgy Training Publications, 1991. (Distributed in UK by McCrimmons).*

## Sigla Used

- SC *Vatican Council II, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy Sacrosanctum Concilium, 4 December 1963. In Documents on the Liturgy, p. 1.*
- GIRM *Congregation for Divine Worship, General Instruction of the Roman Missal 4<sup>th</sup> edition, 27 March 1975. In Documents on the Liturgy, p. 465.*

It is spiritually harmful if children ‘repeatedly experience in the Church things that are barely comprehensible’ (2). The purpose of the Directory is to help children:

- benefit more from the educational value of the liturgy (2)
- play a fuller part in the liturgy (3), and so be able to
- take part with more understanding in the parish Mass (21).

The liturgy must be adapted (3, 20; SC 38). The Directory gives principles for adapting to those who have not yet reached ‘pre-adolescence’ (6). Further adaptation applying these principles is necessary for children with special needs (6).

### *I. The Introduction of Children to the Eucharistic Celebration*

Liturgical formation (8), appropriate to their age (12); Liturgies especially for children (13), and not always Mass (see 27):

- prayer
- services of the word (see also 14).

*II. Masses with Adults  
in which Children also participate*

One liturgy for the whole community is most important (16). Infants may be cared for outside of the act of worship (16). Within the liturgy, account should be taken of children:

- occasional words addressed to them: e.g. beginning and end of Mass (17); in the homily (17, 19),
- involvement of children in the action: e.g. procession with the gifts (19); singing (19),
- special liturgy of the word (17).

Sometimes, where there is a larger proportion of children:

- the homily may be addressed more directly to them,
- one of the adaptations given in chapter 3, below, may be used.

*III. Masses with Children  
in which only a few Adults participate*

Recommended especially on weekdays (20).

Further adaptation is necessary (20), in keeping with the purpose of the various elements of the liturgy outlined in the Missal (21).

- Every effort should... be made to increase... participation and to make it more intense. (22)
- The liturgy should never appear as something dry and merely intellectual. (35)

Thorough preparation by everyone is essential (29).

*Involving the Children*

- arranging the room (22),
- visual aids (35), their own artwork (36),
- music and song (22, 30): especially the eucharistic acclamations (30); use of recorded music (32),
- reading scripture and the intercessions (22),
- dialogue with the children, especially in the homily (22, 47),
- opportunity to give reasons for thanksgivings at the start of the eucharistic prayer (22),
- silence (22, 37),

- gesture (33) and movement, especially the four processions (34): entrance, gospel, gifts, communion,
- involvement in preparing the gifts (22).

### *Responsibility of the Priest*

To make the celebration 'festive, familial and meditative' (23):

- personal preparation (23),
- manner of acting and speaking (23): especially the eucharistic prayer (52),
- actions and gestures: 'dignity, clarity, simplicity' (23).

### *Place and Time of Celebration*

The criterion is to facilitate:

- 'a living liturgy that is suited to their age' (25),
- optimum receptivity (26), therefore:
- the Mass may be held in a church, or elsewhere,
- the numbers of children should not be too large (28).

### *Texts of the Mass*

- any prayers from the Roman Missal (Sacramentary) in keeping with the season (50),
- these may be adapted, but keeping the structure and style of presidential prayers (51),
- the Apostles' Creed may be used (39),
- the Sanctus, Agnus Dei, etc. may be adapted for singing (44): **Note:** this applies only for Masses with children,
- congregational responses, the Lord's Prayer, and the trinitarian blessing formula are not be adapted (39).

### *Introductory Rites*

One element (e.g. the greeting) plus the opening prayer are required (40); others are optional, but the elements omitted should vary.

### *Liturgy of the Word*

Scripture is obligatory (41); the gospel is always included (45).

Criterion for the decision: the spiritual value of the text for the children (44):

- the number of readings may be reduced (42),
- other texts may be chosen, in keeping with the feast or season (43),

- the text may be edited (43): simplification is often necessary, but paraphrases should be avoided (45),
- an introduction to the reading is important (47, GIRM 11).

A psalm, or psalm-type hymn, or gospel acclamation (Alleluia), or silence (46).

Importance of the homily (48) and of involving the children in it (22): it may be given by one of the adults (24).

### *Communion Rite*

The Lord's Prayer, fraction, and invitation to communion are obligatory (53): 'Deliver us, Lord', 'Lord Jesus Christ' may be omitted.

Communion in both kinds: a diocese may have norms, but the cup should not be refused simply because of age.

Silent reflection is important (37).

Before the blessing, the priest should say a few words to help link the liturgy with the life of faith and with Christian witness (54).

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