



DIOCESE OF PORTSMOUTH

Guidelines for Liturgy of the Word with Children

These guidelines recognise that much good work has taken place and continues to take place in the diocese in celebrating Liturgy of the Word with Children. It is hoped that what follows below will help to build on what has already been achieved and lead to every parish being able to boast of good practice in this important area of growing in faith.

1. There are two principal parts of the Mass. The Liturgy of the Word at Mass begins when we sit down to listen to the readings, and ends with the Bidding Prayers. The Liturgy of the Eucharist begins with the procession of the gifts and ends with the sharing of communion.
2. Liturgy of the Word with Children is a simpler version of the Liturgy of the Word. When we gather together, young and old, we are part of one assembly. Although they are in a separate place, children are still part of this one assembly, and are still celebrating the same Liturgy of the Word as the adults are, but adapted specially for them.
3. This means it actually is a liturgy – a genuine celebration involving the praise and worship of God. It should not be regarded as a session for teaching the children or keeping them occupied.
4. Liturgy of the Word with Children can happen
 - (a) in a separate area;
 - (b) in the church as part of a Sunday Mass (some parishes do this every week);
 - (c) alternating both of these, or some other regular pattern.

Although a Liturgy of the Word with Children would normally happen each week in another place, parishes are encouraged to hold it once a month in the church as part of a Sunday Mass, and always in the church on special feast days such as Easter, Pentecost and Christmas. These are occasions when it is important for the whole parish family to gather together and celebrate the Word together.



5. The group of children and adults should be formally sent out to hear the Word. This "Dismissal" takes place after the Sign of the Cross and greeting (in Advent, after the blessing of the wreath) and consists of:
 - (a) the priest or deacon solemnly presenting the book of readings to one of the children;
 - (b) some words of blessing over the children – and indeed the whole community – are said by the priest or deacon – e.g. "May the Lord open our ears to hear his Word. Let it grow in us and bear fruit in us". The priest or deacon is encouraged to extend both arms over the children and invites the congregation to do the same while he says the words of blessing.
 - (c) the children and adults process out: the child carrying the book holds it aloft and leads everyone out in procession, ideally accompanied by a processional song which does not end until the last person in the procession has left the church. The processional song helps avoid the distraction that is often caused when what follows in the liturgy is taking place while there is still a lot of movement going on in the body of the church. NB: Because the primary symbol is the Book of the Word, the child carrying the book does not wear any special garment or insignia. The procession may be led by someone (it does not have to be a server) carrying a candle lit from one of the altar candles. This is placed near the Book of the Word (see no. 7 below).

6.
 - (a) Once the procession has reached the place for the celebration of the Word, it normally begins with a few words of welcome. From time to time, an adapted version of a penitential rite might be used.
 - (b) Then one or two readings are read aloud. These must include the Gospel for the day. If there is only one reading, it must be the Gospel. It is very important that the Word of God is proclaimed audibly, clearly and reverently.
 - (c) The Gospel should be welcomed by a sung Alleluia. If there isn't an instrumentalist available, choose a simple Alleluia and just start it off! The children will quickly join in. In Lent, use the sung refrain of an appropriate Lenten Gospel Greeting (perhaps the one being used by the parish).
 - (d) It is good to develop the practice of times of silence to enable the Word to speak.
 - (e) After the Gospel, everyone is encouraged to respond to what they have heard and say what they think about it. This is an opportunity to make links between what we have heard and our own daily lives. It can nourish us and change us. The leader's role is to encourage these reflections, helping the children to explore the scripture, perhaps by asking some questions if the children are reticent. Other forms of reflection can include silence, song, drama, or other activity. Be wary of replacing reflection with activity alone: the focus is always on God speaking to everyone present through the Word, and activities could squeeze out God. There is no need to feel you have to "produce" something to bring up in the procession of gifts.
 - (f) If there is time, the Liturgy of the Word with Children can end with simple intercessions. This prayer is concerned with the needs of the Church, the world and the local community. A short phrase that invites the children to pray is better than a long or detailed list of concerns.

7. It is important to create a warm and welcoming environment which reflects the liturgical season. The aim is to create a sacred space which is visually attractive and which reflects the theme of the Gospel. The Book of the Word should be in a special place and treated with reverence. The place for the Book should not

resemble an altar – this is reserved for the sacrifice which takes place in the Liturgy of the Eucharist, the second part of the Mass. (Don't forget that there are two focuses during Mass: the table of the Word and the table of the Eucharist.)

You might use a cloth that reflects the liturgical colour of the day, a bookstand on which to place the Book of the Word, and one or more candles (these must be placed so as to avoid any risk to personal safety). Readings are read from the Book of the Word rather than from photocopied sheets or the resource book.

8. The person who leads Liturgy of the Word with Children is known as a leader, not a catechist. Their role is to enable everyone to hear and explore God's Word and make their own response to it, rather than to teach. It is a celebration of the Word, rather than a catechism class, First Communion preparation or any other form of religious education.

To comply with Safeguarding requirements, there must always be at least two "leaders" over the age of 18; but for more than 8 children over the age of 3 there needs to be an additional one adult [helper] for every 8 children. (For more information, contact the Diocesan Child Protection Officer or your parish representative.)

In addition, it is wonderful to be able to involve young people (between 12 and 18) as helpers. Ideally, there should be someone to lead some music, who can be either an adult or a young person.

9. The usual age-range for Liturgy of the Word with Children is from 5 or 6 upwards. Children who have started school (even part-timers in reception class) are generally old enough to celebrate the Word. If space and numbers of helpers allow, it can be useful to split them up into age groups, e.g. 5-7, 8-10. Older children (from 10 years upwards) can remain in Liturgy of the Word with Children and start the process of becoming helpers if they are willing to do this (this is where our future adult leaders and helpers will come from – see no. 8 above) or they can join the grown-ups in church. Younger children accompanied by a parent or other responsible adult may also be welcomed into Liturgy of the Word with Children as long as they do not distract attention from the celebration of the Word.

10. The children usually return at the end of the Bidding Prayers. The priest may welcome the children back informally. He could talk to the children about their celebration of the Word, but he should not feel obliged to do this. Sometimes a "question time" can interrupt the flow of the liturgy. If a song is being sung, it does not need to stop during the welcoming back, which is for the children rather than the entire congregation.

Normally, on their return the children join in with the Procession of the Gifts. Some children carry the bread and wine, etc, and the other children walk behind them in the procession. The child who carried out the book carries it back in (not held aloft this time, as the focus is now the gifts of bread and wine, and no longer the book) and places it near the ambo (the lectern from which the Word has been proclaimed in the church). See also no. 12, below.



In the church as part of a Sunday Mass

11. When Liturgy of the Word with Children takes place in the body of the church, it is appropriate for one of the usual leaders to continue to exercise that role in the presence of a priest. In this case, the priest is still the presider over the assembly, and the leader is fulfilling her or his particular ministry within the celebration.
The Book of the Word used for celebrations outside the church should be used at celebrations in the body of the church.

The Liturgy of the Eucharist that follows

12. A way of involving additional children in the procession of gifts is to “dress the altar” – that is, bring up the altar cloths and book and “lay the table” before placing the food and drink for the banquet upon it.
Wherever possible, the children should gather around the altar for the Eucharistic Prayer.
13. If there are a lot of children present, it is recommended that one of the Eucharistic Prayers for Masses with Children be used. All the acclamations should be sung if this is at all possible – published settings exist for these. A separate leaflet giving details of resources is available.

Preparation

14. It will be very helpful for a good celebration if leaders are able to prepare by working together to plan a liturgical unit or a season at one time – for example, from the beginning of Advent to the feast of the Epiphany. Although this may seem demanding when people’s lives are so busy, the advantages gained from spreading the load, sharing different ideas and drawing encouragement from each other are well worth the effort.

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*See also the Guidelines for Liturgy of the Word with Children published in 1996 by the
Liturgy Office of the Bishop’s Conference of England and Wales*

