Get Ready! Get Set!
The final retreat and rehearsal for parents and their children before First Holy Communion

Providing an experience of coaching parents to prepare their own children in this final period of preparation

Leisa Anslinger & Bill Huebsch


**Introduction.**

This is a flexible-schedule retreat and plan for the final rehearsal for parents and their children as they prepare to receive Holy Communion for the first time. Parents and children live together most of the time. They encounter one another daily. Even if the family is split between more than one home, they’re in touch with each other frequently.

But in this final retreat and rehearsal for First Holy Communion, we want to give them a unique experience of being together, one in which we coach the parents to talk with their child about faith. This special time before Holy Communion will be formation that lasts a lifetime, for both the parents and their kids.

When we coach parents like this, the parents get to know their own faith better. They learn side-by-side with their children. Building on the anticipation and attention of parents during preparation for First Holy Communion, this is the perfect time to begin or deepen the process of coaching. Here’s just a bit of what happens during this time:

► Parents are naturally anxious for their children as they prepare to receive Penance or Holy Communion for the first time;

► Coaching not only alleviates some of the nervousness but also involves parents in the learning circle. Parents are relieved to know what their children are learning, and they appreciate the way the coaching process respects and honors their role as the primary influence in the faith growth of their child;

► Catholic parents acquire language with which to talk with their children about sacraments, faith, and their lives;

► Parents who are not Catholic receive a warm welcome. Coaching is a perfect opportunity to help them understand more about what we believe and why, in a way that values their presence and participation;

► Parents begin to see catechists and coaches as partners, not as replacements. This also increases the parents’ openness to continued connection with the community of faith, and to returning for future coaching sessions;

► Children and parents form a deeper bond and strengthen the household of faith.

If you already have a retreat day that includes your rehearsal for First Holy Communion, this outline will give you a way to also make that time into an opportunity to coach parents, maybe for the first time.
Getting set up for this event

This packet includes:
- The outline of the day, with all the preparation notes you will need;
- The handouts for parents and children;
- A timeline for the day, for smaller groups and for larger groups.

The outline of the day:
Sample Retreat Timeline. For larger groups with more than one track of parents/children running simultaneously, see the next page.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>to be determined by you</td>
<td>Arrival, nametags, table assignments, settle in</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 minutes</td>
<td>Welcome, Focus and Opening Prayer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40 minutes</td>
<td>Coaching Parents, using the final prep handouts at tables</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 minutes</td>
<td>Break -- snack, restrooms, movement to next space</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 minutes</td>
<td>Walk-through of church and Mass</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 minutes</td>
<td>Rehearsal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(optional activity)</td>
<td>Children: Craft Parents: Reflection</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 minutes</td>
<td>Closing Prayer, final notes and dismissal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Preparation notes
Choose your team. For this retreat, you’ll need catechists who can coach the parents as they work at their tables on the lesson, tour leaders for the tour of the church and the rehearsal walk-through of the Mass, and people to provide hospitality.

1. **Coaches** – These can be your regular catechists, and you’ll need about one per every two or three tables of parents and children. The role of the coach is to be on hand to support parents who need it, but not to interfere if the parents seem to be getting along on their own. The parents are the primary teachers during the lesson; the coaches are there to assist – and not replace – the parents.

2. **Tour leaders** for the tour of the church. We provide the “tour guide” for you in this kit, along with a handout for participants. These folks will be the local leader for this tour.

3. **Mass guides.** There will also be a rehearsal walk-through of the Mass. If you will stay in one group, two Mass guides will be sufficient; if you will break into smaller groups, one to two guides per small group will be needed.

You’ll also need space in which to hold this event. Because it’s also a rehearsal, folks will be moving throughout the building, so this cannot happen simultaneously with other events, such as funerals or weddings. You’ll need:

4. **A room with tables** for the lesson part of the retreat. If your room has round tables, still place the prayer table in the center and position the tables around it. If the room has long, rectangular tables, set them up like this:

Locate your prayer altar as much in the center of the room as possible. People will be asked to approach it with slips of paper during the Prayer Celebration. Give families privacy by seating them in clumps around the end of rectangular tables or on the sides of round tables. It will be pretty tough to do this day without tables.
To print beforehand
You’ll also need to have on hand the supplies for the coaching lesson, handouts printed from the materials in the appendix of this kit.

► **Make copies** of the lesson handouts (from this kit) and have them ready. You may wish to create a packet for each household. You’ll need:
  o The child’s handout
  o The parents’ handout (with wrap-around steps)

To do beforehand

► **Review** the entire retreat.
► **Seating plans.** Also have seating diagrams and the materials you will need for your First Holy Communion rehearsal.
► **Prepare a Prayer Altar** for your space. Use whatever you wish, but always include a Bible, a candle, and a cross.
► **Have your supplies on hand:** crayons for the children, pens or pencils for everyone, & Bibles to share on the tables.
► **Have sacred music playing quietly** as people arrive. It helps reduce discomfort from awkward silence. Because so much of this day is based on interaction between parent and child, you may wish to allow background music to provide white noise which helps create privacy. Turn the music off during the Prayer Celebration.
► **Provide a drink and snack.** located at a convenient spot in or near the meeting room. Food always helps make people feel comfortable.
► **Arrange for use of the church.** Be sure to schedule the use of the worship space early in the year.

Retreat Timing

► The retreat takes approximately two hours, so it could be held in the late afternoon into the evening, or on a Saturday or Sunday. Our experience is that the weekend is more conducive to the retreat experience, but any time is better than none!
Retreat Elements

► Welcome
  o You will help everyone focus on the theme of this event
  o You will lead a brief opening prayer (provided in this kit)

► A lesson at the tables
  o This is where you will coach parents to guide their own child through a
    “final lesson” for First Holy Communion using a special session from
    Growing Up Catholic

► A walk-through tour of the church
  o Your tour guides will provide this
  o With a moment of prayer for each at the Tabernacle

► A guided demonstration of the Mass

► The rehearsal for the First Communion Liturgy

► (optional activity) A craft for children and reflection for parents

► The closing prayer, any final notes from you, and dismissal

For groups of 30 or fewer children: All of the children and parents can move together through the retreat experience.

For groups of 30 or more: It will be beneficial to follow a staggered scheduling for the elements of the event

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Set this time</td>
<td>Arrival, nametags, table assignments,</td>
<td>Welcome everyone warmly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as you wish</td>
<td>settle in</td>
<td>Be sure to give a special welcome to any non-Catholic parents who may be present.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leave about 15</td>
<td></td>
<td>Have sacred music playing quietly as folks arrive. This helps create an atmosphere of comfort. A silent church hall may feel more like a morgue to some people!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>minutes for</td>
<td></td>
<td>Have beverages and snacks available as people arrive, especially if they’re coming after school on a weeknight.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>folks to</td>
<td></td>
<td>Ask your team and pastoral staff (including the parish priests) to join with the people. It creates a bit of discomfort if they merely linger at the edges of the room.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>arrive and get</td>
<td></td>
<td>Have the room where this event is held clearly marked.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>settled.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Have name tags and seating arrangements in place and all materials on the tables in advance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 minutes</td>
<td>Welcome and focus</td>
<td>When the time comes, welcome everyone and give them a brief (just a moment or two) description of the plan for the retreat so they know what to expect.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Focus:** about 5 minutes

- Introduce the retreat-rehearsal **briefly** using these or similar words:

We are gathering today as a group of families, with our children who are preparing for First Holy Communion, in order to undertake one “special lesson” with them. What makes this lesson so special is that it is one that you parents will lead.

Oh, don’t worry. We’re not asking you to do something that’s impossible. We’ll be here to coach and assist you, but this “special lesson” will be between you and your child. We’ll also have a tour of the church, a demonstration of the Mass, and a rehearsal for the First Communion liturgy.

- Ask if there are any questions.
- Mention how to find the bathrooms.
- Introduce any other parish team members who are present.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6 minutes</td>
<td><strong>Opening Prayer</strong></td>
<td>Say that we will open with a brief prayer, asking the Holy Spirit to be with us today. Begin with the Sign of the Cross, prayed aloud in unison. Follow this with a sacred song if you wish, one that everyone can sing. If possible, invite a parish musician to assist you. Lead the Prayer of Holy Communion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 minutes</td>
<td>Coaching Parents Lessons done at the tables</td>
<td>After the prayer, and after everyone has settled in to their place at the tables, guide the families to the final prep exercise handouts. Parents should follow the numbered steps on their handouts. It’s a good idea to keep the whole group moving at a similar pace so that all complete this work at about the same time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 minutes</td>
<td>Break + movement to next space</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 minutes</td>
<td>Tour of the parish church and guided demo of the Mass</td>
<td>Using the guide we provide, set everyone off on their tours. It’s best to keep these tour groups to about 10 people each if possible. Each group can begin at a different point in the church. During the tour, each group will come to the</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Tabernacle. The tour guide should pause here and invite everyone to a moment of sacred prayer. This is an excellent time for a brief, quiet prayer and a reminder that Jesus is present there. If your parish has perpetual adoration of the Blessed Sacrament or sometimes offers holy hour, one of the regular participants may lead the prayer at the retreat for a good community connection.

- After the tour, gather your whole group for a quick demo on the Mass. If you have a parish priest available, or another member of the pastoral team, you may wish to employ them here. If not, choose a suitable leader for this demo.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>30 minutes</th>
<th>Rehearsal for the Liturgy of First Communion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Have your seating chart ready!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gather everyone in the vestibule and begin with the entry procession.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Have in mind that many of these adults may not come to Mass very often.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Be ready to answer questions about reception of Communion by those outside of full communion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Most parishes include some rehearsal of the details of the liturgy, including how to receive the Blessed Sacrament and (if offered in your parish) the Precious Blood. They will also be able to reinforce at home what was taught during the retreat. In the multiple-group option, two groups practice together. If the groups each represent children who will receive First Holy Communion at different Masses, give each smaller group an opportunity to walk-through separately.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(optional activity)</th>
<th>Children: Craft Parents: Reflection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Often parishes already have customs around the immediate preparation for First Holy Communion. Perhaps the children bake bread, create a memento picture or mosaic, paint a small glass, or make a banner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>If you already have such a custom, the retreat has 45 minutes built in for this activity. If you do not already have a custom such as this, consider some brief craft that could result in a lasting memory and deeper appreciation of the moment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>If you decide that a craft requires more preparation than you can muster, you can either skip this part or select an appropriate video for</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the children to watch and enjoy a snack with each other while the parents participate in their reflection.

► Invite the parents to gather together without their children. Ask them to think back over their own journey of faith. This will also help them “connect the dots” with their influence in the growth of faith of their children. The reflection time could include a brief witness by a parent (perhaps the parent of a child who received First Holy Communion last year), notes that lead participants through a reflection on their own journey of faith, and brief sharing with another.

| 5 minutes | You may simply have the closing prayer right in the worship space when you finish the rehearsal |

**Send home:**
All the handouts used in the retreat + other notes from you regarding the liturgy

Offer any final notes, thoughts, and instructions, and close with a prayer like this:

**Dear Jesus,**
- **we know you are with us here.**
- **You are present in this room.**
- **We love you and want to love you more.**
- **Help us to be more loving this week.**
- **Thank you for giving us faith.**
- **Increase our faith every day.**

**Now let us pray together:**

**Glory Be to the Father, and to the Son,**
- **and to the Holy Spirit,**
- **as it was in the beginning,**
- **is now, and ever shall be, world without end,**
- **Amen.**

**In the name of the Father, and of the Son,**
- **and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.**
Prayer of Holy Communion

Being in communion with each other at home is something that families have to practice every day. Within our families, we are called to be like a “little church” at home, one in which the love of Jesus, whom we receive in communion, guides everything we do. Let us pray together for the grace of seeing Jesus in one another, the willingness to die to ourselves as we practice this love, and the grace to accept love from God, from the members of our church, and from each other.

**Leader:** O God, please help us see how much you love us and help us love each other in the same way.

You love us without end and are so generous to us, O God.

**All:** We love you.

**Leader:** We know that you are always with us, living in our hearts and in the hearts of those around us.

We don’t always recognize you and we are sorry for that.

**All:** Help us see you more clearly.

**Leader:** You teach us to be friends with each other and friends with Jesus. Jesus is a special friend who helps us be in communion.

Jesus offers us his body and blood in communion.

**All:** We promise to love you more.

Bless us, O God, and help us learn to love you more. Be with us today as we learn about what it means to receive Holy Communion. May your Spirit fill us with faith, and may we grow to be your family more and more. Thank you for giving us yourself in this wonderful sacrament.

Amen.