

Archdiocese of Dublin

SACRAMENTS IMPLEMENTATION GROUP

FINAL REPORT

October 2021

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1. SUMMARY / RECOMMENDATIONS

The brief of the SIG was to explore the practicalities of a new approach to the family sacraments. This new approach, as intimated in the Priests Council recommendation to the Archbishop, would centralise the role of the parish, with a view to connecting with parents in their irreplaceable role as the primary agents in their children's faith life. *(see appendix J)*

The recommendations which follow are based on three strands of the group's work;

- Listening to the voices of parents, of parish personnel and of school personnel. *(see appendices C,D,E,F)*
- Reflecting on the parish experience of sacramental celebrations in Covid times. *(see appendix C)*
- Devising and evaluating creative ways of engaging with parents/families. *(see appendix B)*

These three strands give an evidence-base for the recommendations. This makes the SIG confident that a parish-led approach can touch people's lives and, specifically, that it has the potential to reach the majority of parents.

SIG RECOMMENDS THAT THE DIOCESE EMBARK UPON THE FOLLOWING PATH;

THE VISION INSPIRING THE APPROACH

1. The vision is that the personal quality of the parish's interaction with parents and families, in partnership with the work of the school, will generate a sense of welcome and affirmation among parents that will incline them to identify more deeply with the faith community. In this vision the central focus is on the family. The church seeks to connect with the family in its life, with the hope that families in turn will be encouraged to engage with the life of the church.
2. The future envisaged as the practical expression of this vision is one where (a) families choose to celebrate the sacraments in the parish they identify with and (b) this happens in small numbers, in interaction with the faith community.
3. The approach sees the partnership of parish, parents and school in the following way. The heart of the process is parents in the central role of engaging with their children. Both parish and school seek to accompany and support that in their respective ways. The diocese supports and resources both parish and school in their work.

ROLES IN PARTNERSHIP

4. The future role of the parish is; (a) direct registration of families for the sacraments; (b) carrying out the sacramental celebrations in small numbers; (c) carrying out a blended programme of engagement with parents and children.
5. The future role of the school is; (a) the delivery of the *Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland (2015)* through the *Grow in Love/InGrá Dé* Religious Education programme; (b) the support for parents that is part of this; (c) developing the school's Catholic ethos in its daily life.
6. The future role of the diocese is; (a) support for the parish in building its capacity for its role, including practical training and resources; (b) support for the school in delivering the RE programme and in developing its ethos; (c) central office and personnel with responsibility to ensure this support.
7. A critical part of the diocese's role will be to help parishes to develop an integral approach to the family sacraments, starting with Baptism, with a strong emphasis on continuing the relationship with families between the sacramental moments.

2. STEPS FOR THE COMING YEAR 2021-2022

Presented below is the proposed diocesan plan for the family sacraments in 2021-22. It pivots on the primary and indispensable role of the parents in accompanying their children on the path of faith. In that context it articulates the roles of parish, school and diocese in their partnership at the service of the family.

The goal of this plan is to consolidate the developments of the past 18 months, viz. (a) the diocesan direction announced in December 2019, (b) the new form of sacramental celebrations that emerged during Covid and (c) the new approaches to engaging with families developed by the Sacraments Implementation Group (SIG).

For the coming year, 2021-2022, the diocese will consolidate the work already done under (4) above. It will (a) encourage the universal practice of direct registration, (b) ask all parishes to commit to small-scale celebrations, (c) provide guidance and resources for parishes to follow a blended programme of engagement with families.

Embedding the new approach takes longer than a year. It involves widespread embrace of the underlying mindset, the development of local capacity, the generation of resources and the provision of training by the diocese. The coming year is an important step on this path.

The path towards the future envisaged is a gradual one and the pace will vary according to the circumstances of different parishes. Local dialogue between parish and school, along with diocesan communication, will be central to a widespread embrace of the approach.

| BY THE PARISH | BY THE CATHOLIC PRIMARY SCHOOL | BY THE DIOCESE |
|--|---|---|
| <p>Dialogue between parish and school(s), so that all are clear about the new approach and so that school and parish are comfortable with the new forms their partnership is taking.</p> <p>Planning out the year, including capacity requirements.</p> | <p>Dialogue between parish and school(s), so that all are clear about the new approach and so that school and parish are ready to engage with the new forms their partnership is taking.</p> | <p>Communication with parishes that gives a clear and inspiring message about the approach, about the vision and about the practicalities.</p> <p>Putting in place what is required centrally for all this to happen, in particular (a) personnel to generate resources and accompany local initiatives, (b) an advisory group to monitor the progress on the SIG report.</p> |
| <p>REGISTRATION</p> <p>As many parishes as possible to have set up direct registration by the end of 2021.</p> | <p>Guidance to parents and guardians.</p> <p>Practical support for the parish in setting up direct registration.</p> | <p>Provide training on registration for parishes, as in 2020.</p> |
| <p>PARISH PREPARATION</p> <p>Get started on a blended programme, along the following lines;</p> <p>(a) In person: Start of year meeting; Sunday liturgies (e.g. 'Do this in memory'); Occasional rituals (e.g. Service of Light).</p> <p>(b) Online: series of zoom sessions with high quality video material to facilitate parent-child conversation at home.</p> <p>Non-Catholic schools; explore potential of online instruction to accompany in person contact.</p> | <p>SCHOOL PREPARATION</p> <p>The school contributes to sacramental preparation in the <i>Catholic Preschool and Primary religious Education Curriculum for Ireland (2015)</i> through teaching the <i>Grow in Love/I nGrá Dé</i> programme over the 8 years programme.</p> | <p>Generation of materials for parish online sessions, building on those of 2021.</p> <p>Training for parish volunteers in delivering these sessions.</p> <p>Support and guidance for parishes with recruiting volunteers for these activities.</p> <p>Provide guidance and information to parishes with non-Catholic schools.</p> |

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| <p>CELEBRATION</p> <p>Sacramental celebrations in parishes to take the form of small-scale ceremonies, along the lines of the past year, insofar as possible. The evidence is that the personal connection this establishes more than rewards the extra work entailed.</p> | <p>CELEBRATION</p> <p>Provides support for the parish according to agreements made in partnership.</p> | <p>CELEBRATION</p> <p>Sharing of templates of best practice from parishes' 2020 and 2021 experience.</p> |
| <p>FOLLOW-UP</p> <p>Participate in diocesan-led initiatives on follow-up.</p> <p>Together with the school, evaluate the preparation and celebration of the sacraments at the end of the school year.</p> | <p>FOLLOW-UP</p> <p>The Board of Management and the school will evaluate the school's role in the preparation and celebration of the sacraments in accordance with the school's Catholic ethos.</p> | <p>FOLLOW-UP</p> <p>Work during the year on an integral approach to all the family sacraments, which will include plans for follow-up after celebration.</p> |
| <p>CATHOLIC EDUCATION</p> <p>Support implementation of the strategic plans initiated by the diocese.</p> | <p>CATHOLIC EDUCATION</p> <p>Support implementation of the strategic plans initiated by the diocese.</p> | <p>CATHOLIC EDUCATION</p> <p>Strategic planning with stakeholders on revitalising and revising the future of Catholic education.</p> |

3. THE VISION INSPIRING THIS PROPOSAL

As stated above, the vision is focused on the family; on a quality of engagement that will incline parents to identify more deeply with the faith community. The church seeks to connect with the family in its life, with the hope that families in turn will be encouraged to engage with the life of the church. Through the connection built between church and family, it is hoped that family members will encounter the person of Jesus, his presence and his call, in their experience of the sacraments.

Our hope is that this vision will be realised in a continuum of relationship between the parish and the family. The relationship initiated around Baptism will be attended to beyond the celebration, eventually leading into First Communion and then into Confirmation. The sacraments will then be experienced as highpoints in an ongoing encounter rather than isolated events.

This vision, focused as it is on the family, is informed by the following reflection;

For many people involved in ministry the family sacraments represent a dilemma. While the great majority of Catholic parents present their children for the sacraments, neither they nor the children are regular church goers. There is a deep unease about the 'automatic reception' nature of the current approach, which involves the children automatically receiving the sacraments once they reach a certain age. At the same time many pastoral people would be uneasy about making regular church practice a condition for receiving the sacraments. They are caught in the tension between an 'expect' approach which may set the bar too high, and the current 'include' approach which has the bar too low. This report on the family sacraments envisions a middle way.

We recognise many different kinds of family, and many different family experiences. Some families are broken by addictions or violence; some are heavily materialistic; some are church going; some are none of these. The latter may be the largest group in our communities - families that are highly functional, values-driven and non-church going. We recognise that most parents, whatever their family circumstances, do their best to provide a loving environment for their children to grow up in. The experience of this love is foundational for any subsequent religious message to the children about a loving God. In this regard the church and parents are profoundly complementary, irrespective of the level of engagement the parents have with church.

The family was always the main influencer in the lives of children. In the past the cultural strength of the church enabled it to co-opt that family influence for the church's project of initiating the children into regular church membership. This relationship with the families has changed dramatically. While a minority of families continue to identify with the church's project of initiation, the majority do not. This has led to an enormous shift in religious

practice over the last number of decades. The majority of parents who are responsible, loving and values-driven have distanced themselves from regular contact with the church. But not entirely. As noted, a majority of these parents still offer their children for the family sacraments. They see the sacraments as family moments within a generational religious tradition. They identify with some of the values of that tradition, such as Jesus' 'golden rule', but not with the sacraments as initiation into regular church practice.

How as a church ought we to respond to this complex reality? The Vatican recently issued a preparatory document towards the 2023 Synod¹. The document offers a scriptural vision for an approach to mission that speaks strongly to this situation, one that calls us to stay with the mass of families rather than withdraw from them. It speaks of three key players in the work of evangelisation - Jesus, the apostles and the crowd;

'The work of evangelisation and the message of salvation would not be comprehensible without Jesus' constant openness to the widest possible audience, which the Gospels refer to as the *crowd*... The proclamation of the Gospel is not addressed only to an enlightened or chosen few... Some follow Jesus more explicitly, experiencing the fidelity of discipleship, while others are invited to return to their ordinary lives...' (18-19)

The point that is being offered here is that intentional discipleship is not the only goal of Jesus' mission. The main goal is that people would encounter the person of Jesus Christ and be transformed by the good news of God's love. This is especially so for those who are wounded.

'The common trait is that faith always emerges as a valuing of people: their plea is heard, their difficulty is helped, their availability is appreciated, their dignity is confirmed by God's gaze and restored to the community's recognition.' (17)

And the role of the apostles?

'Thanks to the gift of the Spirit of the Risen Lord, they are to guard the place of Jesus, without replacing him: not to put filters on his presence, but to make it easy to encounter him.' (19)

That missionary spirit, that feel for 'the crowd', is at the heart of this approach to the sacraments. Rather than viewing the sacraments as moments of contest between church and family meanings it sees them as moments of mutual encounter. It reaches out to families, engages with their parenting project, and brings the good news of the gospel as gift to that project.

1. <https://www.synod.va/en/documents/versione-desktop-del-documento-preparatorio.html>

The approach to the sacraments here honours the foundational love of the parents, sometimes in the midst of very difficult circumstances. It honours their identification, such as it is, with their faith tradition. Here it recognises, for the great crowd of families, that there already has been some encounter with Jesus. It sees the family sacraments as privileged moments to build on this encounter. That is at the heart of an 'expect and include' mind set.

The mind set change entailed in this for modern day apostles is that in the first instance, the family is not there for the church project, but the church is there for the family project. It seeks through the good news of the gospel to nourish and deepen the family project. The family sacraments, given their popular place already in the lives of families, offer promising opportunities for a mutually enriching encounter between church and families. It is not unreasonable to hope that a church mission that relates to families will itself become attractive to families. It is not unreasonable to hope that the family sacraments offered in that spirit become for the families memorable steps in a lifelong journey towards the God of Jesus and the community of his followers.

4. THE ROLE OF PARENTS IN THE NEW APPROACH

Vatican Two uses three phrases to describe the family.² The first two are ‘the school of human enrichment’ and ‘the school of social virtue’. The family is the school where one learns to be a human being. Parents’ role ‘as primarily and principally responsible’ for their children’s education’ is of such importance that it is ‘almost impossible to provide an adequate substitute’.

This is echoed by Pope Francis in *Amoris Laetitia*.³ He devotes a whole chapter to applying Paul’s ‘Love is patient, kind...’ passage to family. He talks about families using the three words ‘please’, ‘thanks’ and ‘sorry’. This is a picture of a ‘school’ where people learn to be at their best as people. He includes the different generations in the picture he paints.

He speaks of how parents’ self-giving in living for their children reflects God’s own self-emptying, the heart of Christianity. The core activity of family life echoes the core activity of God. We could add that activities at the heart of family – such as care and belonging and forgiveness – echo the activities of Jesus at the heart of the gospel. In this sense, family life ‘earths’ the gospel.

All this links strongly with what the SIG heard from parents. Their strong desire is that their children flower as persons; that they live from a sense of the values that matter; that they are other-centred in the spirit of Jesus’ golden rule.

In its third phrase Vatican Two describes the family as ‘the domestic church, or ‘the domestic sanctuary of the church’. The Christian family is *the* ‘basic Christian community’ (perhaps a more appealing phrase). It is the basic place where ‘church’ is happening. Core activities of church, such as welcome and care, are core activities of the family as well as core activities of the gospel.

In *Amoris Laetitia*, Francis elaborates on this. He speaks of the family being ‘centred on Christ’ and of parents shaping a ‘God-enlightened space in which to experience the hidden presence of the risen Lord’. He speaks of the special place of family prayer, as well as of popular religious practices, culminating in sharing in the Eucharist. He sees the heart of it in parents’ own trusting and seeking God and cherishing prayer.

He speaks of a spirituality of care pervading family life, of people seeing Christ in each other, and of this spirituality reaching out beyond the family circle. Francis speaks of parents passing on the faith, with a strong sense that this is about practices, where for instance ‘moments of family prayer can be more powerful for evangelisation than any catechism class or sermon’.

² Vatican II. The Church in the Modern World, 52; Catholic Education, 3; The Church, 11; The Laity, 11.

³ References to *Amoris Laetitia*, 89ff, 133, 166, 287-288, 317-318, 321-324. Reference to John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, 26.

Again this echoes with what the SIG heard, of many parents' desire to initiate their children into the prayers and religious practices they themselves learned, even if for many this does not include sharing in the Eucharist.

While 'church' is thus a word for family, 'family' is also a word for church; as when John Paul II calls the parish 'a familial and welcoming home'. There is a sense here of 'two-way traffic', of mutual enrichment. In this context, the role the church hopes the family grows into depends on the church's own affirming of the family and the depth of meaning in how it lives – an affirmation which may invite the family in turn to interest itself in 'church' as a dimension of its own mystery.

The parents the SIG listened to wanted their children to have the sacraments, so that the children could themselves come to make their own choice. To deny them the sacraments would be to deny them that possibility. The parish can be part of this process as it seeks to make the experience of the sacraments the experience of a 'God-enlightened space' and a positive foundation for later life-decisions.

This vision of Vatican Two and Pope Francis captures what the church 'expects' of families, in the sense of what it most deeply hopes for them. When it comes to relating with families around the sacraments, it is guided by the image of 'two-way traffic'. On the one hand, it humbly receives from the family the call and challenge to be a 'familial and welcoming home' and to express this spirit in all its practices. On the other hand, it invites the family to find in Jesus and the gospel an affirmation of and the meaning of all its striving.

It invites the family to find this particularly in the home itself and in family activities such as prayer together, blessing with holy water, visiting the church and lighting a candle, and other familiar religious practices through the seasons of the year, such as in Lent and in November. It looks for practical ways to give parents a sense of confidence and competence in accompanying their children on the path of faith.

In this context, the parish hopes that families will be attracted by the quality of the parish's own outreach around the sacraments, to participate generously, to pray with their child, to engage in faith conversations together, to enjoy the gatherings with other families and to help practically with the preparations and the celebration of the sacrament. Through all this, the parish hopes that many families will come to experience the inner meaning of the whole process in a life-giving and life-affirming encounter with Jesus Christ, God's very life in our hearts.

5. THE ROLE OF THE PARISH IN THE NEW APPROACH

In *The Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis offers us an inspiring and challenging picture of the parish;

‘The parish, if it proves capable of self-renewal and constant adaptivity, continues to be the Church living in the midst of the homes of her sons and daughters. This presumes that it really is in contact with the homes and the lives of its people, and does not become a useless structure out of touch with people or a self-absorbed cluster made up of a chosen few. The parish is the presence of the Church in a given territory, an environment for hearing God’s word, for growth in the Christian life, for dialogue, proclamation, charitable outreach, worship and celebration.’ (28)

This picture of the church really present in people’s lives needs to be built up again today. In the past, families were aware of the parish and its role in their lives. Today that is less and less the case. Local communities are mostly made up of people who have been baptised, but who are largely disengaged from the life of the faith community.

Tomorrow’s parish is called to a missionary outreach in order to establish contact with and engage with families. We are called to re-imagine ourselves in missionary mode – what Francis calls ‘pastoral ministry in a missionary key.’ (33)

The family sacraments (Baptism and Confirmation, First Reconciliation and First Communion) are an instance of this. The inherited way of approaching these sacraments reflects a time when families were engaged, when church was a presence in their lives. But changed times call us to a new approach, where the parish approaches these sacraments in a missionary key.

A New Configuration

Our experience since early 2020 has opened up vistas on what a new practice might look like. The Archbishop had just announced a new direction which would pivot on parishes engaging with parents as they assumed responsibility for the celebration of all these sacraments. Covid led parishes into actually doing that, as they were required to plan for small-scale ceremonies, often when schools were closed. Meanwhile the work of the Sacraments Implementation Group generated online resources that were found to engage effectively with a wide range of families. Through all this, we have found ourselves ‘acting ourselves into a new way of thinking’.

In this new way, we have a new configuration of school and parish where (a) the school engages mainly with the children, along with some outreach to the home and (b) the parish engages mainly with the parents and families, and with the children in that context.

Critically, this new partnership includes a new style of engaging with parents, one that reflects Pope Francis’ missionary key. It acknowledges that parents are not an homogenous group. Some are already engaged with church; others are not interested; but the majority

perhaps could be described as not engaged but open. The appendices on listening to parents reflect this (appendices E,F).

The new style of engaging with parents could be described by the image of a *bridge* between parish and parents where there is two-way traffic. In one direction, the parish interests itself in the lives of its families, in a spirit of appreciation and affirmation. In the other direction, as it connects with the family in its life, the parish hopes that families in turn will be encouraged to interest themselves in the church in its life.

This puts into practice Pope Francis' vision of the church accompanying people. 'Our personal experience of being accompanied and assisted, and of openness to those who accompany us, will teach us to be patient and compassionate with others, and to find the right way to gain their trust, their openness and their readiness to grow.' (173)

This accompanying is characterised by an inclusive spirit. As St Paul described his own ministry, 'I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some' (I Cor 9:22). While the gospel message is constant, his approach varies. He accommodates himself to the world of his audience so that the message can become accessible and life-giving and so that nobody is left outside.

In this spirit, the parish interests itself in all its families, not just those who might already be interested in the parish. In its sacramental practice, it seeks imaginative ways of finding points of connection with this larger constituency.

Moments of Encounter in the Sacramental Year

This role of the parish unfolds through a number of moments of encounter between parish and family. The diocese will have a significant role in helping parishes gradually to build capacity for managing these moments.

REGISTRATION

Families register with the parish for all four sacraments. Practically, this enables direct parish-parent communication and encounter. In the long run, it makes for a situation where parents clearly see the sacraments as events within the life of the parish community (where previously they might have identified them largely with the school). Parish and school work together in the transition to this new arrangement.

PREPARATION

Alongside the child's religious education for the sacraments in the school, there is a parish-based programme of engagement with families, which strives to build a bridge between family life and the sacrament.

The experience of new initiatives during Covid points to a blended form of engagement in future. On the one hand, there are in-person encounters with families – notably, start-of-year gatherings, communal liturgies (such as 'Do This in Memory'), occasional rituals (such as the Service of Light). On the other hand, there are online encounters, using high-quality video resources, to animate faith conversations at home.

Such a blend sees the parish adapting to the world of the family. On the one hand, parents will readily come to information meetings and to rituals where their children are involved. On the other, they will engage with online activities from the warmth of their home, where they would be reluctant to come to 'meetings' in the parish.

In the case of non-Catholic schools, possibilities are emerging for using high quality resources for online instruction of children, along with in person classes with catechists.

CELEBRATION

The parish takes responsibility for organising the celebration of the sacraments. It does this in the form of small-scale liturgies, involving small numbers of families. In doing this, it builds on the best practice identified during Covid sacraments. In that Covid experience, parishes were delighted to discover how intimately the small-scale liturgies touched parents hearts, in a way that the familiar large-scale events have not. Again, the parish takes on this responsibility in dialogue with and with the support of the school.

Along with all this, the diocese is called to promote parish-family communication and encounter *in between* the sacraments of Baptism, First Reconciliation and Communion, and Confirmation. This seeks to build on the relationships forged, so that sacraments are moments in an ongoing relationship rather than stand-alone events.

Building Parish Capacity / Parish Teams

The diocese is realistic in its appreciation of how parishes vary in their capacity to implement this new approach. But already, indications are emerging as to what future capacity will look like, particularly in the context of there being lessening numbers of people in parish ministries and of there being less resources for funding paid pastoral workers.

These indications are about a peer-based form of sacramental ministry. It begins from the bottom up. As parents experience the welcome of a family-centred approach and its interest in their lives, this will generate a willingness to be involved, first in the organisation of sacraments for their own children, but also for some of them in being part of a sacramental team reaching out to other parents.

For the parish, this will not be daunting in the way that inviting parents to acquire a theological or catechetical competence might be. The competences needed here are primarily relational rather than theological, where parents speak to one another from a shared experience, where 'deep calls to deep' in a warm and reassuring way that reflects Pope Francis' vision of accompaniment.

But the role of diocese here is critical. Building this new approach is gradual, incremental, not an overnight achievement. A steady movement forward will be enabled by the generation of resources centrally in the diocese and by the provision of appropriately qualified and skilled personnel, central and regional, to accompany local efforts.

6. THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL IN THE NEW APPROACH

THE ROLE OF THE CATHOLIC PRIMARY SCHOOL AND THE BOARD OF MANAGEMENT AS FAITH PARTNER WITH THE PARISH IN THE PREPARATION OF CHILDREN FOR THE SACRAMENTS

'An immensely valuable component of the Catholic school is the partnership between family, parish and school. This is not something that happens without effort. There is a need for Catholic schools to work continuously at connecting strongly with local parish/parishes – opening up what the school can give to the faith community – and what it can receive from the faith community. The Covid-19 pandemic made us realise that we are more fragile and dependent on each other. Seek to revitalise the connections locally between home, school and parish, such that the school can be a support to families in connecting with parish, and to parishes connecting with families.

.....The Catholic school will become fully engaged in its role of supporting young people and their families when they decide in favour of sacramental participation in the life of the Church. First Holy Communion and Confirmation cannot be a one day 'school event' organised in a local church. Young people and their families should understand that the young person is registering for initiation into the life of the parish community, deepening their life as a Christian, committing to becoming step by step an engaged disciple of Jesus and an active member of the Church, supported on this journey by the school.' (Address of Archbishop Dermot Farrell to the CPSMA Annual Conference, 13th May 2021).

The reason we are deeply involved in Catholic schools is to provide parents who wish to educate their children with a school whose ethos is Catholic. (Archbishop Dermot Farrell at Mass for the APTCS, 14th October 2021).

Introduction: Changes between the roles of Parish and School

Since 2019, the Sacraments Implementation Group (SIG) has worked to support the diocesan decision to revise the preparation and celebration for the sacraments across the Archdiocese of Dublin.

- (a) In the past, the school **prepared** the children for the sacraments and **organised** the celebration in the parish.
- (b) From now, on schools will still **prepare** the children for the sacraments and the parish will **organise** all aspects of the celebration as follows:
 - Registration of the child
 - Establishment of parish sacramental teams
 - Parents' catechesis
 - Celebration of the Liturgy: Enrolment for Sacraments, Sacrament of Reconciliation, Mass for celebration for Holy Communion, Confirmation Liturgy.

Home/School/Parish Partnership

The *Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland* (2015, abbreviated as CPPRECI) is devised on the basis of partnership between home, school and parish.⁴ The Curriculum quotes *Share the Good News (SGN): National Directory for Catechesis in Ireland*. SGN 'draws on a pastoral model: a vision of the parish community as a catechetical community; recognition of the ongoing need for the spiritual care of all educators, parent/s guardians, teachers, parish ministers; and greater sharing of ideas, responsibilities and resources at diocesan and pastoral levels' (SGN 100).⁵ The pastoral model describes the 'differing, connected roles' of parish, home, and school. The roles defined are:

- **The family:** Parents/guardians are the primary educators of their children in faith. In the home, they can introduce young people to the lived reality of the faith through prayer, moral formation, everyday expressions of love and reconciliation, good example and simple sharing of the faith journey. They also contribute appropriately to their children's formal instruction in and initiation into the faith by participating in parish-based catechesis (SGN 91-8), Catholic schools build upon this foundation and work collaboratively with parents/guardians in the Religious Education of their children.⁶
- **The parish** is where the child learns the meaning of worship, encounters Christ in the sacraments and shares in the practical outreach of the Christian community in mission to the world. Parish-based catechetical programmes can support family catechesis, school-based sacramental preparation, liturgical formation, and provide many different opportunities for apostolic action and personal spiritual growth.
- **The school:** Religious education in the Catholic primary school consists of two distinct but complementary dimensions, namely an educational dimension and a faith formation dimension (SGN 38, 39, 99-100). The first dimension, most commonly referred to as curriculum religion, focuses on a form of Religious education, which focuses on the teachings, and values of the Catholic Church. It enables children to learn skills of spiritual, moral and religious literacy, which informs their minds and enhances their understanding of Christian faith, enabling them to develop an informed, mature response to God's call to relationship. The *Religious Education* outcomes in this curriculum reflect this first dimension. The second dimension, faith formation, forms children's characters in the virtues and values of Jesus; supports their faith development, and helps them to experience what it means to be a member of a church community called to witness to Jesus in service of others (SGN 39, 100). In the context of the Catholic school, Religious Education is part of and completed by other forms of ministry of the word (catechesis, liturgical celebration,

⁴ CPPRECI p. 9

⁵ Ibid., p. 13

⁶ It is envisaged that 'Guidelines for Religious education in the Home and Parish' will complement this curriculum. p. 13 (quoted as foot note 6 in the CPPRECI)

social justice, activities etc.). The faith formation goals in the curriculum reflect this second dimension. However, the school as a whole has many opportunities to foster faith formation.⁷

The Catholic Ethos

The Board of Management maintains the ethos of the Catholic Primary School through the provision of training for all members of the school community especially new members.⁸ The Catholic ethos reflects daily in the lived experience of Gospel values. The teachers teach Religious Education from the *Grow in Love/I nGrá Dé* programme according to the norms and standards of the *Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland* (CPPRECI) (2015).

The Catechism of the Catholic Church

All classes follow the four strands of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*; Christian Faith, Sacred Scripture, Liturgy and Sacraments, and Christian Morality. These strands also inform the parish in its accompanying of parents

Religious Education

- To arrange the school timetable to allow for the teaching of religious education during the school day at specific periods.
- To publish a religious education policy for the school in collaboration with the family and parish.

The *Grow in Love/I nGrá Dé* Religious Education programme

- To uphold the Catholic Ethos in relation to religious education, sacramental celebration and other times of the Liturgical year, including Catholic Schools Week, Trócaire Lenten Campaign, etc
- In teaching the *Grow in Love/I nGrá Dé* religious education programme, teachers follow the Monthly Memo provided by the Education Secretariat. Teachers will also receive in-service to update their skills and knowledge of CPPRECI and the *Grow in Love/I nGrá Dé* programme in accordance with the signs of the times
- To evaluate the work of religious education at staff meetings and Board of Management meetings at the beginning and end of the school year

Sacramental Preparation/ Partnership

- Teachers teach and prepare the children for the reception of the Sacraments of Reconciliation, Eucharist and Confirmation. They witness and encourage a lived relationship with Jesus Christ as noted in the “Schedule” of Catholic schools⁹

⁷ CPPRECI p. 13-14

⁸ ‘Understanding and Living the Ethos in a Catholic Primary School’ prescribed in the Education Act, 1998

⁹ Schedule of a Catholic School-CPSMA

- Preparation for the sacraments in school begins with Junior Infants and continues through the spiral curriculum to Sixth Class. Preparation for the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist and Confirmation are given deeper preparation in First and Second Classes and Fifth and Sixth Classes. The school supports the parents and the parish on this faith journey
- Evaluation of annual sacramental celebrations by family, school and parish as partners is essential.

Prayer Environment

Display appropriate prayer spaces throughout the school building to contain statues, Crucifixes, art work etc in tune with the Liturgical Year.

Collaboration with Parish/ Archdiocese

- Post relevant parish events on the school website including times of parish Masses
- School supports parish initiatives and Diocesan initiatives (from the Education Secretariat, the Department of Mission and Ministry) such as prayer moments, liturgies and parish catechesis. This includes liturgical music and prayers introduced through the *Grow in Love/ InGrá Dé* programme and *Laudate*
- Support Diocesan initiatives such as the primary Diocesan Advisors' visits. After each school visit, staff discuss and implement the recommendations offered.

Prayer/Partnership

- Promote daily school prayer moments which can be modelled in home and parish
- Facilitate school retreats and faith support for school communities
- Organise regular whole school prayer assemblies to celebrate significant events during the Liturgical year

Faith Formation/ Partnership

The faith journey of each child is unique and special. The family, school and parish fosters the child's spiritual development in his/her relationship with Jesus Christ. Partners:

- Build bridges/relationships with the pupils/parish to plant seeds of faith which nurture the faith community and encourage active participation in the parish mission
- Organise school activities/projects/events that give lived expression to a child's faith
- Celebrate Catholic School Week and Christian Unity Week to acknowledge inclusion and diversity
- Initiate dialogue, study and action on Archbishop Dermot Farrell's *Pastoral Letter on the Season of Creation 2021* to begin to develop an integral ecology
- Ensure staff meetings and Board of Management meetings begin with a prayer.
- Include Catholic Ethos on every Board of Management meeting
- Celebrate annually the school name, patron, founder/foundress and school motto.

'Mol an óige agus tiocfaidh sí'

7. THE ROLE OF THE ARCHDIOCESE IN THE NEW APPROACH

It is the policy of the Archdiocese which frames, within the teaching of the Church and Canon Law, the approach to the celebration of the sacraments. It therefore creates the context within which parishes and schools develop and implement their respective roles in supporting families, as well as in explaining the meaning and implications of presenting children for the sacraments. Clear statements of policy, such as the 2012 document on First Holy Communion, provide guidance and assurance. As we enter a new phase in the relationship between parishes and schools, the updating of statements of diocesan policy will be an important resource.

In addition to implementing the policy of the Archbishop in respect of norms for the celebration of the sacraments, the diocese also provides guidance, support and resources. Through the Council of Priests, and the structure of pastoral areas and deaneries, the diocese animates the pastoral resources of the diocese and creates opportunities for discussion, feedback and advice to inform the continuing review of diocesan policy. Arising from the work of the SIG, a number of key elements of the role of the Archdiocese are suggested:

Pastoral Vision

The sacraments of initiation form a central element of the mission and ministry of the Archdiocese. Beyond the specifics of diocesan policy at any given time, it is appropriate that the approach to the sacraments should form a centrepiece of pastoral renewal. In particular, a vision that sees the continuity between the sacraments of initiation expressed in an ongoing relationship between families and the community of faith, rather than as isolated events, should ground our planning and practice. Such a vision would reflect the need to assist families to express their sense of the presence of God in their lives through engagement with the community of faith, without reducing it to a headcount of church attendance.

Clarity of Policy

Even with extensive consultation and discussion, the experience of the SIG was that there is a clear need for clarity about what is expected of parishes and schools as a new approach takes shape. It is desirable that communication from the diocesan centre should issue to both parishes and schools whenever issues relating to preparation and celebration of the sacraments are being addressed.

Clarity of Expectations

In addition to the broad policy, it is helpful for the Archdiocese to be clear in specifying the steps which are expected to be taken by parishes and schools to fulfil their roles within the policy. This is already the practice within the Education Secretariat in respect of schools. It is clear that parishes appreciate receiving clear and specific guidance on the implementation of their role, even where this cannot be met in every respect. An appropriate immediate focus might be the arrangements in respect of the sacraments to be celebrated in 2022, on the lines which the SIG are recommending in this report.

Training

The responsibility of parishes in respect of the sacraments of initiation requires the availability of personnel to assist in the organisation of preparation and of celebrations. The more extensive the programme of accompaniment of families, the greater the need for trained volunteers. The diocese currently provides training for baptism teams. An expanded training programme could be a focus for cooperation and coordination across parishes and deaneries. A further option would be to introduce the instituted ministry of catechist to provide a focus for such programmes. The key role of parish secretaries in supporting parish programmes and engaging with families points to the desirability of specific training for them.

Resources

The Covid experience demonstrated the potential of online technology and of high quality materials to enrich the engagement with parents and families. The production of such materials and training in their deployment, including technology issues, is most effectively organised by the diocese (without constraining the development of tailored material at parish level whenever possible).

Capacity

There is considerable variation in the capacity of parishes to offer programmes in support of preparation for the sacraments, not least in the application of technology. While this can be addressed through cooperation within groupings and deaneries, there is scope to provide access to resources at diocesan level, such as to online registration and materials.

Evaluation

The systematic review of the experience of parishes, schools and parents is a valuable resource for pastoral practice. It informs the delivery of programmes, sometimes by challenging the conventional wisdom. This is a function that is most effectively planned and overseen at diocesan level, while engaging those directly involved in delivery.

Deliberation

Changing patterns and expectations among communities and families require reflection and discernment in shaping pastoral policy and practice. This includes issues which have been the subject of ongoing debate, such as the sequence of First Reconciliation and First Holy Communion, and the age of Confirmation. The Archdiocese can foster a culture of critical reflection and feedback to inform such consideration.

Continuity

The follow on from the work of the SIG and the parishes it sought to support in adapting to new ways of engaging with families and schools, should facilitate continued progress towards the goals of diocesan policy. While primary responsibility will rest with the diocesan offices and parish and school personnel, there is merit in mechanisms such as the SIG to provide advice, expertise and feedback.

APPENDICES

*The appendices that follow present the experience of the Sacraments Implementation Group since it began its work in February 2020. Central to the experience has been its **listening** – to parents, to parish personnel, to school personnel. The listening exercises, reflection on what was heard, and the pilot resources generated by way of response, are what has brought the SIG to its vision and recommendations.*

APPENDIX A. THE EXPERIENCE OF THE SACRAMENTS IMPLEMENTATION GROUP

This note sets out the background to the establishment of the SIG, how we went about our work, especially in response to the Covid crisis, and summarises the learning from our experience that may be relevant to the next stages in the project.

First, a fundamental issue that faces parishes is how to relate to communities that, for the most part, are nominally Catholic, but substantially disengaged from the practice of the faith. In preparation for the sacraments in the past home, school and parish were aligned in belief and practice: religious education in schools built on a home life that itself transmitted a faith to children that was expressed in regular practice. Now, with very low levels of practice, the school-based programmes are much less reflective of family life, while the connection of families to parish has been greatly attenuated.

Parishes – and the diocese – are challenged to strike a balance between encouraging presentation of children for the sacraments only where there is a reasonable expectation that this expresses a significant faith commitment - what is 'expected' of families - and the wish to 'include' children from as broad a range of families as show a desire for the sacraments. This tension between the 'expect' and 'include' approaches to ministry has profound implications for pastoral strategy.

The SIG approach to accompaniment of families embraces both approaches, since our view is that accompaniment of families can provide a basis for faith formation. The understanding and response to the 'expect/include' challenge is, we believe, a critical issue in how we approach these sacraments in the future.

Second, parishes have shown some creativity but also wide variation in capacity, in preparation for the sacraments. This points to the need for Diocesan support to increase the effectiveness of parishes with limited local capacity.

Third, a partnership between parishes and schools - both have critical contributions to make - that is based on clarity of roles in preparation for the sacraments provides the optimum basis for supporting families to grow in faith.

Finally, and as a significant source of hope, families have in many cases a strong sense of the sacred and an openness to the Church's message, despite obvious indications of disengagement and disaffection.

Background to the Review of Preparation for the Sacraments

The Sacraments Implementation Group (SIG) was established at the end of 2019 to progress proposals for a changed approach to preparation and celebration of the sacraments of Baptism, First Reconciliation, First Communion and Confirmation which was recommended to the Archbishop by the Council of Priests, following an extensive process of review and consultation.

The initiative arose from reflection on how best to respond to the challenge presented by the declining participation of families in the life of the Church, despite largely unchanged numbers of children being presented for the sacraments. This indicates a significant disconnect between the Church's understanding of the meaning of the sacraments of initiation and the popular cultural engagement with them. The challenge was interpreted as being how best to hand on the faith, rather than simply changing the practical arrangements for preparation for sacraments. The review was based on continued appreciation and support for the invaluable role played by Catholic schools in the religious education of children, including in preparation for the sacraments, while focusing on the evangelisation of young parents and their deeper involvement in the preparation of children for the sacraments.

Sacraments Review Group 2018

A Group established by the Council of Priests in September 2018 undertook an extensive survey of teachers, parents and parish personnel from across the diocese to identify what was considered to work well in the current system and what improvements could be made in the way the sacraments are prepared and celebrated. Over 1800 responses were received, with 44% coming from parents and grandparents. The findings of the survey were discussed in three major assemblies held around the diocese which reviewed the survey results and validated the need for change on a planned, gradual and consistent basis.

The survey responses indicated overwhelming support for the view that it was the responsibility of parents to pass on the faith to their children. A large majority of parents responded that celebration of the sacraments enriched their faith and that of their children, while parishes and schools were substantially less convinced that this was the case (70% v 50%). The reported experience of parents of the celebration of the sacraments was on average twice as positive as that of parish personnel (60-70% v 26-37%), while schools were in between (40-47%). Parental and parish experience of Baptism was significantly more positive (80% v 50%).

The divergence between parish and parental experience suggests that parishes tend to focus on the hope of long-term participation in the life of the Church, while schools and parents focus mainly on the sacraments as important, but stand-alone events in themselves.

The survey and subsequent discussion confirmed a tension between the view that the Church should offer an inclusive approach, welcoming families which request the sacraments even if they see them more as family celebrations than as moments of initiation into the Christian community, and the view that the Church should expect more of parents in respect of adherence to the faith and desire for participation in the community of faith.

There was, however, overwhelming support across all respondents for substantial change through transferring responsibility for preparation for celebration of the sacraments – as opposed to religious education on the sacraments – from school to parish. There was also significant support for raising the age of Confirmation.

The Council of Priests approved the recommendation of the Group that a new approach should be developed which adjusted the emphasis from just teachers engaging with children to also parishes engaging with parents. This engagement should combine both the ‘Expect’ approach – which focuses on the desire that parents should be intentional in seeking the sacraments for their children as part of an active participation in the life of the parish, and the ‘Include’ approach - which engages with people where they are and builds towards discipleship on that basis. This ‘both/and’ would aim to avoid the twin risks of elitism and laxity.

Establishment of the SIG 2019

In response to the recommendation from the Council of Priests, the Archbishop established the SIG at the end of 2019 to prepare a gradual transition to a situation where parishes would assume responsibility for the preparation for celebration of all the Sacraments of Initiation. The SIG adopted a change management approach to its mandate, which envisaged extensive consultation, clarification of the steps involved in effecting the planned transition, providing support for those undertaking new roles and responsibilities, and developing a broad base of support across the Diocese for implementation of the changes on a consistent basis.

The SIG undertook in-depth interviews with a selection of young parents whose children had recently received the sacraments or were preparing for them (see appendices E,F). These confirmed the broad perspective revealed by the earlier survey: that the sacraments are viewed as immensely important family celebrations that connect children to a tradition that is valued, but they are not primarily seen in terms of active participation in the Church. Nonetheless, the conversations revealed in many cases a strong sense of the sacred experienced in the life of the family and appreciation of the formative influence of the Church on values which they respect.

Along with its conversations with parents, the SIG also looked beyond Ireland to listen to how others – in California, in Liverpool and in Australia – were approaching preparation for the sacraments. The SIG concluded that the new approach to the sacraments should be grounded in a process of accompaniment of families, encouraging them to discern the presence of God in their lives, and to recognise the continuity of that experience with the

life of the faith community to which the sacraments would connect them. The SIG saw preparation for celebration of the sacraments as a bridge between families and the Church which could be crossed in both directions.

The SIG perceived that there was some confusion about the intended impact of the diocesan policy on celebration of the sacraments of initiation, with some apprehension that schools would no longer have a central role in preparation for the sacraments. The clear intent is that parishes would reflect their responsibility for celebrating the sacraments and for engaging families in the community of faith by a direct relationship with families, not least in preparation for the ceremonies themselves. The roles of parish and school in support of families are distinct and complementary, and point to the need for the clarity produced by an active partnership.

Impact of COVID-19

Planned further engagement with parish and school personnel was abandoned at the onset of the COVID-19 crisis. Instead, the SIG focused on providing support to parishes for the celebration of the sacraments, to the extent that was permitted within public health guidelines. Ironically, the crisis required the celebration of the sacraments to be organised by parishes, in many cases over Summer 2020 when schools were closed. Instead of a planned approach as had been envisaged over a period of years, parishes responded with great energy and ingenuity to the pastoral challenge of organising the celebrations, in many cases without the assistance of schools.

The SIG invited feedback from parishes on their experience of this new approach developed in time of crisis (see appendix C). This feedback indicated considerable satisfaction with the experience of low-key, informal ceremonies with generally limited numbers in attendance. Parents reported appreciation of the calm and prayerful atmosphere, as well as significant relief that the celebrations could take place. In many parishes parents of children for the sacraments themselves helped with the logistical arrangements, sometimes enabling creative measures to link family members who could not physically be present with the celebration. The feedback indicated that it had proved impossible, for the most part, to have significant preparatory engagement with families, but the programmes which had begun in the schools before lockdown had provided an invaluable basis for the celebrations. Feedback from school principals confirmed this broadly positive experience (see appendix D).

The Work of SIG in 2021

When it became clear that the same broad restrictions were likely to apply in 2021, the SIG focused its attention on practical measures to support parishes in preparing for the celebration of the sacraments under restrictive conditions, while having lasting benefit beyond the Covid crisis.

- Webinars, involving pastoral personnel from the diocese, were organised and support provided on how to register children for the sacraments directly with the

parish, thus providing a practical means of communicating with families, while underlining the fact that the celebration of the sacraments is primarily a parish rather than a school responsibility.

- Recognising that in person meetings with parents would not be possible, the SIG developed video resources for use by parish volunteers to engage with families of children preparing for Confirmation, as the Archbishop indicated that this would be the Diocesan priority.
- The videos were created with the specific objective of stimulating family conversations about the faith significance of the key moment in family life which Confirmation represents, thus addressing directly the 'expect/include' challenge.
- Webinar training for volunteers in the use of these video resources was delivered by SIG members. This included the assistance of diocesan staff around the use of zoom technology. The training had a 'pastoral conversation' style that encouraged dialogue and feedback.
- The deployment of the training and video resources was complicated by uncertainty about the easing of public health restrictions on the celebration of liturgies.
- A more limited resource was created to support parishes preparing for celebrations of First Holy Communion.

The SIG recognised that many parishes had already initiated programmes of accompaniment of families through online engagement with them. The resources the SIG developed were intended to supplement rather than displace such parish initiative.

The SIG review of the experience of celebration of the sacraments over the past 18 months confirmed the diversity of capacity and approach across the Diocesan family, highlighting the need for flexibility in responding to particular needs, such as those of special national schools and Gaelscoileanna, as well as the needs of families whose children are not enrolled in Catholic schools.

By the end of Summer 2021, the SIG reached the conclusion that it had come to the end of the role which it could play in supporting the implementation of diocesan policy on the sacraments of initiation. The Covid crisis drove a rapid and widespread reconfiguration of the roles of parishes and schools, the type of resources and training required had been established, and the capacity of parishes to fulfil their mission in respect of outreach to families was seen to form part of the wider question of pastoral renewal for which the Archbishop had established the Task Force *Building Hope*.

Reflections on our Work

1. The celebration of the sacraments of First Holy Communion and Confirmation is highly valued by families as an expression of their sense of the sacred, of their hopes for their children, and of their appreciation for the tradition, even if they are not church-goers. Accompanying families in their journey of preparation for the

sacraments creates privileged opportunities for encounter with Jesus, appreciation of a faith identity and connection to a community of faith.

2. Effective accompaniment expresses the mission of the Church both to include all who are open to the witness of the faith community, and to explain what is expected of the followers of Jesus. Recognition by families of the value of belonging to a community of faith requires that community to recognise what is of value in the lives of families. Listening to families, their hopes and experiences, was central to the formulation by the SIG of its whole approach. Respectful listening and response is the key in which mission and outreach can and should be developed.
3. The accompaniment of families ideally commences in preparation for Baptism, so that there is a relationship with the parish before children commence the school RE programme.
4. The process of accompaniment creates opportunities for engaging lay faithful, especially young parents, in new forms of ministry which expand parish capacity for mission.
5. Targeted investment will be needed to build and deepen that capacity, so that parish mission can move from a model of accompaniment to one of adult faith formation.
6. New technology and the generation of high quality content enables connections to be made with families in their own space and has great potential beyond the challenge of Covid restrictions.
7. The SIG was established to prepare and implement a multi-annual programme of reformulating the partnership between parish, school and family. The Covid crisis required the immediate adoption of radically changed approaches to celebration of the sacraments. The SIG experience shows parishes can adapt creatively and that resources can be developed centrally to resource and support local initiatives.
8. The implementation of a change programme such as that involved in the sacraments policy is best organised, directed and supported by a combination of clear leadership from the Archbishop, mobilisation of change champions at deanery levels, with appropriate support from the diocesan centre, and a network approach which enables experience and good practice to be shared across parish communities.
9. Our experience offers hope in a strategy which seeks to develop the capacity of parishes to engage in fruitful partnership with Catholic schools in offering families a theological vision that addresses the challenges - spiritual, social, cultural and ecological - that will frame the lives of our children.

The members of the SIG came from a variety of backgrounds and held different perspectives on our terms of reference. The adoption of a change management framework gave us an initial way of identifying and addressing different aspects of the challenge. When this planned approach was overtaken by the Covid crisis, the focus of the Group necessarily shifted to understanding the challenges that restrictions and uncertainty created for

families, parishes and schools. The Group focused on the task of supporting parishes, in particular, to meet these challenges, while sustaining an emphasis on listening and feedback. Regular discussion, grounded in prayer and reflection, enabled the Group to discern the wider implications of the measures being taken. This led to a shared conviction about how the sacraments of initiation could be approached in the life and mission of the Archdiocese. Our experience is, in its own way, an example of the potential of synodality, anchored in the reality of pastoral life, to guide renewal in the Church.

Members of the Sacraments Implementation Group;

Sr Anne Neylon, Cora O'Farrell, Declan Lawlor, Rev Dermot McCarthy, Donal Harrington, Fr Donal Roche, Kevin Mullally, Margaret Drew, Martin Kennedy, Patricia Carroll, Sr Philomena Neary, Fr Richard Sheehy.

**APPENDIX B. SIG LISTENING TO PARISHES AND PARENTS:
AN EVALUATION OF THE HOME-BASED ONLINE PREPARATION FOR CONFIRMATION**

*The pattern emerging from the work of SIG was that a parish-based approach would pivot on these key moments; Registration, Preparation for and Celebration of the Sacrament. (The critical fourth moment of follow-up still needs to be addressed). The main focus of this appendix is on the **evaluation exercise carried out with parishes and parents** about their experience of using the Confirmation preparation resources. That is preceded by notes about the Registration initiative and about parent feedback on the emerging approaches.*

REGISTRATION

The Covid experience had already led some parishes to put in place an arrangement where parents would register directly with the parish, to enable parish-parent communication as well as encourage parents to associate the sacraments with the parish. Building on this, SIG offered online training to parishes on the practicalities of setting up online registration. Three workshops were offered, November 2020 and February 2021, with around 130 participants overall.

PARENT FEEDBACK

In February 2021, zoom conversations were held with six of the parents who had participated in the parent listening exercise the previous Summer (Appendices E,F). We asked for their reactions to what SIG was proposing for Registration, Preparation and Ceremony.

The strongest message overall was a sense of parents' responsiveness to encounters that are consistently personal and welcoming. It came across that much of how things have been structured up to now is more impersonal than personal. The futility of expecting a personal engagement from an impersonal approach was evident.

Ceremonies. Very strong affirmation of the Covid pattern, smaller, personal interaction, child-centred. This helps parents focus on the meaning of the occasion. What they have known in the past is counter-productive, more of a routine and a conveyor belt where the individual child is lost in the crowd – going through the ritual motions rather than touching hearts. There were many references to the language being an obstacle.

Registration. Positive response to a process where there is individual engagement with each family. This would allow for people to opt in and to participate in a less passive way. But it needs to be done in a way that parents are not intimidated or made feel uncomfortable.

Preparation. There was appreciation for welcoming, non-judgmental preparation moments in the parish. Smaller is better, including informality, conversation and parents interacting

with one another. There was positive reaction to the idea of parents themselves delivering preparation processes. But parent engagement with parish preparation programmes came across as the most difficult challenge. (The evaluation below of the SIG's home-based preparation programme for Confirmation is particularly relevant to this point.)

CONFIRMATION

Preparation

Substantial materials were prepared by SIG for online engagement with families. These were entitled '**Walking with Families**' and consisted of three half-hour zoom sessions. Each session included a high quality video (themes: *Strength for the Journey, Gifted by the Spirit, Called by Name*). Parent and child chatted about the video at home and then there was a follow-up home activity suggested.

A number of online training sessions were held for parish personnel, both on the sessions and on the technicalities of running a zoom session. There was a presentation also on the rationale underlying the approach (see below). There were about 140 participants overall, representing something in the region of 60 or more parishes.

Ceremony

The training sessions also included pointers for organising small-scale ceremonies. This material was gathered from the positive experiences of parishes organising ceremonies amidst 2020 Covid restrictions.

Rationale for the approach (text as presented at the training);

- We all know the variety there is among the parents who bring their children for the sacraments. A small number are committed. At the other end of the scale there are those who have no interest. In between there's a large middle-ground of parents.
- Good people. Deeply committed to their children. With deep desires for how their child 'turns out'. As a person with values. They see the sacraments as part of that family life (even though they may not see them as part of going to church). In this approach we're trying to make a connection with this middle-ground of parents in particular.
- But we're not trying to teach them religion. The school teaches religious education. We're trying to complement that with something to support and encourage the parents in their role. So the videos are more about touching people than teaching people – trying to touch the hearts of parents. The heart is where faith is biggest for people. If we touch people's hearts, the rest might follow!
- So the videos are focused on connecting into people's lives and people's feelings. They weave faith and life together. The purpose of the video is to stimulate the chat at home. If the video touches people's hearts, they will want to talk and share. That little faith-sharing or faith-conversation is the goal, even just this 5 minutes, plus maybe a little prayer.

- For most families, that would be massive. There would be a connect between this moment in their lives and God – a sense that God in this moment and that God cares. It might lead to more of the same. They can pick up on the chat. They can look at the video again.
- There’s a strong link between this approach and what we see of Jesus in the gospels. Sometimes we see him teaching. But most times we see him *touching*. Literally even. He touches people’s hearts and often that’s the start of something new in their lives.
- One last point, about doing this on zoom. We might feel that we’re restricted this year. But zoom is actually the opposite! Usually we’d be having parent meetings, hoping that parents turn up. But this is different for them. It’s at home, it’s a half-hour. It’s relaxed and easy to do.¹⁰

EVALUATION OF THE HOME-BASED ONLINE PREPARATION FOR CONFIRMATION

This evaluation was conducted on the experience of seven parishes and parish groupings that ran the *Walking with Families* programme. Some 500 families took part.

Twenty one people in total took part in the evaluation. These were:

- 11 parish personnel (five priests, two parish sisters and four lay volunteers). Ten of these were interviewed and one provided written feedback.
- Ten parents interviewed individually - seven women and three men.

The purpose of this evaluation was to get a sense of how people involved in the delivery and reception of the programme experienced it, and whether that experience accorded with what was intended for the programme, both the practical arrangements of it being home-based and the impact it had on them.

The questions for parish personnel sought to gather information on numbers of families participating, on the experience of using zoom technology and on their sense of the pastoral impact of the programme. The questions for parents focused on how they and their children experienced the programme.

Participation levels

Precise figures weren’t kept but the estimates are that between 40-60% of Confirmation families participated. This averaged out at 50% for this evaluation - some 500 families out of

¹⁰ NOTE ON RESOURCES FOR PREPARATION FOR FIRST COMMUNION

Between time pressure and Covid uncertainty, there was only a modest beginning with online material for First Communion. With no time to invest in producing videos, a simple powerpoint reflection was prepared instead. Within a similar half-hour structure, this led into parent-child conversation and to presenting families with a ‘menu’ of home activities they could choose from afterwards. Again, the rationale was presented and again there were pointers offered for simple, small-scale ceremonies, based on best practice from 2020.

a potential 1000. For six of the programmes parents were contacted and registered by the parishes themselves. In one case the programme was led by the school through the school chaplain. Participating families were broadly representative of the whole with the exception of Traveller families who were largely absent.

The parishes generally ran the programme with class size groups. This meant running the same session a number of times. In order to reduce the demand on the teams time a number of zooms were held on the same night. For some this meant running three of each of the sessions one night a week for three weeks. One parish with two Confirmation classes ran the programme twice a night over three successive nights.

A. INTERVIEWS WITH PARISH PERSONNEL

Pastoral impact - the main response

Of the seven parish teams that took part, five basically had a common positive experience and assessment of the programme. This affirmed central aspects of the underlying rationale for the programme; (a) parents would respond positively to a church approach that centred on family experience; (b) utilising zoom technology to create a family/church experience in the home would also be well received; (c) parishes have the capacity to work with families in this way

1. The strongest point coming through was the contrast between the one-way traffic of the traditional meeting format, and the two-way communication enabled by zoom. Even though the meetings were virtual they were experienced as *more* personal, *more* intimate.
2. There was a recognition that the home based approach created a very different dynamic, one that was much more family-friendly. This was much more appealing for both parents and parish personnel.
3. The underlying sense here is that it was a positive experience of church for both the families and parish personnel.
4. There was also positive feedback on the structure of the programme - the short simple format, with the videos and the opportunity for conversation at home.
5. The content of the videos was strongly affirmed - the language, message, music and imagery.
6. Feedback received by the personnel from parents was also positive.
7. There was a clear sense of the value of this as part of a blended approach in post-Covid times. The zoom programme is seen as part of a package that includes the work of the schools and liturgical gatherings.
8. The programme enabled a wider range of volunteers to engage - especially people who were more comfortable with technology than religious education.
9. Where work had been put into establishing personal contact and relationships with families, the response from the families was more positive.

The following are some direct **quotations** from the parish personnel;

- *We have a banner outside our church - God's house your home. Now I'd like to see another - Your home God's house.*
- *The training made the whole programme look doable.*
- *I was really happy that we got that number of families to come to three meetings.*
- *The difference was the chance to have a personal chat - this was way better than the old style meeting in a hall. That was all one-way traffic and no feedback.*
- *From the parents point of view it wasn't a religion lesson. It wasn't heavy handed. It was a very personal experience for them.*
- *From scrolling down the screen I got the sense that the families were talking about what they had seen on the videos. They would have been more embarrassed to do that in a hall where somebody else could hear them.*
- *I got feedback from some kids using hearing aids. They were delighted with the captions.*
- *This is a step in the right direction. For the first time the parents can say - we know what you are talking about!*
- *As a parish sister I had worked at building relationships with the parents - that was a big help when it came to promoting the programme*
- *I was pleasantly surprised by how positive I felt at the end. There was a joy about it.*
- *It was heart-warming to see so many families turn up. And even at the opening of the zoom there was a bit of banter. There were lovely moments of engagement.*
- *You felt that they were bringing you into the warmth and intimacy of their own homes, and welcoming you.*
- *There is a methodology there that has great scope in the future. We are in their house. They are in our house. There is an equality there.*
- *I felt disappointed that there wasn't more of a catechetical engagement - the parents would have been able for it.*
- *I found surprising catechetical moments - parent's sharing their experience about Confirmation. But it wasn't overly catechetical - it was simple and not intimidating.*
- *My experience in the past of running meetings and trying to get people into small groups, in no way did that measure up to what I saw on the zoom. The parents felt empowered - they could talk to their children about Confirmation.*
- *One of the great treasures of the programme was the videos - their simplicity and quality was outstanding*

- *It was a family moment really - no doubt about it. And that is what we are looking for.*
- *The format of the programme, and the language of the programme resonated with families. That was a real revelation for me.*
- *A concern I'd have is whether the video content would get stale after a few years. It will need to be updated, but the zoom format is certainly worth keeping.*
- *The parents who were involved in giving the programme were very enthusiastic and are now part of a team who will be involved into the future. The children and parents on the receiving end really enjoyed it, it was interesting and short with good interaction between parents and children.*
- *This programme was a gift handed to us in the parish. I hope that it is not a 'once off' - there is something here that could be applied to all the family sacraments.*

Pastoral impact - outliers

Two centres had a different experience or approach. One parish began the programme with one large group of 50 families participating in a single zoom. The more general approach was to work with smaller size groups. This may have had an impact on the quality of engagement.

- *One difficulty was that all the families turned their cameras off as is the practice apparently. So only my camera and those of the two parents were on. It was a strange experience. After the breakout time we asked them to use the chat function to give feedback but there was nothing.*

Because of the on-going Covid situation they then had to cancel the dates set for Confirmation. This led to a collapse in parent numbers.

The main organiser for the second centre was a school chaplain supported by a volunteer with the parish children's liturgy. It was clear from the interviews with the volunteer and participating parents that the focus of the programme was the children rather than parents. According to the parish volunteer;

- *I didn't really encounter the parents. They were passive. We were really directing the questions at the children.*

That point was echoed by one of the parents;

- *The programme was really nice to watch. They (the team) were talking to my daughter. She was very happy with it.*

The parents interviewed from that parish were very positive about the programme, as were the organisers. But it is clear that there is scope for different interpretations of the purpose of the programme. The intentional focus on parents, who in turn engage with their own children may need to be emphasised more strongly.

Experience of zoom technology

By and large the technology worked. A key point that all of the teams made was the value of having a dedicated zoom role. Somebody familiar with and comfortable with the technology was recruited for each of the programmes. That allowed the others to focus on content and engagement with families.

Some families had difficulties with the technology, and a good number of families had the video function turned off. This created a GDPR concern, in that the parish teams couldn't always be sure that there was an adult present with the child.

- *I was glad to have [name of volunteer] controlling the technology!*
- *The thing that disappointed me was more than half had their video switched to off. Some weren't able to switch on and I asked them to confirm that an adult was present with the child.*
- *Up to this year we used to do 'You shall be my witnesses'. From my point of view as a parish priest the zoom was much easier to organise. We needed less volunteers, and it brought on board some volunteers who were comfortable helping out with the technology.*
- *There were some technical issues on the kid's side.*

B. INTERVIEWS WITH PARENTS

The ten parents consisted of seven mothers and three fathers. Some were regular church goers, and some not. Their assessment was highly positive, in keeping with how the parish personnel read their experience. What is striking here as well is that there was no difference between church-going and non-church going parents in their positive assessment.

Practicalities

All spoke positively about the basic structure of the programme;

- It was more convenient to do it at home and less pressurised than having to go to an outside venue
- Half an hour was very manageable in the evening after work and dinner
- A choice of times was helpful
- They were familiar and comfortable with zoom
- One parent mentioned the family was on holiday for one of the sessions and was still able to join in
- Two parents spoke about the value of face-to-face contact and would prefer to see the zoom format as part of a blended approach to preparation rather than the only approach.

The videos

The videos were strongly affirmed by all. Points emphasised here included;

- They were personal, relatable, accessible and emotionally engaging
- They were short and to the point
- They recognised their own family lives and their own family values in them, and felt these affirmed
- The videos brought faith and life together in a way they didn't expect from a church programme
- Production values were high in regard to music, images and voice-over
- All three videos were affirmed, and the one that resonated most was *Strength for the Journey*
- One parent (the father) appreciated the efforts made to engage the attention of the candidates, but felt the videos needed to go much further into their world to really connect with them

Conversations with the children

All had conversations with their children both during and after each session.

- The overall format, with video and conversation in the home made this a real family event
- It provided a platform for conversation with the twelve year-olds at an age when they can be difficult to engage
- The conversations got easier from one session to the next
- Two mentioned that their child is shy, and the privacy of the zoom format suited them
- The chat function suited them as well - the children were interested in seeing the chat comments
- Three parents spoke about other siblings joining in the programme and conversations
- Two mentioned that younger children (8-9 years) were very engaged.

Faith and church

- There was a sense of delight that family life as they experienced it was being reflected and honored in a church setting
- There was an appreciation for the parish personnel involved in the delivery of the programme
- The zoom format allowed for a more personal connection with the parish and parish personnel than public meetings
- This was a happy experience of being part of church, something that they would be glad of again.

Here are some direct quotations from the parent interviews;

- *My daughter has self-esteem problems. She feels she has no gifts, no talents. I loved the video about the gifts, especially about how unique we are - it was beautiful.*
- *The programme was about their whole lives - it wasn't just about going to Mass. I thought that was really positive*
- *Honestly I wasn't expecting the programme to be as relatable as it was, especially about the children moving on and changing schools. It really hit the nail on the head on what they are going through right now. I wasn't expecting it to be so on point.*
- *We would chat at the table about the video with her Dad and her older sister. It really did bring Confirmation to the centre of the family.*
- *I thought it was more accessible than what we learned when we were making our Confirmation. It wasn't as stringent. You get this vibe that the church is more accepting. There was a real thread of empathy through the programme.*
- *They were good videos - better than what we thought we were going to get. I remember from school and from going to Mass - all I heard was the same tone, the same old stories I'd heard a million times.*
- *God walks with you. You are never alone. That really touched me when it was said in the video.*
- *We felt there was great effort made by the parish to have something prepared ahead of the ceremony.*

CONCLUSIONS

1. For parents key positives were the home venue and the connection made between faith and their lived experience.
2. For the parish personnel a key positive was the more intimate and interactive connection with the parents. They see a future for this home-based format as part of a blended approach including the schools and liturgy.
3. Questions raised included a difficulty some parents had with the technology, and whether the video material sufficiently relates to the culture of the candidates.
4. Overall the pilot evaluation points to a shared, positive experience for both parents and parish personnel. This is in strong contrast to the 'conflict of meanings' scenario that underpinned the rationale for this project.

APPENDIX C. SIG LISTENING TO PARISH PERSONNEL

During the Summer and Autumn of 2020, the Sacraments Implementation Group prioritised consultation with the interested parties in relation to future sacramental practice. There were a number of listening exercises with parish personnel.

Listening to parishes' experience of managing sacraments during Covid

This listening included: 14 phone conversations with Episcopal Vicars and VFs: 34 responses (phone/email) from parishes sharing their experience of 2020; feedback from 12 VFs on the October deanery discussions of the sacraments.

The following is a summary of the main patterns in the feedback;

1. There was a universal, strong positive feeling about the 2020 sacraments – celebrations that were smaller, simpler, more intimate, more prayerful, without the usual fuss and fanfare. Priests were struck by the amount of appreciation expressed by parents. There was a sense of 'there's something in this'. Parishes want to hold on to this next year and not go back. They are encouraged in this by the reactions of both parents and schools to this year's experience.
2. At the same time, many parishes still have to complete 2020 sacraments. They are concerned about that, not about 2021 sacraments. The suggestion of taking a 'breather' now was received positively (as well, parents and schools are not thinking about dates). Parishes are uncertain about 2021; they find it hard to visualise how the 2021 sacraments will work out. They are focused on practicalities rather than pastoral strategy for the future.
3. Looking ahead, the strongest pastoral concern was for outreach to parents. The main thread in this was about 'people resources'; local leaders, trained to accompany parents. The accompaniment was usually spoken of in catechetical terms.
4. Parishes envisaged themselves in a continuing relationship with the school. There is a sense that a move from school-led to parish-led sacraments has begun, but that it will be gradual. Parishes value the school's role and do not want to lose it. Some want to push ahead with the transition. Others feel quite dependent on the schools.
5. Where it came up, parishes were receptive to the idea of parish-based registration and to being helped with setting it up. Some already have it in place; others are exploring it for next year. It was also clear that it will not be doable at this stage in all places.
6. Parishes see the need for online ways of connecting with families, as well as for support in developing this capability.

The SIG identified meeting points or convergences between this and what the parents said, along with some difference of emphasis;

From the parent interviews it is clear that parents themselves want more intimate ceremonies rather than big events. The kind of ceremonies we had in 2020 were in this vein and corresponded strongly with what the occasions mean to the families. Those kind of ceremonies create a space for the kind of welcome and belonging and affirmation that families appreciate and warm to; a space for a transformed kind of interaction between family and parish.

Both the parent and the parishes value the part played by the school. At the same time, there is a strong if not universal desire among both for a move towards parish-based sacraments. They see this as bringing parents more into the picture, asking them to opt in and play their part. For parish personnel, the move to parish-based registration would be a specific expression of this.

The kind of outreach parents are most likely to connect with is more family-centred than church-centred. While parishes tend to talk in terms of 'catechetical' outreach, this may be more akin to 'evangelisation'. Such a family-centred outreach would seem to have the greatest potential for widespread appeal. Significantly, the demands this might make on parish capacity may be quite manageable. That would be a not inconsiderable reassurance in relation to parish concerns about capacity.

2. Zoom conversations with groups of diocesan and parish personnel

In Autumn 2020, SIG produced a 'work in progress' report on the parent interviews (see appendices E, F) and on the parish/deanery feedback (above). To gather feedback, there was a series of 10 facilitated small group conversations by zoom. 28 parish/diocesan personnel took part. These included members of the Priests Council, VFs, central pastoral staff, diocese-employed and parish-employed parish pastoral workers.

What participants said about 2020 sacraments;

The conversations strongly confirmed what we have been learning about the hugely positive 2020 experience of sacrament in parishes. Many spoke of it as a great opportunity; a 'grace', an 'eye-opener', a 'watershed'. The desire was to not go back, but to build from that. We're on the right track. It has propelled us in the direction we were already sensing. It has given us a mandate for going forward.

The conversations helped clarify just what it was that was positive about 2020. It was the intimacy of the small-scale ceremonies, in contrast to the familiar large-scale events. It was personal in a heart-warming way for both family and parish. There was a new quality of personal contact. It was prayerful and the sacrament itself stood out. Words used; 'uncluttered', 'uplifting', a 'delight', 'calm', 'no stress', 'wonderful', 'such an easy day', 'thrilled' with it. One participant said; 'they're getting what church is all about'. Another said that it has told us how we can connect with parents.

Schools were not a main focus in the discussions. There was some sense of a need to talk with schools, in the light of the 2020 experience and what it means for the future configuration of parish and school roles in preparation and celebration of the sacraments.

Participants were invited to share 'leads' they might have for 2021, arising out of success stories and good practice from 2020. These were compiled for sharing in the diocese during 2021.

There were a number of references to sustainability. On the one hand, there was the surprising experience of being able to carry off something very life-giving amidst severe constraints in 2020. On the other, there is a concern about building capacity, in the context of an ageing clergy and the need for volunteers and training.

What participants said about the report on the parents interviews;

There was a positive reaction to the carrying out of the exercise. Some remarked that those interviewed reflected the vast majority of parents who present for the sacraments

There was a shared appreciation of the home as the primary place where faith is to be nourished and the place to situate our engagement. One participant expressed excitement at the prospect of moving from 'getting to the parents through the children' to 'connecting to the children through the parents'.

There was also a shared appreciation that the central issue named is the gap between parents and parish. On one hand there is the world of the parish, where the meaning of the sacraments is understood in terms of encountering Christ and participating in faith community. On the other hand there is the world of parents, where the meaning of the sacraments is seen in terms of family traditions.

There were different 'takes' on this gap. One interpretation acknowledged the importance of the sacraments to parents, as well as the sense of spirituality and values in their lives. But it felt there is little sense in this of Christ and of church, as well as little understanding of the sacraments. Less and less are they religious events, more and more are they consumerist. The church needs to engage parents on this front, to bring them into a new way of thinking where they might encounter Christ.

The other interpretation also acknowledged the importance of the sacraments to parents, as well as the sense of spirituality and values in their lives. But it saw this more in terms of positives present in their lives than in terms of what is absent. It felt that we could listen more to where parents are coming from, so as not to underestimate their lives. Along with that, it felt that to some extent we have failed them, overly focused on mass, not encouraging them into community or finding other ways of making sense to them.

There was a shared sense that what we currently do is not succeeding in bridging the gap. For example, parents meetings don't work; one participant described a feeling of a 'wall' between parish and parents. Participants tended to see a need more for evangelisation than

for catechesis (without it being 'either-or'). Their sense was of a relational approach, not imposing on, but walking with parents – a two-way interaction.

SIG reflections on this consultation;

It is clear that our shared passion is for the good news of the gospel, that young families would come into contact with this, that they would encounter Christ and come to participate in Christian community.

There is a strong sense emerging from what was heard about the way towards achieving this. The way that is suggesting itself is to enter into where parents are at, to establish relationship and to build from there towards our goal.

2020 gave us a 'taster' of what this could be like – small-scale, intimate and personal, welcoming and affirming, opening out into something spiritually rich and meaningful for all.

APPENDIX D. SIG LISTENING TO SCHOOL PERSONNEL

In late 2020, the Sacraments Implementation Group held eight facilitated small group zoom conversations, about 45 minutes each. 23 people participated from schools: 20 principals, 2 deputy, one teacher; including 5 Deis and 2 Gaescoil.

The conversations were based on a document circulated beforehand. This reported the feedback in the 2019 diocesan survey about a widespread desire for change towards greater parish responsibility for the sacraments. It also reported on the positive experiences of parishes organising sacraments during Covid restrictions.

| SUMMARY OF WHAT SCHOOL PERSONNEL SAID | QUOTATIONS FROM SCHOOL PERSONNEL |
|--|---|
| <p>The great majority strongly supported shifting responsibility for sacraments from school to parish. There was a clear grasp that this is about engaging parents. A move to parish creates a context for meaningful engagement with parents.</p> <p>A very small number resisted relinquishing the sacraments as mainly school events, big moments in the life of the school community, with parish support (clearest voice for this was a Gaelscoil.)</p> <p>Schools see that they have been doing everything and that it may be easier that way. They realise that parents have been rendered passive, disempowered, spoon-fed. Parents are happy that the sacraments are something the school does for them.</p> <p>They acknowledged that schools do a lot of ‘performance’ and that there is a pressure on them to perform. An inordinate amount of time goes into practicalities that are not really the teachers’ job. They would be happy to see a scaling back of the big event. It would reduce school stress. It would make for better ceremonies. The 2020 experience fed into this; those that had exposure to the small-scale events compared them very positively to the usual.</p> | <p><i>‘This discussion is a long time coming and I look forward to the change.’</i></p> <p><i>‘Parish-based is music to my ears’</i></p> <p><i>‘If parents have to engage, it puts an onus on them; the kids see that’</i></p> <p><i>‘Quality is more important than quantity’</i></p> <p><i>‘The day would be more special if parents were involved’</i></p> <p><i>‘Schools feel they are working in a vacuum.’</i></p> <p><i>‘We have been spoon-feeding all these years.’</i></p> <p><i>‘Schools have done a disservice to parents by doing everything’</i></p> <p><i>‘The significance of the event is lost on so many’</i></p> <p><i>‘Parish based sacraments would do away with the frills and spills’</i></p> <p><i>‘An “Inordinate amount of time” is what teachers feel’</i></p> <p><i>‘[2020 was] absolutely fabulous... the most spiritual we’ve had’</i></p> <p><i>‘Genuine, sincere, intimate – bring it back to that’</i></p> <p><i>‘Intimacy of smaller ceremonies. You get to know people better.’</i></p> <p><i>‘Perfect time to change’</i></p> |

Shifting responsibility was seen, not as schools disappearing from the picture, but **as a reconfigured relationship**. This was expressed quite clearly. **The school would focus on its educational role**, delivering the RE programme (including sacraments). **The parish role would be pastoral engagement with the parents and the practical organisation of the sacramental celebrations**. There would also be ongoing collaboration outside the sacraments, e.g. at points during the liturgical year.

Schools are happy to re-define roles, but they want to continue being involved. Their individual knowledge of and care for the children was mentioned.

Part of being involved was a frequently expressed **desire to support parishes in the transitional period**. Along with this, schools emphasised the **importance of clarity around defining roles and timelines**. This would help motivate people and avoid misleading narratives.

There was **very little sense that the shift would be a bereavement**. Staff would be happy with it (there were also references to RE being no more than just another subject for many teachers). The **Catholic ethos would not suffer**; there is much **more to it in the life of the school than just the sacraments**. Being relieved of practical preparations could help with the inclusion of children of other faiths

'The language needs to be clear; it's not that sacraments are "taken out of schools"; it's the practical preparation that's taken out'

'School can focus on teaching the programme'

'Schools don't want to carry the whole show'

'We have to stand back and support the church'

'We don't want to be in the driving seat, but we want to be involved'

'We wouldn't like it to be completely removed; we want to be part of the joy. It's a big lift for the school'

'Concern for children who might get left behind, if school is no longer involved'

'A strong message is needed out there on what is happening'

'We need clarification of roles.'

'A clear timeline is important. Schools need to know what is happening, how and when'

'Without clarity, the narrative will be "they're taken it out of schools"'

'I hope the parish has a good plan of what they need from us in the transition'

'Catholic identity of school would be stronger... the sacraments dilute the Catholic ethos'

'RE is a subject to teachers, like literacy and numeracy'

'It is getting harder to motivate staff'

There was a sense that it would be a **slow, gradual process for parents to become used to a new way**. It would happen in small steps. Parishes would need to tease out what engaging with parents actually looks like. It should start from an appreciation of where they are coming from, a very different world from yesteryear.

We asked principals about our interviews with parents and our sense of a strong middle-ground, not churchgoers but open. **They affirmed a receptivity among parents, but also the strong constituency who focus solely on the big day and its trappings**. There was a sense that contrasts among parents here correlated with levels of socio-economic disadvantage.

Along with all this went **a sense that a reconfigured relationship would challenge the parish capacity**. But it is still the right thing to do. Some were confident that there are people to take it on. Others didn't wish to underestimate the challenge. Who will be the leaders, especially in deprived areas? The value, even the need, of inspiring and competent parish personnel to engage with parents and to liaise with schools.

Another theme was about the school population coming from different parishes. People asked, what would a parish-based approach look like in those situations? While the feeling was this is the way to go, how would 'parish-led' actually work here?

'My question is, what does 'accompanying parents' mean?'

'Take parents where they're at... things have changed... we have to go with that... meet them half way'

'It's new for parents, so small steps, to get them used to it... walk them through it'

'It's a disservice to parents to do everything for them. Trust parents and give them responsibility'

'There's no one-size-fits-all' [for parents]

'Parents have their children's best interests at heart. The parish' task is to help parents to have faith conversations with their child'

'A large number of parents are not churchgoers but are embedded in their Catholic faith'

'Parents are wedded to the big day'

'Very good experience. In DEIS band 1 I couldn't believe how a family took responsibility'

'Has the parish the capacity to change?'

'It will work I believe'

'There are people who'll take it on'

'Who will lead it in deprived places?'

'Where will the push (drive) come from in the parish? Has the parish the capacity to manage the change in deprived parishes?'

'Be brave and positive'

'[With so many of the children from outside the parish] how would it work in practice?'

APPENDIX E. SIG LISTENING TO PARENTS, SUMMARY REPORT

Background

The research and consultations of the previous Sacraments Review Group in 2019 indicate that ‘the mind of the diocese’ is that we do not want to continue with the current system of ‘automatic’ access. At the same time, there is little desire for ‘raising the bar’ in a way that could lead to a church ‘for the few’.¹¹ There is a desire not to lose contact with the majority of families, who are not regular churchgoers.

The way forward, then, is to find new ways to maintain contact with families, ways that both they and the parish find meaningful. But the context is complex and it will be quite an achievement to do this, to steer a path between an approach that makes high demands and one that makes hardly any.

The key to this, as we see it, is a shift to focusing on *parents*, within a parish-based approach. It is clear that their interest and motivation are critical to what happens in the sacramental process.

But parents are not an homogenous group. We identified three categories: churchgoers; not churchgoers but open; not interested.¹² There is not ‘one size fits all’. Differentiated goals and approaches are called for.

The great majority of our parents are not regular churchgoers. Of these, a substantial portion are in the category ‘not churchgoers but open’. It may well be that they are the main category of parent that we come in contact with.

However, familiar approaches, both here and elsewhere, are geared to churchgoers and churchgoing. The terms we use, such as ‘catechesis’ and ‘adult religious education’, reflect this. Only very few parents respond. The experience is that most parents (not only non-churchgoers) are not attracted by these approaches. Their experience is often one of ‘captive audiences’ and ‘jumping through hoops’.

What kind of approach might be more fruitful? We felt that our next step should be to *listen* to these parents. This would be in the spirit of Francis’ vision of parish; ‘it really is in contact with the homes and the lives of its people, and does not become a useless structure out of touch with people’.¹³ A listening exercise would seek to learn about their world. That might yield indications as to what kind of approach would connect with them.

¹¹ The phrase is from Francis, *Querida Amazonia*, 27.

¹² This is similar to Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* 14; ‘New evangelisation’ happens in three principal settings, (a) the faithful who regularly take part; plus those with a real faith who don’t take part in worship, (b) the baptised who lack a meaningful relationship with the church, (c) those who do not know Christ.

¹³ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* 27.

The Listening Exercise

The listening exercise we carried out consisted of separate, one-to-one zoom conversations with 25 parents, each lasting about 40 minutes. All had had their children baptised and most had experienced or were about to experience First Communion. Over 80% of these parents were not regular churchgoers. They mostly represented the category of 'not churchgoer but open'.

The parents were first invited to say a little about the story of their lives. Then they were asked about what matters most to them now, e.g., Who are the most important people in your life? What do you enjoy most? What stresses you most? How important is success? What does it mean to live a good life? How have these things changed over the years?

They were then asked about their beliefs. What are your sources for figuring out right and wrong? Do you believe in God? Where do you experience God? Do you pray? Finally they were asked about the Baptism/First Communion of their children. Why did you choose it? What was good about the experience? Was there anything less positive? Is there anything you would like to say to the diocese about future practice around these sacraments?

Appendix G offers an extended summary of what parents actually said; reading it will bring to life the learnings listed here.

Summary of what we learned about the parents and their world

- 1) We came to an appreciation of the depth and richness of their lives, the seriousness with which they live their lives.
- 2) Family is absolutely central in their lives. They have readjusted the balance of their lives and their priorities to this end. The experience of bringing up a family is teaching them about the meaning of life.
- 3) They have a deep appreciation that 'success' in life goes beyond the material. It is about the quality of relationships and about values-inspired living.
- 4) While they are not regular churchgoers, faith is not absent from their lives. This varies, from a weaker sense of God and prayer to a strong sense of an option deliberately thought out.
- 5) The faith element is most evident in their deep sense of values, particularly of being an other-centred person. This echoes strongly with the core values of the gospel, even though there is little explicit reference to Christ.¹⁴
- 6) There is a strong desire among these parents to instil in their children what they themselves value. They want their children to be formed in the values they believe in. They also desire that their children grow up with a sense of God and of prayer.

¹⁴ Compare Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* 68; It would show a lack of trust in [God's] free and unstinting activity to think that authentic Christian values are absent where great numbers of people have received baptism and express their faith and solidarity with others in a variety of ways ... The immense importance of a culture marked by faith cannot be overlooked... An evangelised popular culture contains values of faith and solidarity capable of encouraging the development of a more just and believing society, and possesses a particular wisdom which ought to be gratefully acknowledged.

- 7) The family sacraments are highly valued by these parents. They value them as family events, as key moments in an ongoing family tradition. They hope that the church would honour and respect all that is sacred to them in this.
- 8) Within this family context, they see the sacraments as part of the process of communicating to their children their own sense of values, of God and of prayer.
- 9) Their disposition towards church is complex. There is a lingering fondness for what they were brought up in. But mass/church is not where the spiritual connection is now happening for them. Their experience has led them to low levels of confidence in the church. Mass-going does not work with a young family. Most of them do not experience church as geared towards including, welcoming and affirming them as young parents. In addition, they feel an alienation from its language and its teachings.¹⁵
- 10) These parents strongly affirm the direction in which the diocese is moving with First Communion. They particularly welcome an approach where parents are invited to opt in and actively play their part.

Looking ahead

It is clear from these interviews that parents want more intimate ceremonies rather than big events. This was most evident in what they said about baptism but applies to the other sacraments also. The kind of ceremonies we had in 2020 correspond strongly with what the occasions mean to the families. Those kind of ceremonies create a space for the kind of welcome and belonging and affirmation that families appreciate and warm to; a space for a transformed kind of interaction between family and parish.

It comes across strongly that the kind of outreach parents are most likely to live to is more family-centred than church-centred, connecting first of all with their world. While parishes tend to talk in terms of 'catechetical' outreach, this may be more akin to 'evangelisation'. Catechesis may come later for most parents. Such family-centred outreach would seem to have the greatest potential for widespread appeal, as well as a building block towards a deeper identification of families with church.

The parents we spoke with value the part played by the school. At the same time, most of them welcome the move to parish-based sacraments. They see this as bringing parents more into the picture, asking them to opt in and play their part.

¹⁵ See Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* 63; We must recognize that if part of our baptised people lack a sense of belonging to the Church, this is also due to certain structures and the occasionally unwelcoming atmosphere of some of our parishes and communities, or to a bureaucratic way of dealing with problems, be they simple or complex, in the lives of our people. In many places an administrative approach prevails over a pastoral approach, as does a concentration on administering the sacraments apart from other forms of evangelisation.

APPENDIX F. SIG LISTENING TO PARENTS, EXTENDED REPORT

This is an extended summary of the listening to parents. One-to-one zoom conversations, each lasting about forty minutes each, were conducted with twenty-five parents. The headings are those followed in the conversations. These headings were provided to the participants ahead of the conversations. Direct quotations are included to illustrate. Names are fictitious, to protect anonymity.

1 WHAT THE PARENTS SAID ABOUT THEIR LIVES NOW

Struggles in life

There emerged a striking overall picture of people having known struggle and suffering in their lives. There were illness and bereavement - the childhood death of a sibling; death of parents; premature death of a close friend; parent's illness while growing up and in the present.

Some referred to difficult socio-economic conditions growing up, as well as to difficult conditions in their family of origin. A few spoke of their own parents separating. A number spoke of issues with fertility, struggling to have a child, miscarriages. A few referred to the challenges of coping with a child's medical condition and to concerns around family health. Others spoke of struggles with marriage breakdown, with addiction and with homelessness.

This is not something that parents dwelled upon. Overall there is a clear sense of people who are highly motivated and positive, who haven't been crushed by the struggles in their lives.

Work

Parents spoke positively about their experience of work. There was a little about it being no more than a means to an end; money is important, but the end is what matters. There was some reference to stress around work, but not a lot.

Parents spoke of how much work meant to them. They said they take pride in doing their work well, to the best of their ability. They spoke of feeling useful, of contributing, of a sense that what you do matters. They spoke of the sense of achievement in doing something worthwhile.

In all that parents said about work, what came across most strongly was how it had been relativised by having children. One person went part-time. Another turned down a promotion and took parental leave. Another would like to upskill, but said that family

security comes first. Nora took a career break after a second child, to have more home time and to 'refocus a little bit'.

Family

Parents were asked who and what is most important to them at this point in their lives. The response was unanimous and unequivocal. Pamela said, '100% family and there are a few layers'. Family is absolutely central for all these parents. Everything revolves around it.

Nearly all the parents referred to the further layers. These include their own parents and grandparents and their siblings. Many included their friends also. For Aoife, all of these are 'like an extended family really'.

Luke said, 'I'm very lucky that home is a safe place for all of us, it feels that way'. He captures the feelings of many, that family is the stable, secure centre of life and that energy goes into making this more and more the case.

This is reinforced by what parents said about their experience of the Covid lockdown. It was a time of stress. Some of the stress was around work but more of it was around family – not seeing other family members, people on top of each other. But what they were saying most strongly was about it being a positive experience that brought home to them what was really important.

Ross said it 'kind of put the brakes on a little bit'. Eimear said she learned 'to slow down and appreciate, just spending time with your kids and things'. Sinead realised that it's all about family and spending time together; 'I see how happy my little one is when you are down on the floor doing something with her'. In a similar vein, Ciara has realised that 'I don't have to spend a lot of money to show her that I care for her'.

'A very special, quiet, lovely time' (Pamela), 'like a little gift from God' (Noelle). With the same sense of family time together, Jack says that 'the COVID lockdown was pretty much as close to my ideal life as I could get'.

The parents discovered in a new and delightful way what they had already affirmed; that family are the most important people in their lives and that family is the heart of their lives to which everything else is subservient.

Stress

Parents were invited to speak about things that stressed them most. An initial point that came across is that it varies with personalities and circumstances. Where one person is easily stressed, another is not a stressor. In a relationship, both could be present!

Some spoke of having come to grips with stress, including with the help of counselling. Parents spoke of learning to be in the moment. Ciara talked of trying to be more mindful, lest 'you lose the time you have right now'.

Other people came up as a source of stress. There were mentions of people being rude or taking advantage of others; of people who are not bothered to make an effort; of favouritism at work; of people not knowing what they are doing and taking it out on others ('toxic'). Against this, some spoke of learning to handle it; realising people don't share the same values, becoming more tolerant.

But the main experiences of stress were in relation to home and work. Brian and Aoife captured it well; 'We both have sort of demanding jobs and so trying to balance the two of us working with the kids, with the housework, with everything – that's probably what causes the most friction among us... 'you'd need an extra pair of hands' ... 'you hear yourself being short with [the children]'. Within the home/work complex, parents also spoke of stresses over the health of members of their family and extended family, and over having enough money to support family life.

2 WHAT THE PARENTS SAID ABOUT THE MEANING OF LIFE (part one)

Parents were invited to talk about what it means to live a good life. They were asked what for them makes for a successful life. What they said about the two overlaps.

Material things were not to the fore. Some said that money and material things would have been more central in the past, but not now in the context of bringing up a family. The latter is what matters now; it is the focus of energy and material things are a means to that end. As Shane puts it, they provide a 'good stable foundation'. Oonagh's words reflect the overall sentiment; 'I would not be overly, I am not interested in material things, like I am not very glamorous or like having big cars or a big house. I am happy with the lot that I have. I am grateful for what I have already'.

The predominant sense among the parents is that the good life is about something simple and straightforward. It is about your family; about being happy, about security and safety, about finding joy in the simple things. This comes across in the activities the parents speak about, simple activities where the family being together is what matters more than what they actually do.

'It's just pure family', says Sinead; 'being together', says Brian. 'We put everything into spending time with the [children]', says Sophie. Alan sums it up; 'A good life is having your loving family around you, that's basically all. It's nothing about money, it's just all family. That's the meaning of life, having your friends and your family and you are happy.' For Deirdre, success in life is about 'well brought up children'.

Asked about 'success', Nora's response was; 'Well not monetary anyway I think success is just feeling happy being content, as a mam I suppose that the children, that the kids are

happy that they don't feel, they are not wanting, and I don't mean wanting for anything materialistic, but just like I mean time... it is so important to not make children feel that they are just one of a group and that you have to make time...'

Luke's thoughts bring up another aspect of the good life. He talks of 'a bit of comfort and protection... security... peace of mind... has become much more important for me... life is for living and it's short and we should probably balance work and life a bit more than we might have in the past'. This home-work balance is a recurring theme. The experience of having their own family has brought parents in touch with something deeper in life, something precious, to be appreciated and attended to.

Sinead says, 'having kids definitely makes a big difference to what you are looking for'. Likewise Amy; 'and then you see the light. I think it is when you have kids, like, everything changes; you understand what is more important, what's more important is... for me it is really when you have kids it fundamentally alters how you do things, you have to have balance... it's not about what you want any more, it's about what's good for them and how you need to look after them'.

Parents' concern for what their children become links with another strain in what they say about the good life. It is how they describe the good life in terms of values to live by. A striking number of the parents reference the golden rule. 'Just treat others as you would have them treat you' (Jack). This commonplace phrase contains a great deal of substance for them.

Aoife describes it as 'more of a moral compass I think at this stage'. Emily speaks of it in terms of kindness. 'Kindness has kind of become my religion... If you are going to be anything in the world just be kind to somebody, you don't know what they are going through... So to do something kind every day, to make a difference that way in people's lives. I really believe in karma, and stuff like that, the more positive energy you put out in the world the more hopeful light will come back into yours'.

A 'successful life' is thus expressed on two levels. On one level, it is about the simple joys of family life, being happy and content. On another level, it is about the kind of person you are in relation to others. Asked about 'success' in life, Eve said, 'I consider our relationship quite a successful relationship'. Jack said he would measure it by 'the number of people that go to your funeral'. Amy says that 'the good life is kind of about the kind of person you are'.

Once again, it bears repeating that the most significant influence in arriving at this kind of wisdom about life was the experience of having a family.

3 WHAT THE PARENTS SAID ABOUT THE MEANING OF LIFE (part two)

Right and Wrong

The parents talk more about the meaning of life in response to the questions about morality and about religion. In a question that picks up on some of what has just been said, they were invited to talk about their sources for figuring out what is right and what is wrong. The overall pattern here was one of change over the years from childhood to now.

This is how Pamela describes the complexity of it; 'I was very much brought up under the understanding that God gives you the understanding of right and wrong and I guess that has stayed with me, because it's so ingrained... But I also don't think that's just where it comes from because you can have an atheist who is a very good moral person. I think your own, I guess, education, your own understanding, I guess it boils down to your gut, if you want to call it your conscience or whatever you call it. That inherent thing that we are born with, this understanding of right or wrong. While I would like to say that would be independent of religion for me, it is probably not entirely independent of religion'.

Many parents echoed this. They talked about what was instilled in childhood – as much from grandparents as from parents. In Michelle's words, it became 'nearly an instinct'. The source here is God; it is church; it is parents and grandparents; all woven into one.

But it seems to be something that goes deeper than than religion. Aoife talks about the influence of 'other people who have gone above and beyond... more than a Christian value... it's pure, I think'. Sophie recalls 'going home sometimes and there'd be Travellers in our kitchen, you know, my mum would say, "they were being jeered outside, so I brought them in" – and how this influenced her own involvement in social outreach.

In adult life, there was a pattern of people coming to their own internalised sense of right and wrong. As Shane puts it, 'a lot of it has to come from yourself now'. Both Eve and Aoife independently used the image of their own 'moral compass', while others spoke of processing things, perhaps asking others, mulling things over, ultimately relying on their own 'gut' or instinct.

Brian articulates something of the loneliness in this; 'I feel a bit more that you're on your own now. Like, there's so many things in the media and in the news and...everything is questioned and you don't know what's true or what's not true or... you do kind of feel that you're out there on your own a bit and you do sort of have to rely on your own instincts'.

Alongside this, Oonagh talks about how God and prayer continue to be part of it for her; 'I would be lying in bed and I would have my thoughts and I would be saying to God – give us a hand-out, what is right and wrong, you know, which is the right path you know, or am I on the right path'.

As regards what their moral instinct or compass tells these parents about right and wrong, we can refer back to what they said above about the good life and the golden rule. The pattern is that their 'compass' points them very clearly in the direction of other-centred living.

Finally, as parents talk about right and wrong and their ideas about the good life, there is a very strong strain of their desire to instil this in their children. It is striking how many of them speak in tandem of their own sense of right living and their hopes for their children.

Talking about what was ingrained in her, Michelle goes on immediately to say; 'I'm now rearing a child and trying to teach her right from wrong. You can't sort of tell her something is wrong and then go and do it yourself! So, it's trying to...you know...lead by example.'

Talking above about kindness becoming her religion, Emily continues; 'That would be very important to me and that my kids would understand that too.' Amy puts it like this; 'I want to raise my children to be outward looking, to think about others... about what you have and to be very grateful... look around your community like your backyard and see what is needed... be kind to the people around you'.

Belief in God

There was a near universal affirmation of belief in God. The affirmation, however, varied in intensity. There were affirmations of a very strong faith. A small number talked of struggling with belief in God. Most were in between, reflecting a belief in God that was somewhat undefined and no more than weakly linked to church and the language of Christian faith.

Alan's response would be echoed in what many parents said; 'I do believe in God. I have a belief that there is a God there. If we are here there has to be somebody there that put us here, it's like the meaning of life but I have a strong faith in God. I don't go to the church that often, I used to go quite a lot on a Sunday but over the few years I have sort of... you don't need the church to pray.'

Pamela says yes to the question, but it is vague; 'a bigger and better something out there but I don't really know what it is'. Michelle's reply is to say 'very much so... very important to me'. She talks of the comfort she gains from her belief. Oonagh describes herself as 'very religious... very spiritual... I believe that we go on to an afterlife and we are protected and minded you know and so I have very strong beliefs there'. Nora says 'faith is very important to me'.

Amy doesn't believe in a 'man up there' and is 'not too sure' about heaven and hell. Ross says, 'I believe in God, I believe in Jesus Christ, but I'm not a firm believer in the church or the institution'. Frances says that she does have faith, but talks about how her faith has been tested by the death of someone close.

Noelle talks of how her faith permeates her life; 'My faith is not just about mass... it's about your whole...the whole essence of life and everything God has to do with it.' Karen says that there is a fundamental comfort in knowing that you matter and that God loves you, no matter what happens in life.

The previous paragraphs express the range in parents' responses. A follow-up question was about where they find God in their lives. Nature was mentioned most, along with in quiet moments. In both, Aoife says 'you're struck by a sense of something more'. Eve speaks of meditating, 'I would feel an energy or a light or a love'. For Pamela, 'it could be something silly that one of the kids does and just that sense of something that you might get, sometimes that gives you the feeling'. Some mention prayer.

Luke captures a lot of this in his response; 'I feel very connected to God in nature. I also find connection with God in dead relatives... Yeah, I find God in peace...when I'm at rest and at peace, I really find a connection to God... I find him in the eyes of my children... when I really look at them, that there's an innocence and a goodness there, that sometimes gets corrupted by the world and, you know, I really see that in them. That they have goodness, you know.... I'm trying to think where else... Nature would be definitely the biggest one. Would I find it when I go in to light a candle in the church? Probably. Do I find it at mass? Probably not.'

His last point is echoed by many other parents. When Eve speaks above of what she finds in meditating, she continues, 'that's not something that I ever got in church or mass'. Frances says, 'Obviously I'll go to mass, but... I prefer just speaking to God... hard to focus in mass... more just talking to God'. Some do speak positively of going to church or mass, but the main pattern is otherwise. As Eve puts it; 'church, mass and the whole ceremony of mass is not where I feel connected with God. And I don't feel it represents God's connection for me'.

Prayer

The parents spoke about prayer in their lives. Most of them said that prayer was part of their lives. But there were some for whom it hardly figured. And among those who did pray, there was a variety in how they prayed.

The prayer was often quite traditional, what had been instilled in them from childhood and the practices of parents or grandparents. (Grandparents surfaced as a significant influence for many.) Responses were dotted with mentions of prayer to Our Lady or the saints (Saint Anthony in particular); of lighting candles; of speaking to grandparents; of novenas.

Some spoke of how they had moved to something more personal. Luke for example; 'it wouldn't be that structured, but it would be regular... I've tried to move away from the "if I want something, I'll pray for it" ... to being a bit more of a regular gratitude, acceptance... setbacks happen, good things happen, let's accept, try and accept both as part of the bigger structure and the bigger plan and the bigger life plan'.

Nora described her prayer in this way; 'I have a very healthy relationship with God in that I can talk to him at any stage of the day – I used to think as a kid I needed to be in a quiet space and I still remember having a picture actually of a girl kneeling down and I used to always try to copy that, but for me it is just I can touch base or say a prayer anytime that I want to and also I am conscious not to just ask for – for a long time it was just asking for help or for intervention but I regularly now thank him for all of the blessings that I think that I have had especially since my kids are born... I am referencing him in my thoughts regularly throughout the day and so much so I don't even notice it'.

Overall, Jane probably represents the typical parent among those interviewed; 'I probably wouldn't say a structured prayer...like that you'd say in mass or whatever...but I'd say my own personal prayer. I wouldn't say daily but I suppose, like anybody else, something's going off and you're kind of looking for the intervention!... I would often go in and light a candle... I just think the fact that you're actually thinking about the person and you're actually willing to do that for them and just to say that little prayer'.

A few parents express a desire to introduce their children to prayer. Eimear talks of how 'I'd teach the kids to put their hands into the font...to bless themselves when you are going past the church. Eve captures a need for sensitivity; 'I do pray to God and I do believe in Jesus Christ and I do believe that, you know, there is something more than this. But it's hard; how do we give that to our children without over-influencing them, while still giving them a sense of...that there is something more?'

There are echoes above and throughout the interviews of what Alan said, 'you don't need to go to church to pray'. But it is more than a superficial remark; a significant part of it has to do with changes in parents' spiritual journeys.

Changing Experience of Faith

Emily elaborates quite a bit on her experience. 'I think my faith has kind of reshaped... from what it would have been based around the church and a lot of formal teachings whereas I feel that it has moved more towards what I can do and I can achieve in my life that brings light into other people's lives, you know... A lot of religion when I grew up was more about punishment and penance instead of celebration so I have kind of moved from that toward more joy, happiness, celebration, not the dowdiness and the formal kind of structure that the church environment brought. I kind of haven't got my kids into that kind of view of the church. I have them more in "look at the sunset out there say isn't creation amazing"... That church, dull, dreary, fear. You'd go to church and you wouldn't follow anything they say. It didn't have kind of a vibrancy about it whereas that is what I think more engages people...'

She continues; 'I don't feel I have to be in the church building to have faith. I don't feel that is the core of my religion any more. I feel in here is much more, that's my church in here now. I don't need to be in that building and that formal atmosphere to be believing in God and my faith... [talks of stress of bringing young children to mass]... I thought I have to find a

new way for my faith now that I am a mother and have these kids. I need to find a new way of maintaining my faith in a more accessible way to me and my children and that's when I made the shift, move towards that my church is here as opposed to in that building... I am not willing to walk away from my faith, it's finding a way of adapting and changing how I can access it. I would feel very passionate about it.'

A few parents make reference to a distancing from some church teaching that has impacted their faith. One of them is Aoife; 'I have felt down through the years that it's been hard to hold on to my faith the older I get and the further I feel the church, in particular...the views of the church differ so much from mine now. It's hard to reconcile sometimes'... [The occasional time she's at mass] 'there's a definite feeling I get of closeness to something, but I wouldn't say I necessarily look to the church or rely on the church to feel that connection either'.

Luke describes his journey; 'I think I've always had a spirituality, I think that has come back and... the church isn't, not a part of that. But I wouldn't say it's the core of it, for me... So, I don't know where I'm at when it comes to conventional religion, really. I think with a lot of Irish people, we don't really know... I believe in God. Strongly believe in God. I don't have a disassociation with the God of my childhood. I don't want to reject that God, I think that God is very valid. I do think that I'd have some issues around some of the intricacies of church doctrine, but... I think the basic foundation for me was reasonable...and it has, I think it has stood to me over the years... My belief is that it...if I can somehow hold the core values of Christianity in my life, that's not a bad way for me to be.'

Sinead recalls how something changed when she was an altar girl. Something was going on in the church (not to do with the priests); 'I changed my view of what I felt I need to go to be a good person... stopped going to mass... I don't have to go to mass to be religious or to talk to God... I feel I almost have my God, if that makes sense... what I feel my God wants from me is to be a good person... [occasionally she has gone back and it's ok, but] I am more into the values, genuinely, even just keeping it really basic... just that being good and treating people like you want to be treated'.

Ciara's nanny instilled her sense of prayer... 'Now, I think since I have gotten older, I have just realised for me personally God is not only in the church. In my house now I would have St. Anthony candles. I have small prayers around the house, I have things like that and not having the chance to go to church all the time made me just be able to experience that at home and be able to pray just at home for myself, not in a congregation full of people, but just for me... for me it is a more personal thing'.

Not unlike Emily, Sophie has come to her own resolution; 'My view would be to be a good Christian and to live a good life. And I don't necessarily have to go to mass to do that... I like all the things of the church, I just don't feel I have to go every week to say, "I'm part of that club." Like, I'm part of that club every day in actions that I do, but I don't go the extra mile and go to church.'

A significant thread in all this is about welcome and inclusion. Jane talks about the church being 'open'. 'And that's what it should be... and I think a lot of people might have lost their faith because of that. Or feel like they could be welcome... it was nearly like that closed door, d'ya know... that's where they could really connect with people and show that the doors are open to you, no matter what.'

Noelle expresses her own experience very powerfully; 'I know our church and I don't really go down that often... When I do go down, everyone is lovely. But I just never meet anyone that's my age or that has young kids like me... there is a huge church community, but it feels like it's their own community, that I'm not in it. I have my faith, I love going down and everyone's lovely when I go down, but I'm not in their community... You feel like, "I'm part of this community but I'm not really in it". I'd really like to be more included, even though I said I feel like I'm part of it, I'm not in it'. Others echoed this somewhat in their association of the church with older people.

Churchgoing

At the same time others like Sinead, who don't go to church, do speak positively of being in church. A few talk of liking mass; for Amy, it's 'a form of meditation... you very rarely just get forty minutes to reflect and to think'. But mostly they are talking about occasional visits rather than going to mass. As regard reasons for not going to mass, the one that comes up repeatedly is about having a young family.

Oonagh represents the experience of many; 'I absolutely adore me Sunday Mass... I just found that because my family was so young an all that I just couldn't get out, I kinda just gave up on my hour for Mass, to take care of... life kind of took me out of it for a while'.

Emily describes the stress; 'I used to go to Mass every week religiously and I only stopped when I had children and it just didn't work with family life... Mass to me became a source of stress, worry, anxiety, the complete opposite to what it supposed be... instead of connecting with what the priest was saying, I spent my time worrying about how other people were viewing my family. Then it became so stressful trying to keep them quiet, keep them entertained, this is not going to work I'm not enjoying it, nobody around me is enjoying it, my kids are not enjoying it'.

Shane echoes some of what came up already, faith expressed in daily living but not in churchgoing; 'I think sometimes we would incorporate religion and stuff into our lives on a different day, or through the week, not necessarily doing nothing for the week, and then going to Mass and then everything is alright just because you went once... To us it would be more of a constant thing than a once a week event... it's more important to live that aspect personally at home'.

3 WHAT THE PARENTS SAID ABOUT THE SACRAMENTS

The parents were asked about Baptism and about First Communion – what it was like, why they chose it, what it means to them.¹⁶ They were also asked if there was anything they would like to say to the Sacraments Implementation Group in relation to diocesan practice.

Baptism

The parents had a lot more to say about Baptism than about First Communion. Partly this is because a good few of them had not yet had a child for First Communion. But the responses suggest that it may also be because Baptism has a deeper meaning for them.

The reasons for choosing Baptism point to a strong generational theme. Alan speaks for most when he says; ‘because I am from a Catholic family and all down through the generations we were all baptised’. While all these parents chose to have their children baptised, there were a small number who were conflicted about it, or where the couple had differing views.

This family tradition is seen in the importance attached to using the same candle and the same robe as others before. Eimear; ‘They wore the same robe that we all, my brothers and sisters and my mam and all wore. It was kind of passed down through the family’. Frances describes it, the gown and the candle, as ‘a lovely tradition’.

Likewise Emily; The baptism candle us three siblings used has moved through our family, and the next generation. It’s very important. It’s in a battered box with our names and dates scrolled on it, it’s like a link and bond and a tradition that this is passed through to the family. It’s like you are passing on the light to the next generation’.

Margaret’s christening shawl goes back 40 years. She tells this story; ‘we all went down to [county of origin], there last year and we brought the christening shawl with us so we actually went back to the church where I was baptised and we got like a couple of photos in the church like with the christening shawl so it was just to kind of say well we were back to where it started and this is where mammy started and this was where the blanket was originally brought into the first church down there’.

These parents express what comes across through all the responses; that Baptism is a hugely significant family moment, a precious part of a family tradition. While a small few may not, most see this also in terms of faith.

Michelle says; ‘I wanted her to grow up as a part of the church, as a part of God’s family... I wanted her to grow up with a faith’. Oonagh says; ‘I wanted to give them the faith that I have. I wanted to pass on to them what was passed on to me’. For Brendan, ‘we are bringing you to what we’ve known’.

¹⁶ While all the parents had had their children baptised, not all of these had reached First Communion stage (in some cases it had been postponed because of lockdown).

Brian captures how the two strands, family and church, come together; 'A welcoming into, I suppose...there's the religious welcoming to the religious family and then the welcome into our own family'.

Quite a few, as might be expected, reflect the traditional sense of Baptism being a protection (a 'blanket of protection' as Margaret puts it). Eimear says 'it is nice to get them kind of blessed and I think, in my head, it keeps them safe'. Ciara thought her child 'was more protected if she was baptised. 'I would worry', says Emily, 'if I hadn't done it... God forbid, if anything happened and I had given my children that start in life'.

As regards faith, what many parents wanted to give their child was the *choice* of faith. Everything these parents said was counter to the view that Baptism is a kind of indoctrination. It came across strongly that baptising the child is what gives them a choice later on. As Ross puts it; 'if you start off not having this in their lives, they will never have it in their lives'. In a similar vein, Sophie says they chose to baptise their children because 'I want them to make the decision themselves, I don't want to force my beliefs on them'. She comments that other parents, by denying their child baptism, are imposing their own beliefs.

Moving on to the Baptism itself, the parents had a lot to say. The strong sense was that they want an intimate family occasion rather than a 'big splash' – being with 'the people who were there all the time' as Sinead put it. For Amy, just having the family gathered there was itself a 'huge event'.

It was clear that parents wanted to be treated in a way that resonated with this sense; the value they put on the occasion, the significance they attached to it. There were contrasting experiences in how they were treated, either being welcomed and affirmed or the opposite.

Nora had such contrasting experiences with her two baptisms. With the first, she felt uncomfortable going in to the meeting but really appreciated the welcome of the team, being honoured no less than anyone else. With the second, the priest would not facilitate a friend coming from abroad with a suitable date. Fortunately, she found another priest who was accommodating. 'you know when you go to approach a priest... you have this kind of respect this kind of awe and if you feel that you are not getting any kind of respect back it is very scary to want to go back there, it is very unlikely that you would feel welcome'.

A similar contrast was shared by Jane. With the first baptism, there was a group meeting. It was more 'procedural', about the practicalities of the ceremony; 'there was no kind of build up... I just thought it would have been a bit more personal'. With the second, however, a parish worker visited the house; 'that was a little more personable... it was kind of interactive'.

Eve conveys something of the power of welcome. With her second baptism the priest was 'so nice, he was brilliant, he was such a warm man, he was really in touch with the community, you know, he came and called to the house a couple of times beforehand'. 'I suppose' she continued, 'after all this stuff chipping away at the reputation of the church,

that kind of reinstilled that, you know, there are some good people there, there are good people who want to do good work. And I think it meant, to me it kind of a little bit drew me back in. You know? I think it kind of...enticed us a bit more. You know, we did go to church more.'

Contrasts emerged too in relation to the Baptism ceremony. A number of parents had had the experience both of a single child being baptised and of a ceremony with multiple children. They described a big difference between the two.

Karen had her youngest baptised alone, whereas the others were just one of a number. The first felt 'meaningful'; everyone was engaged and the children in the extended family felt included. On the other occasions it felt 'impersonal and a matter of routine'. She thinks Baptisms are best done for families individually.

Emily would much rather have had just her family there. With other families there is so much else going on and 'it took the focus from me'. 'it's more something that you just want to just experience with your own family. It's kind of special and unique to your child, I kind of prefer that feel... it's just so huge that I felt it kind of diluted it a little bit by sharing with all those other families. I know the idea is the community, we are all part of God's community. For me I would have loved it just to be nearly a private thing, a moment for welcoming this baby into my own family.'

Sophie's first child was baptised along with four others. It was, she said, 'a little bit of a conveyor belt... just chaos'. She felt others showed a lack of respect, not taking it seriously. She 'would have liked a really personal one. Like a one-on-one'. For her second child, the priest refused to allow it in the parish where the school was. She went elsewhere and recalls the impression the priest there made on her; Afterwards, he actually came down to us outside – he left the church and came out – and actually held our daughter's leg and he said, "look, I just...I hope she has a lovely life, she's a lovely child." And I just remember, just...he didn't have to do it. And, look, you know... we don't remember what people say, but we remember how people make us feel'.

Sophie reflected further on her experiences; 'I think that's very powerful... we're going from this church that the priest is saying, "no, I can't do..." and this other priest going and saying, you know, "may she have a really special life."' She makes reference to miscarriages she suffered, how she was 'so invested'. She asks; 'they're so special to me; why don't you think they're very special?' She says it is meant to be 'the reverse of a funeral, that you're actually celebrating them coming into the world'. And she wants that mirrored is how the baptism is actually experienced.

Three parents talked about how some of the language grated with what the ceremony meant to them. While Amy liked some elements, there were others she did not, 'like your renouncing the devil'. Pamela reacted against the 'reject Satan' language; 'I understand original sin... but I just don't know why you need to say it, I don't like the sound of it.' Luke also reacted strongly; 'I just can't get my head around that concept [original sin], one of the

tenets that really hurts me... a bitterness... how something so innocent and pure can have that brand'. He speaks of how it created a resentment in him towards the ceremony.

There were a few comments about other aspects. Those who had the experience of a welcome mass prior to the Baptism day were very positive in their appreciation. Noelle describes how people came over to say 'welcome'; 'I really enjoyed that part. It was new... it was like a welcoming thing... there is a support network here, in the church... there is a community'. There were a small number of comments about the preparatory meetings, mixed between positive and negative. A number of parents expressed appreciation for the home visit they received.

First Communion

Some of what the parents say about Baptism applies to First Communion also. There is the same sense of a family tradition, of marking a significant milestone. Shane describes these sacraments as 'little milestones in life... milestones that we would have liked our children to have because we had them ourselves'.

There is also the same sense of the sacrament giving the children the option to make their own choice later on. Sophie says; 'I'm going to set them up on the path and then, when they're old enough to make their own decision, they'll make their own decision'.

A number of parents saw new elements too. It is the first 'major and public event in a child's life' (Amy). Now 'they're standing on their own two feet' (Sophie). A few parents talked of how their children now felt on a par, now able to receive communion. 'Now I am the same as you' (Emily). The children can choose what to do on the day. They are more conscious of what they are signing up to. For Margaret, they have started 'focusing on their own faith'.

There are many more comments than at Baptism about how the family mark the day. These parents express very little interest in the big party and the bouncy castle. Emily speaks for many when she says her children were thrilled with just a family meal; 'that to them was huge'. Eve does not like the material emphasis, 'that's not what making your Communion is about'; we need to 'push back' on that.

More of the parents' thoughts about First Communion emerged when they were invited to make comments on the Sacraments Implementation Group work regarding future diocesan directions. The great majority of those who expressed a view (about half those interviewed) supported the move to a parish-based approach.

Quite a few comments were made about other parents for whom the meaning is lost (there were also some comments along these lines in relation to Baptism). For Margaret, 'the importance of the communion is gone with some of the parents'; It is about the 'craic'. Nora feels that not many are 'bringing it back down to its fundamental meaning'.

Pamela favours a different approach; 'the parents, I would communicate about this and I don't think God or religion has really never been mentioned. For someone like me who is not overly religious I find that disheartening... the message of what it is really all about is gone. It's lost in all the bells and whistles... I actually think if you really want to sign up for this you have to understand the bigger picture here and maybe you have to take a little bit of that responsibility on to yourself... If it's offered as more of an opt in that might change the goalposts a little as opposed to something that's presumed and somebody else does the serious stuff and I do the fun stuff.'

Michelle speaks as a teacher; 'as much as it breaks my heart to say it, I think we need to come away from that [school event]. I think it needs to be a parent...more and more involved... it's putting an awful lot of pressure now on teachers to prepare children and...really, if the backing is not there from the parents, it's very, very difficult... and I can't even believe I'm saying that because...if you'd asked me when I had my first Communion class, I would have said, "no, this is the way to do it, they should make it with their friends," you know. But more and more parents have come in now and they don't want those sacraments... I think, as hard as it is to say it, I think it's time to take them out of schools.'

Emily is happy with the prospect; 'I don't think it should necessarily be the school's job to do it... you can see the shift, it is moving away from being the responsibility of the school and that is perfectly ok with me. It's my faith and I choose, and my child chooses, to go on this sacramental journey and do all of this then I am quite happy for that to be my responsibility to take ownership of that. I would like the school support in it...'

Luke supports a change; 'my feeling is that... it should probably not be part of the mainstream schooling... I think you get a lot of passengers and I'd probably say I was a passenger... [The] distraction around the margins... damages it as a sacrament... how do you get around that without making it too exclusive?... if it did become more parish than school, people might make more of a choice about it or do a bit more thinking about it... it might make it more wholesome and more valid and valuable to the people who actually do it, for them to opt in rather than to opt out'

Frances thinks 'it's great now what the church is proposing... I don't think it should be a given... that they make their communion or their confirmation. I think it is something that has to be thought about, seriously'. She compares the Educate Together school, where parents opt in, to how in the Catholic school parents are 'stressed and... caught up in the silly things'

There was only a small number of parents who wanted to retain the current set-up. One of them is Alan, whose child was due to make First Communion earlier this year; 'I have heard a lot of chatter going around, saying that they want to take it away from the schools and that the parents have to organise communions themselves. I think that is wrong. I think that it's a beautiful sacrament of God and I think that it should be left the way it is going at the moment between the church and schools organise communion and confirmation.'