Dear Parents,

Welcome to this year’s programme leading to the celebration, for the first time, of the Sacrament of Reconciliation and reception of Holy Communion. You will need to formally register and details of this can be found at the end of these notes.

This is a special time of grace for your children, for you and for your family. It is one of those times when God invites you to come closer to him and experience his love for you more deeply.

In Baptism we are given the seed of faith, but it is only with time and with care that it grows and makes us fully alive. I look forward to walking with you through this year.

The Sacraments that your children will celebrate for the first time next year are important gifts to them for their journey in faith (as they are for us too). In Holy Communion they receive Jesus Christ as their daily bread, God-with-them giving them what they need to grow as his friends and to love as he loves. They remember, with us, that Jesus gave himself for us in love. In the Sacrament of Reconciliation they come to know God their Father as full of compassion, who loves each and every part of them – not just the nice bits.

This coming year then is about uncovering and discovering the Mass as the privileged place in which we meet God, and are one with him, and these Sacraments as meeting points with Jesus as our constant friend and companion.

Many of your children will be learning to swim, play sport or play instruments. All of these take a certain amount of regular practice at weekly meetings and in-between. The same holds true of the learning-by-doing of the Sacraments and of our life as friends of Jesus Christ.

The patterns and practice of faith can get disrupted by many things: moving away from a church we are familiar with, the joyful chaos and fatigue of raising a new family, to say nothing of the upheaval of a global pandemic. I would like to invite you to look at this year as an opportunity to explore in practice new ways of living a life of faith and experiencing the joy and strength which God alone can provide.

I would encourage you to be open to how the Lord might wish to lead you and your family in the coming year. Try to be open to new possibilities, new ways of seeing and new ways of living: with God, with one another and in our common home.

**So, how does the programme work?**

We use a resource called “Growing Up Catholic”, a parent-led programme. It is a series of colourful booklet with activities for the children and helpful notes for parents to enable you to work through them with your children.

There will be leadership and input from Fr Jonathan and possibly others, but the real teachers are you, the parents of the children taking part – this reflects the promises you made at their baptism and the blessings you received for this wonderful task. The messages you give to your child, either directly or indirectly through your actions, have a far greater impact on how your son or daughter comes to understand God, than this programme alone can ever achieve. In this spirit, we extend a warm welcome to you as the first educators in this journey to your child’s First Reconciliation and First Holy Communion and promise that we will do our best to support you.

**What sort of support is there?**

There will be a series of sessions on a Saturday afternoon (usually 3pm finishing by 4.45pm) when we will gather, pray together and look at each of the key themes. Exactly how we do this will depend a little on COVID. In previous years we met at St Edmund’s School and been able to do some craft activities. This year we have met online or in small groups at St Joseph’s Church. It is our firm intention to do as much as possible face to face in the coming year.

On those weekends there will be a special welcome at each parish Mass for children preparing for these Sacraments and their families. Please make a particular effort to attend.

We will also arrange a couple of “Sycamore” sessions for parents in the course of the year, as an opportunity for us to reflect on our faith together as adults and the significance of these Sacraments for us.

You might like to get a copy of *YouCat for Kids*. It sums up the basics of our faith in a very user-friendly manner. Also highly recommended is the *Catholic Children’s Bible* by St Mary’s Press: this might be a good present from godparents! We can arrange a parish order if that would be helpful.

**Important things to do**

Keeping it simple! The messages of our faith are simple even if they are sometimes dressed in elaborate language. Your role is to help the children learn the important stuff – it’s quality that matters, not quantity!

Join in. The purpose of the parent led programme is to help you help your child prepare for the sacraments. By giving you the opportunity to reflect on your faith and its place in your life, we hope that you will be able to talk freely with your child about your beliefs and answer their questions. These days, there’s not much space given to talk about faith. Sometimes, it feels embarrassing to do so. Please remember that everyone is there for the same reason – to support his or her child.

Take your child with you to Mass regularly. The Mass is a perfect guide: the liturgy itself forms us. All the children need to know is contained within it. We also encourage you to use the Simple Mass book we give you, with your child so that they start to say the responses and read the prayers with the rest of the congregation. This helps them to be more involved.

**Programme Dates**

The programme dates are included with this letter. Please put these dates in your diary now!

The first session will be on Saturday 18th September at 3pm. The venue will be confirmed in early September.

**Commitment**

We expect every child and at least one parent to attend every session. Children must not be left on their own at the session, whether online or gathered face to face, both as they need an adult to help them complete their booklet and as part of our commitment to safeguarding.

By attending Mass regularly and each preparation session we are showing our children how important these Sacraments are to us and how much we value them.

By making a particular effort to pray regularly at home you will give your children important spiritual tools to deepen their friendship with Jesus Christ now, and for their life ahead.

The scriptures teach us that we should show our love in action, and there will be times when we ask for volunteers to help with various tasks. Please set a good example to your children by offering to help.

We understand that there are times and circumstances when you cannot attend such as illness, but not because of football practice, or swimming gala. There will be no other time to catch up on the session you miss. If you are unable to attend please let us know. If you miss more than **2 sessions** you will not be able to complete the course this year and will have to do the next one.

**Is there a cost?**

No. The parish will provide the materials for the programme as part of its pastoral activity. However, the parish is funded entirely by offerings from parishioners and needs to contribute to the shared costs of the diocese as well as our own direct costs. If you don’t regularly contribute as members of the parish you are invited to consider doing so. Gift aiding your contributions enable us to reclaim the tax. Parishioners give by standing order, occasional direct transfers, and cash or contactless in the weekly collection.

**A note on behaviour**

We are committed to the wellbeing of everyone who participates in the life of the church, for they are created in God’s image and likeness and we will not tolerate unacceptable behaviour from adults or children.

If we need to meet online, please remember to behave and dress as you would if we were face to face and to ensure that any others in view or sound do likewise.

Please remember that we are all volunteers running this programme, who have given up our time to prepare and run this programme.

**How do I formally register?**

Step 1. Please register your family on the parish online database. This form will go live in a week or so, and you will receive a link.

Step 2. Complete the online form for First Holy Communion, and send the programme team a copy of your child’s baptism certificate if they were not baptised here. The form will be available later this summer and a link sent.

**And finally**

We are delighted to welcome you to the programme and very much look forward to working with you and your child over the coming months. May God bless you in the challenging and exciting role of parenthood and guide you as you prepare your child for such an important step in life.

Any queries please email [communionatsteds@gmail.com](%22mailto%3A)

Fr Jonathan & The Programme Team

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