

Religious Education Handbook For Families



DIOCESE OF VENICE IN FLORIDA
Department of Education
Office of Religious Education

July 2024

Statement on Parental Partnership in Parish Religious Education

Parents are the primary educators of their children; this is an essential tenet of the Catholic faith¹. We, the catechists and administrators of the Diocese of Venice, consider it a privilege and a blessing to work alongside you in the education and spiritual formation of your children. When you choose to partner with our diocesan Religious Education programs, you commit to a collaboration of effort and good will, opening the door to a world of truth, goodness, and beauty.

Parents, as primary educators, are their child's greatest influencers and role models - physically, mentally, and spiritually. Your personal relationship with God, participation in the Holy Mass, and your involvement in your parish community will influence the ways in which your child relates to God and others. Parents are the "most influential agents of catechesis for their children" and "catechize primarily by the witness of their Christian lives and by their love for the faith"². Catholic values and Christian behavior demonstrated in the home and reinforced through parish Religious Education helps to ensure these values take root in your child.

Family centered catechesis, liturgical celebrations, and parish sponsored events are excellent ways to help families grow closer to God and strengthen familial bonds. Your parish will provide resources throughout the year which will seek to strengthen and affirm your responsibility as the first educator³ of your child. Engaging in your child's catechetical journey prioritizes your role as the primary educator of your child and creates opportunities to aid in the catechetical formation of your child.

During these formative years, your child needs constant support at home as well as from their parish community to develop his/her moral, intellectual, social, cultural, and physical capacity. Parents must trust the sincerity of the efforts of their educational partners - parish catechists - in their quest to share the fullness of our faith, reinforce virtues, and invite students into a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ.

As a gentle reminder, when conflicts arise, we follow the Catholic principle of subsidiarity; that is, concerns should always be brought, first, to the staff member, catechist, or administrator to which the parent has the concern. It is vital that both parents and catechists model respect and strive to see the dignity in each other, so that they may work in union towards the growth and betterment of the child.

Nothing is more important, or more beautiful, than the task of forming knowledgeable, kind, and moral Christian citizens of tomorrow. We are grateful for the opportunity to evangelize and catechize your children and we look forward to working alongside you.

Yours in Christ,

Lisa Zolkos

Lisa Zolkos, Diocese of Venice - Director of Catechesis and Faith Formation

¹ *Gravissimum Educationis* 3

² *(National Directory of Catechesis, p234)*.

³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §2223

Attendance at Religious Education Sessions

Diocesan policy states that parishioners must register their children in their home parish for Religious Education classes/programming.

It is the parent or guardian's responsibility to report the absence of their child from the catechetical session. Please check with your director or coordinator of religious education for your parish's procedure to alert administrators and catechists to absence.

Additionally, parents should check with their child's catechist to find out how the missed work, retreat, or event during absence can be made up.

Attendance at Sunday Mass

Sunday Mass fulfills God's law. The Third Commandment is, "Remember to keep holy the Sabbath" (Ex 20:8; Dt 5:12). God's law makes compulsory what we should desire for ourselves. As Catholics, we keep the Sabbath holy by fulfilling our obligation to attend Mass (CCC 2174-2178).

Jesus's parents "fulfilled all of the prescriptions of the law" (Luke 2:39) Not only did they follow God's law, but they raised Jesus to follow it as well. Jesus declared "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill ... whoever obeys and teaches these commandments will be called greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 5:17, 5:19).

Sunday Mass attendance is required to grow in our own faith journey and necessary to model faithful worship to those we desire to aid in theirs.

Agreement with Parent/Guardians

Parents/guardians should sign an agreement that they will abide by the rules outlined in the handbook.

Alcohol

Alcohol is not allowed on parish premises when students are present.

Calendar

Parish religious education programs should have a minimum of 30 contact hours with students per year. At the beginning of each academic year, a calendar will be provided to the parent/guardian listing the dates for religious education, safe environment training for children, special parish events, etc. This should include beginning and end times for sessions, session dates, dates for holidays, and make-up days for inclement weather.

Code of Student Conduct

Attached as Appendix – presented by parish Director/Coordinator of Religious Education.

Communication

The preferred method of communication between catechist and the parent/guardian should be written and mailed or electronically sent unless they can be handed directly to the parent/guardian by a catechist or staff member.

Custodial Rights of Parent/Guardians

The Director should be informed by the custodial parent/guardian of the rights of the noncustodial parent/guardian as they pertain to the child's participation in the program as well as release from the program. Legal documentation, if available, should be kept in the student's file.

Discipline

The Diocese of Venice is committed to providing all students with a safe learning environment in which all members of its community are treated with human dignity and respect.

It is the responsibility of the catechist to maintain discipline and classroom management, and to provide an environment conducive to learning. Under no circumstances should physical contact be used as a form of discipline (refer to Safe Environment training).

As our faith is predicated on forgiveness and reconciliation, a restorative justice approach should be employed when mitigating disruptions and improper actions in class. A restorative justice approach will help bring students into "right relationship" or communion with self, others, and God. This method will not only aid in classroom management but will serve to assist in the formation of conscience for our youth as well.

1. Help the child to discern the inappropriateness of their action (word or deed);
2. Help the child understand the Christ-centered options they should have chosen;
3. Help the child to "make it right" and restore their relationships with peers and catechists.

Protecting against and addressing bullying is critical for creating and maintaining a safe, secure and positive climate. Florida Statute defines bullying as "systematically and chronically inflicting physical hurt or psychological distress on one or more students or employees that is severe or pervasive." Bullying behavior is viewed as being in direct opposition to the mission of the Diocese of Venice and in conflict with the fundamental teachings of the Catholic Church. Students are expected to treat each other with dignity and respect and are entitled to freedom from any kind of harassment. No form of harassment will be tolerated.

The catechetical program reserves the right to remove a student from the group session:

- if it is believed that the student would benefit significantly from an individual or smaller group situation,
- if the student's behavior is seriously inhibiting the learning of others in the group,
- if temporary removal is used as a disciplinary measure for serious and persistent disruptive behavior.

Such action should be preceded by a consultation involving the student, the family, the catechist, priest, and the director/coordinator of religious education. If, in an extreme case, the director finds it necessary to remove a student from the program entirely, the final decision must be approved by the Pastor.

Dismissal

Unscheduled early dismissals should never occur. At the end of the catechetical session children are to be promptly dismissed to the care of their parent, guardian, or designated adult.

The parent, guardian, or designated adult must be someone who has been formally declared in writing at registration on the student record card. If someone other than the parent, guardian, or designated adult is to pick up the child, this change must be made in writing to the director/coordinator prior to the session in question. This request should include: the name of the child, person picking up the child, the designated date changes will occur, the parent/guardians contact information should further clarification be necessary, and a signature from the parent/guardian.

The recommended method of dismissal is to have the parent or designated adult come to the classroom where the children are waiting under the care of the Catechist. If an individual student needs to be dismissed early, the request should be made in writing by the parent to the director/coordinator prior to the scheduled class. This request should include: the name of the child, person picking up the child, the designated date and time of pickup, the parent/guardians contact information should further clarification be necessary, and a signature from the parent/guardian.

Parents should instruct their children to report to the director/coordinator in the unforeseen event of not being picked up at dismissal. The child will then remain with the director/coordinator until the child's parent arrives. Catechetical staff are not permitted to drive students home.

Dress Code

Dress code should emphasize modest dress. A good reference is the local public school district student dress code or Catholic school dress down day attire.

Electronics in the Classroom/Program

Students should be discouraged from bringing electronic devices, toys, radios, iPads, iPods, cell phones, gaming devices, or pocket organizers to class. Exceptions to this include educational assistive technology deemed necessary.

Emergency Procedures

These instructions are given orally to all students by their catechists but should also be provided in writing and posted inside each classroom space. There should be a brief, clear statement of emergency procedures, including fire, weather, and bomb threats. Fire and police telephone numbers should be posted in various conspicuous places on the premises. In each area where catechetical sessions are held, a diagram of emergency exit routes must be on display. A record of each evacuation of the premises, including fire drills, must be kept on file. Parish Directors and Coordinators will provide the procedure for notification of the parent/guardian and/or emergency personnel should an accident or illness occur.

Field Trips

If a field trip is planned, parent/guardian(s) must sign the form: **Consent, Release of Liability and indemnification for Field Trip Form**. These are located on the Diocesan website under Diocesan Forms/Children and Youth.

It is recommended that the signature on this form be verified by comparing it with the signature on the student information record. Telephone calls should not be accepted in lieu of written permission forms.

In situations where volunteers have agreed to use their own automobiles to transport children for various catechetical program activities, the volunteers should understand that the automobile policy of the volunteer responds first in the event of any accident (insurance follows the car, not the driver), and be approved by Risk Management. Anyone who volunteers to drive children must have completed and been approved through the Diocesan Safe Environment Background Screening and fingerprinting processes without exception.

Homework

If homework is to be given, there should be a clear policy regarding the requirements of the assignment/task and what the permissible consequences of not completing the assigned task/homework. It is highly recommended that when homework is assigned it be a whole family catechesis assignment that will strengthen the familial bond as well as provide an opportunity for the student (and family members) to grow in his/her faith.

Medical Condition of Student

The catechist should be informed about any student who has a special medical condition which could present itself in the session or which could affect the teaching/learning environment (e.g. allergies, asthma, auditory or visual impairment, possibility of seizures, learning disability, hyperactivity, attention deficit disorder, etc.). A statement of confidentiality regarding medical conditions should be included in the registration packet.

Parents should be discouraged from bringing food/snacks to religious education classes because some children may have medical restrictions or allergies to certain foods or ingredients.

Medical Emergency Information

Every child should have on file in the parish religious education office the **Request for Medical Procedure Affidavit, Medical Release of Liability and Indemnification** which contains the medical emergency release. This form must be reviewed every year and bear the original signature of the parent/guardian.

Any changes to the record must be made in writing by the parent/guardian.

Medication

No medication of any kind (including both prescription and over-the-counter) should be administered to, or taken by, the student during the parish religious education program. If an exception must be made, the parent/guardian must provide a written request and directives from the doctor and have the request approved by the Pastor.

Mission Statement

The parish handbook or Parent Agreement should contain a Mission Statement of the parish as well as the goals and objectives of the Religious Education program.

Records

A parent/guardian has the right to inspect any and all of their child's records; all persons except appropriate parish program authorities should be denied access without written parent/guardian permission or a court order.

Student records should be kept for a minimum of seven years.

Retention of Students

The parent/guardian handbook should clearly state the requirements for continued retention of students. Excessive absence, poor classroom behavior, and lack of participation can affect retention. The program policy and procedures for addressing this situation should be clearly explained, including alternatives to repeating the grade level.

Sacraments of Initiation

A separate handbook for the Sacraments of Initiation should be provided to families by their parish.

Safe Environment Training for Children

As stated in the Charter for the Protection of Young People by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, all diocesan personnel, volunteers, catechists, minors, and vulnerable adults must participate in Safe Environment programming within all parishes and schools in every diocese in America. The USCCB has mandated compliance in participation in and reporting of programming for Protecting God's Children (adults) and Safe Environment Training (children and vulnerable adults). The mission of the Safe Environment Program is:

- To provide required training programs for children and young people in our Catholic schools and Parish religious education programs. This includes age-appropriate materials pertaining to personal safety and information about improper touching and relationships.
- To provide required education for all active lay employees, priests, religious, deacons, and those volunteers regularly involved with minors, and parents, as to the issue of abuse of children including the detection, prevention and reporting of child abuse.
- To thoroughly screen and evaluate the background of all employees within the Diocese of Venice – clergy, religious and laity – and those volunteers who work with children and young people.
- To hold all diocesan employees (clergy, religious and laity) and those volunteers who work with children and young people – to Christ-centered and professional codes of conduct.

The Safe Environment Program for adults (catechist, volunteers, and employees) consists of two core components to help ensure a safe environment for children: Background Checking and Fingerprinting, and Training and Awareness. **Every volunteer, catechist, and employee must complete the Safe Environment requirements to work with children and vulnerable adults regardless of the commitment (time) they will be exposed to children and vulnerable adults. No exception.**

The Diocese engages Virtus and CASE for data management and video training programs for Protecting God's Children – Safe Environment Training through education and prevention training for adults and children.

Snacks

It is recommended that the religious education program avoid serving food during the sessions because some children may have medical restrictions or allergies to certain foods or ingredients

Special Learning

Children with special learning needs should be fully welcomed into their parish catechetical, Sacramental, and youth ministry programs and should not be denied access to programming because of their disability. Catechesis for persons with special needs requires sensitivity, compassion, and a clear understanding of the needs of the child in question as well as an evaluation of the resources available to the parish. Evangelization and catechesis for individuals with disabilities must be customized in content and method to fit the unique needs of each student.

Most children with disabilities who come to a parish religious education program are part of an inclusive education program in their public school and are currently learning side by side with their peers. Great care should be taken to avoid isolation of these persons through fragmentation of programs or anti-Christian attitudes. Regardless of ability, a person with special needs has the same right to participate in the fullness of our faith including Sacraments.

Support is the key to successful inclusion. As far as is possible, children should be integrated into the full catechetical activities of the parish. Special needs children should be invited to learn our faith side by side with children of the same chronological age. Even if a child has developmental disabilities, he or she should not be placed with younger children since this action does not respect the dignity of the human person.

In the event it is necessary for children or youth to receive formation in a specialized setting, they should be included in all special events of their parish community, such as liturgies, social events, and recreational activities so that they can receive the support of their community of faith in fulfillment of their baptismal promises.

Supervision

Supervision is not provided before or after the times specified by the parish for religious education, programming, or diocesan approved, parish sponsored events.

Visitors

No unauthorized persons (those who have not completed Safe Environment requirements) should be allowed in the area where the catechetical sessions are taking place. Parents and other visitors must go directly to the Catechetical Office or designated reception area during scheduled times of catechetical programming. No exceptions.

Volunteers

Parents/guardians should be directed to the Diocesan **Safe Environment Policy** and the requirements that apply to such service. Any volunteer, chaperone, or assistant working with children and vulnerable adults (for any amount of time) in the Diocese of Venice must undergo Safe Environment training, complete a background check, and be fingerprinted. No exceptions.

Youth Outreach

A separate handbook may be supplied for Youth Outreach.