“This is My Body”
An Anchor Supplement on First Holy Communion
The fathers of the Second Vatican Council taught that the sacrifice of the Eucharist is the “source and the summit of the Christian life” (Lumen Gentium 11): the source, because it is the starting point from which everything in the Christian life should flow; the summit, because it is the end toward which everything in the Christian life should go. The Eucharist is the beginning and the goal of the Christian life because the Eucharist is Jesus Christ, who must be the “alpha and the omega,” of any life that is authentically Christian.

For this reason, the training of people to live a truly eucharistic life is one of the most important things that the Church does. Just as the Church as a whole draws her life from the Eucharist, so, too, she seeks to form individual Catholics to draw their life from the same divine font. One of the principal ways she fulfills this mission is through the attention given to children preparing to receive Jesus in holy Communion for the first time and to continue to receive him with love the second, third, fourth, next and last times.

Such training — done at home by faithful families, in Catholic schools, Religious Education programs and by the Church as a whole through the liturgical pedagogy of the Mass — often does not make headlines, even in Catholic papers, probably since it is so routine that its importance can too easily be overlooked. But every edition of this paper could justly begin with a front-page headline, “Jesus Christ visits St. Mary’s on Sunday,” or “The eternal Son of God gives his Body, Blood, soul and divinity to faithful at St. John’s,” or “The Word of God still dwells among us in the tabernacle at St. Joseph’s.”

This supplement is an attempt to give attention to the most important event that happens in southeastern Massachusetts on any given day, and to the preparation of the next generation to recognize, esteem, worthily receive and live in union with it. We hope that it will rekindle “eucharistic amazement” among all Catholics in the diocese, no matter how young.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. Roger J. Landry
Executive Editor
Preparing students to receive Communion

By Kenneth J. Souza

Anchor Staff

FALL RIVER — For the 40 second-graders receiving first holy Communion at St. Michael’s Parish, the long solemn walk down the church’s center aisle began more than a year earlier, when they entered the two-year program as first-graders.

After two years of learning their prayers, studying about the Eucharist, attending a retreat, doing community service alongside the parish’s confirmation students, and making their first confession, they were ready to receive Jesus’ body for the first time.

With the girls donning white dresses and the boys wearing matching white suits, they processed down the aisle with their hands clasped prayerfully together in front of them. Although they tried to contain themselves, there was just a hint of nervous excitement that brought out an occasional giggle or caused them to fidget in line.

“I’m excited,” said Juliana Almeida. “I learned about taking the Eucharist and walking down the aisle in church. Jesus gave everybody his Blood and his Body at the last supper so I can receive Communion now every time I go to Mass.”

“I’m so happy that I’m going to receive the Eucharist and it’s going to forgive all my sins,” said Zachary Silva. “I’m ready to receive Jesus … and then I’m going to have a party.”

For Amy Madeira, second-grade teacher at St. Michael’s School and the coordinator for the parish’s first Communion program for the past 11 years, it’s a proud moment and the culmination of two years of training.

“A lot of the kids are nervous about receiving Jesus,” Madeira said. “They ask ‘how do we receive Jesus? Will he stay with us?’ But they understand a lot more as the weeks go on. The other day Father Edward Correia gave the students a tour and explained about the chalice and the altar, explaining the vestments and all the items on the altar so they’re able to understand the Mass a bit more.”

“We spend a lot of time preparing them,” said Holy Union Sister Marie Baldi, principal at St. Michael’s School. “This year we started additional, mandatory liturgies to bring the faith formation and school children together. We’re doing more and more like that … we’re all St. Michael’s children.”

Of the 40 first communicants in this year’s class, roughly half — or 16 — come from the parochial school while the rest are members of the religious education program.

“I think it’s a happy time but I also hope it’s something that really means something to them and I hope they carry it through,” Sister Baldi said. “The excitement isn’t just on first Communion day, that it’s continual as they receive the Eucharist.”

For parish faith formation teacher Anna Soares, the challenge of keeping the kids focused on the sacrament and the fact that they are receiving the Lord for the first time is always difficult.

“They always tend to focus on the party afterwards,” Soares said. “But by the time first Communion comes I think they understand what it’s all about — about receiving Jesus for the first time — and I think they really get focused. Ultimately the kids are happy and they want to make their parents and family proud.”

Soares began working with the St. Michael’s Parish first Communion program 12 years ago, when her own children were preparing to receive the sacrament.

“I love it,” she said. “I enjoyed it so much that I just couldn’t let it go — I’ve been coming back ever since.”

She said it remains a pivotal moment in a young child’s faith formation: the point at which they sense they truly become one with God and his Church.

“They all get a little nervous, but when they arrive at church and see all their family members and friends and the banners we’ve put up with their names, they get excited,” Soares said. “You can see it on everyone’s faces as they walk in.”

The infectious joy and exuberance of this year’s class of first communicants is readily apparent as they loudly proclaim in song “My God is an awesome God” after receiving the Eucharist for the first time.

“It’s a moment that their teachers hope will stay with them long after all the banners, suits, dresses and, yes, even the parties and gifts have long been forgotten,” said Ethan Borges.

His classmate Trevor Vieira couldn’t agree more.

“I’ll be able to go up to receive Communion during Mass from now on,” he said proudly.
GUAIMACA, Honduras — It’s clear that the people of Guaimaca don’t have the material possessions that many of their brothers and sisters in the Diocese of Fall River do, but the treasure chests of their faith lives are as filled as anyone’s. Illustrating the beauty of the Catholic Church, Christ’s gift to his followers, the sacraments, are the same in Honduras, on Cape Cod, or in Rwanda. It’s the universality of our Church that keeps all of us spiritually connected as family.

As folks in southeastern Massachusetts joyfully bid adieu to a rainy April and welcome May, the month of our Blessed Mother, hundreds of young members of the Catholic family will receive the great gift of the Eucharist for the first time. The same blessed events are taking place 2,100 miles to our southwest at the diocesan mission in Guaimaca.

In an interview with Father Craig A. Pregana, pastor of St. Rose of Lima and St. Francis parishes in Guaimaca, The Anchor discovered many similarities and differences in preparing for and receiving first Communion in Honduras and Massachusetts.

With regards to how children perceive receiving the Body of Christ, Father Pregana said, “I don’t think there is much of a difference in the minds of the children. Children are children and their understanding and desire are the same.” He added, “Preparing children to receive Communion for the first time is a pleasure because they’re so open to what they’re being taught. They are getting closer to God in a spiritual way.”

Like families in the Fall River Diocese, those in Guaimaca share with their children the joy and sacredness of the day. “The families here celebrate the day because it is a special one,” said Father Pregana. “For many of them, it’s a reminder of how they celebrated when they were children themselves.”

Sacramental preparation for the special day is also similar. The catechists in Guaimaca have a list of themes they cover with the young students. Because of the poverty not many of the parents can afford to buy a catechism book, so the teachers photocopy whatever materials they need. “Teacher gave me preparation and it felt great to receive the host for the first time,” Luis Alberto Mejia Amador, age nine, told The Anchor.

Concepcion Garcia is a delegada (delegate of the Word of God in the villages) and a catechist, and plays an important role in preparing her young charges for the big day. “I decided to become a catechist because as an adult in the community I felt it was my responsibility to share the faith with the children, if not it felt like the ‘sin of omission,’” she said. “We adults can’t just sit by and expect the children to learn by themselves. We must evangelize and teach the faith to them.”

Father Pregana said the children also take part in a retreat as part of the preparation process, to “practice” receiving. “They enjoy it and they clearly understand the difference between the bread they receive at practice and the consecrated host they receive on first Communion day,” he said.

First Communion day in the Guaimacan parishes is much the same as in the Diocese of Fall River. “The children dress in their nice clothes and sit together in a group: boys on one side, girls on another,” said Father Pregana. “The songs are lively and everyone sings. One difference is that the children all bring a white candle which they light during the Mass as a reminder of their baptism. They continue their Christian initiation with their first Communion.”

“There was great joy to receive Jesus for the first time,” said Fatima Yulisa Amador, age 11.

Following the Mass, families gather at their homes for a celebration lunch with godparents and other special guests. “Since it’s a celebration the family will try to have a lunch with chicken, or some kind of meat, to accompany the rice,” Father Pregana said.
‘Children are children’
Continued from page 4

said. “Of course, some families are not able to do anything. So we have a large cake in the parish hall after the first Communion so all the kids can participate.”

Father Pregana explained that in addition to the Mass in the large town of Guaimaca, there are also approximately 25 villages that also prepare their children to receive first Communion. “Those celebrations are different because the families are generally poorer and it’s reflected in the way the children are dressed,” he said. “The focus truly becomes the Eucharist and not on the clothing or decorations. My experience is that the decorations always add to the occasion, but the lack of them never diminishes the specialness of the day.”

“A recurring sentiment among the Honduran children when speaking about receiving Jesus was that they could now truly become members of the faith community. “I wanted to make my first Communion to be able to receive with the rest of the community,” added Fatima.

“Receiving the Body of Christ for the first time is not only a personal experience, it’s a communal one,” said Father Pregana. “They’re now able to share in the table of the Lord. The youngsters are getting closer to their older brothers and sisters and family, as they can now share Communion. They want to ‘be part of’ the rest of the community and they understand that sharing in Communion is an expression of that. It also means they can now be altar servers … which is a big deal here in the parish.”

Father Pregana added that following their first Communion, “The kids are very eager to come back and receive again. They proudly walk in the main aisle with their families, or come up on their own.”

For Father Pregana, as with many of his brother priests in the Diocese of Fall River, first Communion is a breath of fresh air when often their ministries are filled with comforting the sick and dying. “It reminds me and gives me hope that the next generation is receiving the faith passed along by their parents,” he commented.

While all first Communions “are special,” Father Pregana recalled a particularly humorous episode.

“I do remember one first Communion — rather comically — it was in one of our villages and a few young people from the youth group were accompanying me on the trip. I had put some sodas and cookies in the cooler for us to have on the trip.

“My intention was to preach a homily aimed at the children and compare the different forms of bread to highlight the difference in the eucharistic bread we share. So I brought along a piece of white bread, a cracker, and even a tortilla.

“We arrived at the village and we were setting up for Mass when I asked Manuel to bring in the small bag of breads from the cooler. I was chatting with the children while we waited. It took longer than it should have taken to bring the bread. Finally, Jessica returned looking a bit nervous. She said, ‘Padre, you know how you brought the soda and cookies for us to eat on the road? Well, I don’t know how to tell you but Manuel ate your homily.’ He had eaten the bread, crackers and tortilla that were to be my homily. We all had a good laugh … after.”

It doesn’t matter where one goes in the world, young members of the Catholic Church share the joy and excitement of receiving Jesus for the first of hopefully many, many times. It was Christ himself who said, “Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it at all.” Perhaps young Alberto sums it up best, “Receiving Jesus will help me to follow him better in my life. I want to follow the ways of Jesus.”

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Stay with me, Lord, for it is necessary to have You present so that I do not forget You. You know how easily I abandon You. Stay with me, Lord, because I am weak, and I need Your strength that I may not fall so often.

Stay with me, Lord, for You are my light, and without You I am in darkness. Stay with me, Lord, to show me Your will.

Stay with me, Lord, so that I hear Your voice and follow You. Stay with me, Lord, for I desire to love You very much and to be in Your company always.

Stay with me, Lord, if You wish me to be faithful to You. Stay with me, Lord, for as poor as my soul is I want it to be a place of consolation for You, a nest of love.

Amen.
Sacraments are a ‘family’ affair

By Patricia Pasternak
Special to The Anchor

FALL RIVER — The old adage “faith is caught not taught” continues to serve as a reminder that faith formation involves much more than attending “classes.” Sacraments are by their very nature communal and so when children begin to prepare for sacramental celebrations their individual families and their parish family need to be part of those preparations.

Preparing to celebrate first Communion also includes preparation for celebrating the sacrament of reconciliation as well. Who better than the parents — the ones who first taught their children to say, “I’m sorry,” when they did or said something hurtful — to help them to learn about God’s loving mercy and forgiveness? Parent-child catechetical sessions at home, in addition to a child’s regular Religious Education classes, enable parents communicate to their children the loving power of forgiveness.

Consider a session that focuses on the Gospel story of the Prodigal Son from the 15th chapter of St. Luke’s Gospel. Having the parents share that story with their children allows them to personalize it by including incidents from their own lives as a child or an adult. Discussion questions can lead them into conversations that allow them to share their faith with each another. Praying together allows them to give thanks to God, their loving Father. And the sharing of a tasty treat to symbolize the celebratory aspect of the story makes the learning experiential and concrete.

Parents always plan for a party following their child’s celebration of first Communion, but few, if any, plan one for their child’s celebration of first reconciliation. In fact, in nearly 20 years of planning such parish Reconciliation parties, I have never encountered any conflict with a home party being planned! In one of the parishes where I served, the parable of the Lost Sheep, also from Luke’s Gospel, was the reading during the communal penance service. The party that followed re-enforced the joy of the shepherd upon finding his lost sheep and a cake, designed and decorated in the shape of a lamb, was the delicious centerpiece at the dessert table, thanks to a talented parishioner there.

The goal of any first Communion program is to enable the child to participate as fully as possible in the weekly celebration of the Eucharist. So learning about the two main parts of the Mass, the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist — and the responses that are included in each part — is central. Once again, parish catechists must depend upon the parents to practice the responses with the children, not only at Mass but also at home.

Equally important is helping the parents to increase their understanding of and appreciation for the precious gift of the Eucharist. After years of feeling frustrated trying to package such wisdom into just a portion of the parent meeting, I discovered a better way — by drawing from a key element of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults.

From the earliest times of Christianity, the Lenten season had been seen as an intense period of immediate preparation for the celebration of the sacraments of initiation (baptism, confirmation and Eucharist). And so, a few years ago, I began asking families to re-adjust their weekend schedules so that we could all attend the same Mass for the Sundays of Lent. Making this “sacrifice” provides six opportunities for parents to learn a little more about the sacrament by adding just a brief teaching [10 minutes tops] at the end of Mass on such topics such as the role of Scripture in the Mass, the liturgical year, and the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. And the weekly gathering with their parish community is emphasized for the children by making it a part of their preparation.

These and other activities can provide a model for life-long faith formation. The Eucharist, which is the “source and summit” of our faith, will provide the nourishment and strength for the journey.

Patricia Pasternak is director of Religious Education, Holy Trinity Parish in Fall River.
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For most people, owning a dog is not simply a matter of having a pet, but of opening wide their hearts and homes, and totally embracing a new family member who just happens to be of the canine species. And why not? Dogs are rarely grouchy or too busy to play. Actually, it’s just the opposite. Dogs love and want to play with us, no matter how grouchy or busy we are. A dog’s love is unconditional. The main thing that causes a dog to hang his head and whimper is being penned up or kept apart from his people. Of course some dogs are bred just for show, and some are kept outside due to things like allergies, and so it’s just understood that these dogs won’t ever be a part of the family in the same way as a pooch who curls up on the couch with us, or wakes us up with slobber kisses.

It might seem an odd parallel, but I’d like to consider for a moment how our relationship with dogs and Jesus might be alike. Understand that I am comparing the experience of loving a family dog with the experience of loving Jesus, not the actual animal with the actual person of Jesus. I am doing this in order to give parents an image to share with their children in preparing them for the joy of first Communion. I propose that the faith life of our family, and therefore our understanding of Jesus in the Eucharist, might improve dramatically if we were to open wide our hearts and our homes and totally embrace Jesus like a beloved family member, instead of treating him like a show dog to be brought out only when it’s socially beneficial, or like an outdoor pet to be kept conveniently under our control.

The big story of our Catholic faith is that Jesus came down from heaven to join our human family. Jesus’ love for us is so doggedly unconditional, however, that even after he died for our sins, rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven, he did not abandon us. Instead, through the institution of the Eucharist, the giving of his Body and Blood for our spiritual food, he found a way to remain intimately present to us. In some ways, understanding this type of love is a deep mystery, and in other ways it’s really as obvious as how we know the unconditional love of a canine family member even though he cannot speak.

In considering how we as parents might best prepare our children to understand both the mystery and the reality of Jesus in the Eucharist, our overarching goal must be to let Jesus wiggle his way into our hearts and into our homes. We must love Jesus, even if imperfectly, and let him love us, because that love will spread like dog toys to every corner of our home. Specific ways to prepare our children at home to receive the Eucharist are many, and fall into categories according to age. From newborn to toddler, love your child and love yourself. Practice patience and forgiveness as you teach the ropes of Catholic parenting. Be with your child as much as is possible. Go to Mass together. Light candles, sing songs, read books, and watch media that gives glory to God. Say prayers at bedtime.

From toddler to preschooler, teach rote prayers to your child, introduce child-friendly saint and Bible stories, explain the parts of the Mass, and develop solid friendships with other Catholics. Expect your child to be kind in word and deed to his siblings. Let him say grace at meals.

From kindergarten to the age of receiving first Communion, expect your child to pay more and more attention during Mass. Quietly point out when the bread and wine become the Body and Blood. Bring your child to eucharistic adoration, even if for just 10 minutes. Teach him how to pray from his heart. Explain the great graces that flow from the sacrament of reconciliation and avail yourself and your child of these graces frequently.

As with canine family members, I can almost see Jesus hanging his head and weeping when we leave him out of our lives and treat the church building as if it were his “pen.” First Communion is not a graduation ceremony, but an initiation ceremony. We can wow our children with the miracle that each time they receive Communion, they welcome Jesus into their very bodies, the most intimate and cozy home they have to offer to him. If we compare the joy of receiving the Eucharist to that of bringing home a new puppy each and every Sunday, I guarantee that our children will understand the type of love Jesus is offering.

Heidi is an author, photographer, and full-time mother. She and her husband raise their six children in Falmouth. homegrownfaith@gmail.com.
The Eucharist is a source of heroic strength for children

There is no doubt that an unforgettable meeting with Jesus is first holy Communion, a day to be remembered as one of life’s most beautiful.

The Eucharist, instituted by Christ at the Last Supper on the night before his passion, is a sacrament of the New Covenant — the greatest of the sacraments. In this sacrament, the Lord becomes food for the soul under the appearances of bread and wine.

Children receive this sacrament solemnly a first time — in first holy Communion — and are encouraged to receive it afterward as often as possible in order to remain in close friendship with Jesus.

To be able to receive holy Communion, as you know, it is necessary to have received baptism: this is the first of the sacraments and the one most necessary for salvation. Baptism is a great event. In the Church’s first centuries, when baptism was received mostly by grown-ups, the ceremony ended with receiving the Eucharist, and was as solemn as first holy Communion is today.

Later on, when baptism began to be given mainly to newborn babies — and this is the case of many of you, dear children, so that in fact you do not remember the day of your baptism — the more solemn celebration was transferred to the moment of first holy Communion.

Every boy and every girl belonging to a Catholic family knows all about this custom: first holy Communion is a great family celebration. On that day, together with the one who is making his or her first holy Communion, the parents, brothers, sisters, relatives, godparents, and sometimes also the instructors and teachers, generally receive the Eucharist.

The day of first holy Communion is also a great day of celebration in the parish. I remember as though it were yesterday when, together with the other boys and girls of my own age, I received the Eucharist for the first time in the parish church of my town. This event is usually commemorated in a family photo, so that it will not be forgotten. Photos like these generally remain with a person all through his or her life.

As time goes by, people take out these pictures and experience once more the emotions of those moments; they return to the purity and joy experienced in that meeting with Jesus, the one who out of love became the redeemer of man.

For how many children in the history of the Church has the Eucharist been a source of spiritual strength, sometimes even heroic strength? How can we fail to be reminded, for example, of holy boys and girls who lived in the first centuries and are still known and venerated throughout the Church? St. Agnes, who lived in Rome; St. Agatha, who was martyred in Sicily; St. Tarcisius, a boy who is rightly called the "martyr of the Eucharist" because he preferred to die rather than give up Jesus, whom he was carrying under the appearance of bread.
Forty first communicants from St. Michael's Parish line up to process into church to receive the sacrament during an April 19 Mass celebration. (Photo by Kenneth J. Souza)

Second-grade students from St. Michael's Parish wait to process into church to receive the sacrament during a Mass celebration April 19. (Photo by Kenneth J. Souza)

Emma Ventura receives first holy Communion from Father Francis Moy, SJ, at St. Mary's Church in South Dartmouth while her proud parents and brother look on. (Photo courtesy of Maré Studios and Gallery, 2919 Pawtucket Avenue, Riverside, R.I.)

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