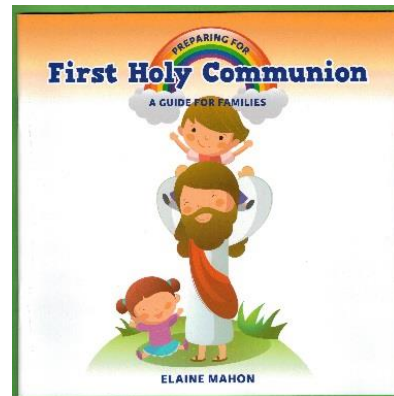
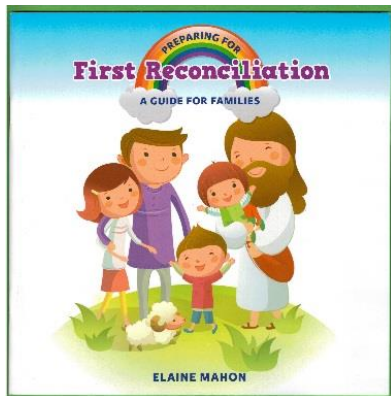


Preparing for First Reconciliation & First Holy Communion



Elaine Mahon. *Preparing for First Reconciliation – A Guide for Families*.
Dublin: Veritas Publications 2012.

Elaine Mahon. *Preparing for First Holy Communion – A Guide for Families*.
Dublin: Veritas Publications 2013.

A Review by Éanna Johnson PhD

February 2017

Overall Conclusions:

It is good in principle to have booklets to help prepare Catholic children to receive the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Holy Communion (Eucharist) for the first time. It is also good in principle that these Booklets are designed as Guides for Families, because it is so important to involve parents / guardians in the education in faith of the children, in partnership with the Catholic school and parish.

An issue which arises in catechesis of young people is discerning how much content should be included for their particular age and stage, while other relevant material may legitimately be deferred to later stages when pupils have grown in maturity and understanding. One can continue learning about the Sacraments all one's life and never plumb the full depths of meaning. However, at each stage there is a certain completeness appropriate to the integrity of the teaching, and omission of key essential information can lead to deficient and even false teaching.

The writer of these two Booklets is Elaine Mahon, who is also principal writer of *Grow in Love* for 1st and 2nd Classes ¹, which prepare children to receive the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Holy Communion. These two Booklets include much good material, but omission of essential elements of faith mean that they fail to present authentic Catholic teaching. In addition, the Booklets tend to be overly 'horizontal', with undue focus on the material to the neglect of the spiritual. For these reasons the Booklets could not be recommended for preparation of Catholic children to receive First Reconciliation and Holy Communion. ²

The Trinity: The Holy Trinity is the fundamental truth of the Faith, the foundation of the entire 'hierarchy of truths' of the Faith, including the Sacraments. Simple teaching of the Trinity can be given to even the youngest of school children. These booklets have no teaching on the Trinity, while the omissions seem so deliberate as to effectively deny the Trinity. The Sign of the Cross is the simplest of Trinitarian prayers, and is widely used in Catholic catechesis to introduce children to the Trinity. The Booklets refer to the 'Sign of the Cross' but do not even give the text, let alone use it to teach about the Trinity.

'God' is often mentioned, but 'God the Father' is not featured, while 'God' is likened to 'a mother or father'. Jesus is presented as a good human being, but his divinity is not taught, and he is never referred to as 'God the Son'. Jesus is occasionally referred to as 'God's Son', but this is not a statement of divinity, because all the baptised are called 'children of God'. The Holy Spirit is not mentioned.

The Church teaches that the Trinity is foundational to all the sacraments – the creative goodness of the God the Father, the saving sacrifice of Jesus, God the Son, on the cross, and the grace of God the Holy Spirit ³. These Booklets on Reconciliation and Eucharist should introduce a simple understanding of the Trinity for children and parents as a foundation for understanding of the Sacraments, but do not. This is most serious, because a religion without the Trinity, as presented in these Booklets, is not Christianity.

¹ Council for Catechetics of Irish Episcopal Conference. *Grow in Love Series*. Dublin: Veritas Publications, 2016.

² These booklets lack the necessary approval of the Catholic Church (Canon Law: 823-829). A book that has the necessary Church approval, covers both First Reconciliation and Communion, and could be recommended without reservation is: Deirdre Mary Ascough, *My First Holy Communion*. Clonmacnois Press, 2010,2012. Also available in Irish: *Mo Chéad Chomaoineach Naofa*.

³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) 1076-1134.

Jesus: Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, became both God and man to save the human race from sin through his sacrifice on the cross, to teach us through word and example, and sent the Holy Spirit to be our guide until Jesus' second coming at the end of time. The Booklets present Jesus as no more than a good man, whose mission was to teach people that God loved them and they must love one another. In this the Booklets present a false Jesus, one who is no different in essence from the long line of Old Testament prophets. Jesus Christ is at the heart of the Sacraments, he instituted them all. The Booklets' omissions result in the presentations on the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Communion lacking life and meaning because the real Jesus is missing.

Sacraments: A Sacrament is an outward sign instituted by Jesus Christ to give grace – the outer sign helps us to understand the invisible grace. There are seven Sacraments of the Church – Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Reconciliation, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders and Marriage. The Booklets do not mention grace and do not teach the nature of a Sacrament nor the seven Sacraments. These are a serious omissions, because how can pupils understand Reconciliation and Eucharist if they do not understand grace and sacrament? It is also vital for pupils to have a basic understanding of Baptism and Holy Orders, because these Sacraments are intimately connected with Reconciliation and Eucharist.

Baptism & Holy Orders: It is good that both Booklets include Baptism, but seriously inadequate that Baptism is presented as no more than becoming part of God's family, rather like a human joining ritual. Teaching on Baptism should include that the Sacrament is administered by pouring water on the person's head, while calling on the Holy Trinity, saying 'I baptise you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit', and that the graces of Baptism bring forgiveness of original sin and all personal sins, birth into the new life as children of God the Father, and members of the Church, the Body of Christ.

Holy Orders is the Sacrament that gives the ordained priest the spiritual powers to pronounce forgiveness of sins in God's name, and to change the bread and wine into the body and blood, soul and divinity of Christ. The Booklets do not teach about, nor even mention, Holy Orders, thereby inferring that the priest, as an ordinary man, can forgive sins and effect transubstantiation, which even the pupils must see is ridiculous!

Decline in Faith: The Booklet on First Holy Communion observes that, 'It is a sad reality that many children celebrate their First Holy Communion with great enthusiasm and then don't continue to go to Mass until they begin to prepare for the Sacrament of Confirmation'. This appears to be common experience in parishes in Ireland, and the children don't come back to Mass again after Confirmation, except for special occasions like weddings and funerals. Tragically this phenomenon became widespread in the developed world ⁴ following the post-Vatican II introduction of deficient and defective catechesis programmes, starting with the '*Dutch Catechism*' in 1966⁵. Our own precipitous decline in young people's faith started with introduction of similar unsatisfactory catechetical programmes in Irish Catholic schools forty years ago. Sadly these two Booklets lack the capacity to improve matters, because they repeat the deficiencies that caused the problem in the first place.

⁴ Congregation for the Clergy. *General Directory for Catechesis*, 181. Dublin: Veritas Publications, 1998.

⁵ Higher Catechetical Institute, Nijmegen. *A New Catechism – Catholic Faith for Adults*. New York: Herder & Herder, 1967.

Preparing for First Reconciliation – A Guide for Families

This Booklet has good aspects, but also suffers from the problems as noted above: the omission of the Holy Trinity, the presentation of Jesus as no more than a human being, the omission of teaching on the nature of 'sacrament', deficient teaching on Baptism, and omission of teaching on the Sacrament of Holy Orders (specifically for this Booklet the spiritual power of the Sacrament to forgive sins in the name of God, the Holy Trinity). For these reasons this Booklet could not be recommended to Catholic families for preparation of children for the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

In relation to morality the Booklet gives Jesus' teaching as no more than to love God and other people. Jesus did indeed give this teaching as the greatest commandment of the Old Testament, the Law of Moses (Mt.22:24-40). However, Jesus did not say that this was the only moral law that was needed. On the contrary he said he had not come to abolish the Law, but to fulfil it ⁶, which he demonstrated by affirming the Ten Commandments and giving many teachings on morality, especially the Beatitudes ⁷. The Church has followed Jesus' example, knowing that we human beings are all limited and fallen, needing much more moral guidance than the basic commandment to love God and neighbour. The Ten Commandments have a special place in both Old and New Testaments, and have been wisely used as a moral framework by the Church ever since ⁸.

The Booklet does not recognise any moral commandment or guidance coming from God or Church, other than Jesus' teaching to love God and other people. This means that young children are left to themselves to decide what is loving or not, a kind of DIY morality. There are examples given of right and wrong behaviour, which are not unreasonable, but are only ideas coming from the Booklet's writer, not God's objective moral commandments. This applies particularly to examination of conscience, for which the Booklet should have followed the Church's wise recommendation to use the Ten Commandments as guide ⁹. Sin is mentioned a few times, but not explained or defined, which is unsatisfactory.

It is good to include the *Confiteor*, also the Parable of the Prodigal Son, which is an appropriate choice to illustrate the meaning of God's forgiveness.

It is good for the Booklet to present the steps involved in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and the words used by penitent and priest, which are very valuable in teaching children how to approach the Sacrament.

The Booklet includes an 'Act of Sorrow', as follows: *O my God, I thank you for loving me. I am sorry for all my sins, for not loving others and not loving you. Help me to live like Jesus and not sin again. Amen.*

This 'Act of Sorrow' has good elements, but also deficiencies in comparison with an 'Act of Contrition' recommended by the Church ¹⁰, as follows: *O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee, and I detest all my sins because of thy just punishments, but most of all because they offend Thee, my God, who art all good and deserving of my love. I firmly resolve with the help of Thy grace to sin no more and to avoid the near occasions of sin. Amen.*

⁶ Matthew 5:17-19.

⁷ Matthew 5:3-12.

⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2052-2557.

⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1454.

¹⁰ *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*. 193.

The language of this 'Act of Contrition' could be adapted for use with children (e.g. 'near occasions of sin' could be rendered 'whatever leads me to sin'), but it is the content which is most relevant. The Booklet's 'Act of Sorrow' puts love of God secondary to love of others; the 'Act of Contrition' correctly puts God first. The 'Act of Contrition' recognises spiritual consequences of sin, which are not recognised in the 'Act of Sorrow' (nor anywhere else in the Booklet). The 'Act of Contrition' has a firm resolution, a decision, not to sin again, which is essential for true contrition; there is no firm resolution in the 'Act of Sorrow', nor elsewhere in the Booklet, where there is only reference to 'trying' not to sin again, which falls short of true contrition.

The Church teaches that when the priest pronounces the words of Absolution (*'I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit'*) he is speaking in the name of Jesus Christ and in the spiritual power of the Sacrament of Ordination, which brings about forgiveness of the penitent's sins¹¹. The Booklet does not give the words of Absolution, says the priest *'will say a special blessing called an Absolution which shows that God has welcomed us back'*. This is problematic because it infers no more than the priest affirms that God has already forgiven the penitent anyway, which removes the reason for going to the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

There is encouragement for children, and parents, to go to the Sacrament of Reconciliation often, which is excellent in principle. The Booklet suggests this should be twice per year (Advent and Easter), but more often (e.g. monthly) would seem more prudent.

¹¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1448-1449.

Preparing for First Holy Communion – A Guide for Families

This Booklet presents many aspects of the Mass well. Regretfully however, there are crucial omissions which take out the very heart of the Mass, thereby failing to provide a satisfactory preparation for First Holy Communion.

The most fundamental truth of Christian faith is that the one true God is Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This Booklet does not recognise God as Trinity. At the heart of the Mass is Jesus, God the Son, second divine person of the Holy Trinity, true God and true Man, who came to earth to give his life as a sacrifice to save the human race from sin. This same Jesus will come again at the end of time to judge everyone and bring in a new heaven and new earth. This Booklet presents Jesus as a godly human being, but not divine. He is presented as a good teacher and healer, but not Saviour of the human race (which is not acknowledged to be in need of salvation from sin anyway). This Booklet therefore presents a false 'Jesus', so that its presentation of the Mass, however many good aspects it contains, is like an empty shell with the heart missing.

The Church teaches that the Mass/Eucharist is the source and summit of the Christian life, because in the Eucharist is contained Christ himself. The Mass is the same sacrifice as Calvary, offered in an un-bloody manner; the Mass re-presents (makes present again) the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. The Mass as a celebratory meal is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet which the just will enjoy after death with God, the angels and saints. This Booklet does not recognise the Mass as the source and summit of the Christian life, does not acknowledge the Mass as sacrifice, only a human meal, without eschatological significance. This Booklet therefore does not present the Church's understanding of the Mass.

The Church teaches that at the Last Supper Jesus instituted the ordained priestly ministry in the Apostles, who have handed it on to their successors, the bishops and priests of the Church. The true celebrant of every Mass is Jesus himself, while the priest stands in the person of Christ. Only an ordained priest has the spiritual power of ordination, when he pronounces the words of consecration, to make Jesus truly present body and blood, soul and divinity, under the appearance of bread and wine. This Booklet includes the Last Supper, which is good, but not good in omitting the connection with priestly ordination, the Sacrament of Holy Orders and the spiritual power it gives to priests to effect 'transubstantiation'. Also omitted is that the priest stands in the person of Christ in offering the Mass. In omitting a Catholic understanding of priesthood this Booklet fails to give a Catholic understanding of Mass / Eucharist.

The Booklet has strong encouragement for parents to learn with their children, help them know the Mass and attend Mass as a family – this is good.

There is reference to Baptism, which is good in principle, but the presentation of Baptism is deficient, merely becoming a member of God's family. Baptism is not acknowledged to give new life and grace, cleansing from original and all other sins, and making one a Christian and therefore part of the Body of Christ.

The Booklet is good in presenting the parts of the Mass and in correct sequence, and providing a 'Checklist' of items in the church, which are well explained. Singing of hymns is well explained as another way of praying to God.

The Penitential Rite at the beginning of Mass is well presented, including the Confiteor.

The Liturgy of the Word and the readings from Scripture at Mass are generally well presented and explained. It is good to state that the priest reads the Gospel, but it would have been better to go further and explain that it is only the priest who reads the Gospel, not one of the lay readers, because the priest at Mass acts in the person of Christ.

The Booklet rightly highlights the next part of the Mass as the Liturgy of the Eucharist, but there are shortcomings in the presentation. The meaning of the word 'Eucharist' is correctly given as 'thanksgiving', but there is then undue emphasis on 'thanksgiving', as if it were the meaning of the Mass; this is unhelpful and misleading. The Church teaches that there are many names for the Mass, each of which evokes different aspects of the inexhaustible riches of the sacrament¹².

The Booklet describes the Eucharistic Prayer as 'a long prayer of thanksgiving' which diminishes its full meaning, especially the Consecration, which is not identified as the most important part, the very heart of the Mass. The Liturgy of the Eucharist is particularly diminished by omitting that the Mass is a sacrifice, an unbloody re-presentation of the saving sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. It is good to say that after the Consecration the bread and wine, while still looking and tasting like bread and wine, are actually changed into the body and blood of Christ. However, it is not good to omit the presence of Jesus 'soul and divinity' in the Eucharist, which ties in with the Booklet's non-recognition of the divinity of Jesus.

There are good aspects in the Booklet's presentation on receiving Holy Communion: we receive Jesus himself, the Bread of Life; Holy Communion is food that helps us to grow in love with God and for other people; we show great respect for Communion; we pray before and after receiving Communion. However, introducing Holy Communion with illustrations of Christmas dinner, Birthday cakes, and Family picnics risks trivialising the sacrament rather than developing the meaning.

The Booklet's presentation on the Mass concludes with the blessing and sending forth 'to put into action the message of Jesus in our own place and time'. The list of ideas for the children to follow are indeed '*nice things*', but it would be more helpful if they were taught the Ten Commandments as the framework for *God's ideas* on what to avoid and what to do in love of God and neighbour.

The final pages of the Booklet set out the prayers of the Mass, which is very good.

¹² Fifteen such names are given in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1328-1332.