

FAQs About Sacraments and Disability

For more information, see the *USCCB Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities – Revised 2017* edition

Baptism

I was approached by a woman who wants Baptism for her 14-year-old son with intellectual disabilities. He doesn't speak and will not understand what is happening. Can he still be Baptized?

Yes. Disability is never a reason to refuse Baptism. If a parent or guardian consents and there is reason to hope the person will be brought up in the Catholic faith, Baptism should not be denied. (See Guideline #11)

One of my parishioners wants her younger brother, who has Down syndrome, to serve as godparent to her baby. He is sweet and attends Mass but only has a basic understanding of our faith, though he lives it every day. Can he be a godparent?

Yes, provided he meets other requirements. (See Guideline #14)

Confirmation

I am struggling. I have a parent who really wants their child to receive Confirmation with his peers. He has severe disabilities and it is hard to know what he takes in from the world around him. I want to say yes, but he clearly does not have the use of reason. What do I tell the parent?

If it is clear he may never attain the use of reason, he can receive the Sacrament of Confirmation. Including him with his peers as much as possible is important, so that he feels the welcome of the whole community of faith. Doing so affirms his and his family's Catholic identity. (See Guideline #18)

First Communion / Eucharist

We have several youngsters in our parish who have limited communication skills, even for their young ages. I am looking at our typical Eucharist preparation and cannot imagine them ever meeting our requirements. Do you have suggestions?

Though dioceses and parishes often have certain requirements, the core criterion is to know that the Body of Christ is not regular food. If they can show reverence or recognize the Eucharist in their own way (through respectful silence or symbolic gestures), they can receive. (See Guideline #22)

I know children typically celebrate Reconciliation before celebrating their first Holy Communion. My child cannot discern between right and wrong and can only participate minimally in communal Reconciliation services. Can he still receive the Eucharist?

Yes, after developmentally appropriate preparation. (See Guideline #22)

I'm taking Eucharist to some Catholics in a nearby nursing home. I know one of the women uses a feeding tube. Can she receive Holy Communion?

Yes. A small amount of the consecrated host or wine (a crumb or a drop), can be placed in the mouth. It is never to be given through the tube. (See Guideline #24)

I know that this nursing home has a memory care wing. The staff know who is Catholic and could receive Holy Communion, but what if the person doesn't remember what the Eucharist is? What if he can't demonstrate reverence?

Keep offering it. There is to be a presumption that they still recognize and benefit from the Eucharist. Consult experts if swallowing is difficult. (See Guideline #26)

Reconciliation

My daughter has an intellectual disability. She will say the words, "I'm sorry," but she often can't tell you what she is sorry for. Can she receive Reconciliation?

Yes. If she feels sorry for doing something wrong—even if she can't describe it in words—she can receive absolution. If she can't feel sorrow for sin due to lack of reason she can still take part in community prayer. (See Guideline 28)

I became Deaf as an adult. How can I receive Reconciliation?

If your primary language has become American Sign Language, ideally you will find a priest who is fluent or, if that is not possible, you will need the assistance of an approved sign language interpreter. If your primary communication system is something else, use that system and work with the priest to be sure the seal of the confessional is not broken. (See Guidelines #29 and #30)

We have a young parishioner on the autism spectrum who struggles with small spaces. I am concerned that he will not be able to focus on Reconciliation if he is in a confessional. Our priest insists on using a fixed screen. What can I do?

The priest has the right to insist on using a screen. It is still worth having a conversation with the priest about the challenge the confessional presents for this person and possible alternatives including moving the screen into a bigger room. In making any accommodation to provide Reconciliation outside of the confessional, both face-to-face and private options need to be available. (See Guideline #31)

Marriage

A couple who both have Down syndrome came to me recently wanting to receive the Sacrament of Matrimony. I'm at a loss about what to tell them. Can they marry?

Maybe. Guidelines #43 and #44 provide information to help you find the answer for this specific couple.

Holy Orders

I feel called to priestly life but am afraid I will not be able to receive Holy Orders because I am on the autism spectrum. Should I even try?

Having a disability does not disqualify you, but you must "possess the necessary spiritual, physical, human, moral, intellectual, emotional, and psychological qualities and abilities to fulfill the ministerial functions of the order they receive." (See Guideline #37)