

# Preparation of an unsighted or visually impaired child for the First Communion in the Catholic Church in Poland

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The aim of the article is to present the preparation of the unsighted and visually impaired children for the First Communion and for their first confession. Blind and visually impaired children whose case is discussed in this article, are, according to the medical standards, described as unsighted; these children attend specialist educational centres. The first part of the article presents the conditions of their preparation for the First Holy Communion and for the first Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, emphasising the influence of the visual impairment on their cognition and communication. The next part of the article shows the steps of the theoretical preparation, with a particular emphasis on the theological issues presented during the religious education classes. Further parts of the article present the steps of the practical preparation, which mainly takes place in the church and in the chapels. The finally presented issue concerns the cooperation between the priests and catechists with the parents of these children.

**Contribution:** The research presented in the article significantly contributes to the Pastoral Theology, mainly in the field of pastoral care of children with disabilities.

**Keywords:** the First Communion; visual impairment; preparation for the Holy Communion; the pastoral care; a visually impaired child.

## Introduction

The First Holy Communion is mainly a religious event. It is the first full participation in the Holy Mass. In the theological aspect, the Holy Communion means the full unity with Christ Who is received in the form of bread and wine (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1994). Therefore, the first full participation in the Holy Communion is a mysterious and profound experience for Catholics as one of the most important religious events in their life.

In different countries, a child's First Holy Communion is celebrated in various ways. In Poland, it is a very solemn event. The particular meaning of the First Holy Communion in the spiritual life is underlined by a grand ceremony. The day of the First Holy Communion is a family celebration. After the Holy Mass, the family and the invited guests gather around the child at the party organised by the parents. The child who is receiving the First Communion is usually given presents, frequently expensive ones, which are to highlight the importance of this event.

The celebration of the First Holy Communion is also important for the parish. The Holy Mass is particularly festive, the liturgy is accompanied by festive singing mainly performed by the children who are to receive the Sacrament. Certain parts of the liturgy are very ceremonious. The organisers try to engage the children, their parents and siblings to the greatest extent (McGrail 2007). The liturgy is often preceded by the speeches and performances of children, of their parents and sometimes of other parishioners, and after the liturgy, there is a festive thanksgiving party. The children are dressed in the First Communion dresses and suits that also underline the importance of this event. The parents often hire someone to record this celebration in photos and films.

The article is rooted in pastoral theology. It aims at presenting the process of preparation for the Holy Communion of unsighted and visually impaired children. The expression 'unsighted' mainly concerns children who are visually impaired or who are almost blind – slightly able to discern the shapes of objects; or who are totally blind, those who lost their eyesight and those with damaged eyesight who also suffer from additional limitations. These limitations include some

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additional disabilities or serious chronic diseases such as, for example, diabetes. The expression 'a visually impaired child' in this article mainly concerns blind children who do not have any control of their eyesight and who do not react to any visual stimuli. The term 'visually impaired' concerns children with residual vision. The aim of the article is to present the process of preparation for the Holy Communion of the unsighted and visually impaired children. The expression 'unsighted' mainly concerns the children who are totally blind and who do not react to any visual stimuli. However, the issues described in the article concern the children who are almost blind or partially sighted. They remained half-blind, but their eyesight does not help them in the cognition and communication. The half-blind children, similarly to the unsighted ones, mainly use other extra-visual stimuli. Among the group described in the article, there are also those who lost their eyesight later in life. Such children keep in mind the visual images, and they still use them in the cognitive processes and in communication with the world (Okupińska 2010).

The article presents the preparation for the First Holy Communion of the unsighted or visually impaired children who attend the specialist educational centres. In comparison to the inclusive education, the system of education and schooling in such institutions has many advantages, among which in Poland there are rehabilitation and revalidation. These are boarding schools where children spend most of the year. The religious needs of such children are satisfied in the institutions; this includes, among others, the preparation for the First Communion and for the sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. This article is written according to the rules of theological and pastoral research. The interviewed workers and the specialist institutions chosen by the author were selected with the method of randomisation. The research is based on structured interview approach. It means that the interviewed people were asked the same set of open questions. The interviewed could openly answer the questions the way they wanted. They were also asked to give extensive and expanded answers (Sztumski 2010). The received data was analysed in the light of the literature on typhlo-pedagogy and typhlo-psychology.

## **The conditions for the preparation of an unsighted or visually impaired child for the First Holy Communion and for the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation**

The unsighted and visually impaired children, similarly to their able-bodied peers, are capable to receive the Holy Communion and to go to the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. Therefore, they can and should be well prepared for that. These children are bestowed with every other necessary physical and psychological feature, like others, and that is why they can also be properly prepared for the religious life and for receiving the sacraments. The loss of

sight or a serious damage to it may, however, negatively influence the development of physical, intellectual and emotional skills, which are necessary for independent functioning and for leading an active religious life (Kucharczyk 2015). Those who prepare the unsighted or visually impaired children for receiving the Eucharist and for going to confession must be aware of all the handicaps resulting from the visual impairment, and they should satisfy the children's specific cognitive and social needs. These educators must be equipped with a thorough typhlo-psychology and typhlo-pedagogy knowledge. The cooperation with such children must be based on a thorough scientific education in typhlogy in order to understand the specific nature of their education, learning, socialisation and religiousness. Those who are engaged into the preparation of such children for the Eucharist and confession should also know the children with whom they are working. This mainly concerns their degree of independence especially the ability to lead a fairly independent life among other people (Majewski 2010).

The unsighted or visually impaired children, similarly to their able-bodied peers, have their own way of self-development. Every visually impaired child is different from others, which means that he or she develops physically and psychologically in his or her own way, and therefore, he or she should be treated individually and exceptionally. It also concerns their religious development, as the visually impaired children have their own way of preparation for the life of the prayer and for the sacramental life.

An unsighted or visually impaired child, who is not additionally burdened, may develop mentally and socially to the same degree as his or her able-bodied peer in the same time. Therefore, such a child is capable to receive the First Holy Communion and to go to confession at the same time as his or her able-bodied peers. In the case of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, it is thought that a person who goes to confession must be aware of his/her sins and must have the ability to tell the right from wrong, while, as far as the Eucharist is concerned, it is necessary for them to see the difference between the Eucharistic bread and the ordinary bread. People who prepare the visually impaired children for these sacraments must be aware of the individual features of each child. In this case, these concern the social background in which they were raised and their personal rehabilitation (Kuczyńska-Kwapisz & Kwapisz 2020). The fact that some of these children are not capable to receive the sacraments at the same time as their peers, mainly results from the parents' neglect and from the lack of support from their local social environment in the children's process of education (Szabała 2017).

## **The theoretical preparation**

The theoretical preparation takes place during the religious education lessons at school. Primary schools are integral elements of educational centres in Poland. Religious education is one of the taught subjects. Teaching of religious

education is based on the catechesis curriculum of the Polish Catholic Church (The Conference of the Polish Episcopal Council 2018). In practice, the teachers of religious education in the specialist educational centres for the unsighted and visually impaired children use the same curricula as those for the able-bodied children who are being prepared to receive the First Holy Communion and to go to the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. The main idea that is transmitted to the visually impaired children concerns the fact that they will be united with Christ in the Eucharist and that they will receive His Body as a nourishment for their soul. The teachers explain to the children that receiving the Communion means receiving Christ's Body and uniting with Him. They also explain that this sacrament, while uniting the man with God, leads to building the union with other people. This unity is expressed in the friendship based on love bestowed by Jesus. Teachers underline the uniting role of the Holy Communion, between the man and God, and the man and other people, which should result in a systematic receiving of the Sacrament (Interviewee 3).

The theoretical preparation for the First Holy Communion involves a series of issues connected with the Sacrament of the Eucharist. Visually impaired children get to know how the Eucharist was established: the teacher reads to them certain parts of the Bible that concern the Eucharist. It is then proven that ministering the Eucharist is the Church's atonement, which has its source in Jesus Christ's sacrifice.

During the religious education classes, the unsighted and visually impaired children are being prepared for the conscious and active participation in the liturgy of the Eucharist. The teachers explain to them what happens during the Holy Mass. They describe particular parts of the mass and explain their meaning. They devote quite a lot of time to that, even more than is spent on explaining it to the able-bodied children. The unsighted children are deprived of the possibility to watch the gestures and liturgical activities performed by the priest and by the accompanying people at the altar. They are unable to see the positions and gestures of the participants as well as their interactions with the priests. Therefore, the catechists must describe each particular gesture of the priest and the words that accompany them as well as the answers of the participants (both words and gestures). Describing and explaining all of the elements of the liturgy is important for their understanding and constitutes an introduction into the practical preparation (Interviewee 1).

The theoretical preparation is not limited to the explanation of what the Holy Communion is and what the liturgy of the mass consists of. The catechists do their best to prepare the kerygmatic and mystagogical catechesis. Receiving the Eucharist is described by them as a personal meeting with Jesus their Friend. They explain to the children that Jesus loves them despite their visual impairment and that they are important to Him. He provides them with His unique

plan and He invites them for cooperation. He wants to lead them and support them. The visual impairment is often shown as a special circumstance, which makes these children special and chosen for the unique cooperation with God (Interviewee 1).

Underlying the uniqueness of an unsighted or visually impaired child and indicating that it does not make him or her inferior to others despite many limitations is beneficial for the long-term and strong relationship with God. Systematic reception of the Holy Communion is also beneficial for their development. Therefore, the catechists encourage for the practice of the First Fridays Devotion. It consists in going to confession and receiving the Eucharist, and in observing the liturgy of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus. The visually impaired children can participate in the celebration during a Holy Mass and the occasional service. The children who take part in the celebration receive devotional souvenirs suited to their perception.

The mystagogical nature of the catechetical teaching before the First Holy Communion is also reflected in teaching the children how to receive the Eucharist. It concerns the direct preparation for the participation in the Holy Mass and for receiving the Eucharist. The unsighted and visually impaired children, in contrast to the able-bodied children, do not use prayer books, which contain certain prayer formulas; therefore, the catechists try to teach them the prayers by heart (Interviewee 2).

It is a common practice of the Catholic Church that receiving the First Holy Communion is preceded by going to the first confession. The preparation for receiving the Eucharist is simultaneous with the preparation for confession and they constitute one integral process. The theoretical preparation for the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation consists of various aspects among which the dominating one is the meeting with the forgiving Christ. During the process of preparation, the child should be aware of what a sin is and why it separates the man from God as well as of what happens during the confession. In the liturgical aspect, he or she should learn how to go to confession properly and get to know the conditions of that (The Conference of the Polish Episcopal Council 2018).

Both the preparation for the Eucharist and the preparation for confession are realised as catecheses – kerygmatic and mystagogical. The catecheses should lead to teaching the visually impaired child how to live in friendship with Christ, and, in case of offending Him with a sin, they should know how to return to the full unity with Him in the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. The child should also be convinced of Christ's forgiveness and should never be afraid to address Him in case of committing a sin (Mąkosza 2007). Another aim of the theoretical preparation for confession is the reflexion over one's life – suitably to the stage of

development – and expressing regret for the committed evil deeds. Such a reflection should lead to the decision to improve one's life.

Although the unsighted or visually impaired children receive their First Holy Communion around the age of 9, just like their able-bodied peers, the theoretical preparation and its effects may differ from the ones acquired by the able-bodied children. Not all of the unsighted or visually impaired children stay at the specialist educational centres and not all of them are well revalidated and well prepared for the school education. The specialist educational centres offer classes that are to help these children overcome the results of parental neglect or of the improper educational approach of the teachers. What is more, the religious life of the families of the unsighted or visually impaired children is at different stages of development. Such psychological and social conditions of the visually impaired children result in different stages of development of the preparation for the First Holy Communion process. The differences in the intellectual and social predispositions of certain students result in the fact that the preparation is to a great degree an individual process. Many teachers of religious education, paying attention to the slow pace of preparation, modify the curricula for the able-bodied children in order to suit them to the needs and abilities of the unsighted or visually impaired children. (Interviewee 1).

The significant individual differences between children and the relatively few school groups allow the teachers to work with the children in an individual way. The preparation for the First Holy Communion is also to a great extent an individual process. As a result of that, the children can be prepared in a deepened and versatile way. This way of preparation of the visually impaired children results in the fact that catechists and priests do not need to use certain measures used in the work with the able-bodied children. In the specialist educational centres, teachers do not use the exams for checking the knowledge acquisition after the preparation process. It results from the fact that the teachers know the level of knowledge and skills of each particular student (Interviewee 1).

## The practical preparation

The practical preparation concerns learning the skills necessary for receiving the Holy Communion as well as for going to confession (Eschenauer 2014). Because of the lack of visual stimuli necessary to get to know the liturgical space and the liturgical objects and the lack of visual stimulation that encourages to follow the liturgical gestures, the preparation process is led in a different way than in case of the able-bodied children. The differences in the practical preparation are visible already in the way of moving in the church building. Although the church buildings are designed on the basis of the same rules, in practice they differ in size and in the way the interior of the building is arranged. What is more, the objects in the interiors differ and they are often located in various places. Therefore, it is important to

organise the practical preparation for the First Holy Communion in the very church or chapel where the event is planned (Interviewee 2). The event often takes place in the parish of the specialist educational centre. Some educational centres have their own chapel, which is the centre of religious life. Such churches and chapels are the places of the practical preparation and are well known by the visually impaired children. Receiving the First Holy Communion in such places is very beneficial for these children. One of the advantages is integration because the visually impaired children receive the sacrament together with the other children from the parish. The celebration of the First Holy Communion is a celebration for the whole community of the local Church, the visually impaired children are treated like their able-bodied peers, while the latter feel responsible for those visually impaired and both groups experience unity in the Christian spirit (Polak 2017).

Receiving the Holy Communion for the first time in the specialist education centre is deprived of this strong integration advantage because the children take part in the event only in their own company. However, there is another advantage of the situation that concerns the safety of taking part in the celebration in the well-known environment. The children know their friends and do not expect any negative attitudes towards them, and they can always count on the professional aid and assistance of their catechists and teachers.

The greatest challenge for the visually impaired child appears when the child receives the First Holy Communion and goes to confession in their family parish. The children who spend most of the time in the specialist educational centres do not know their parish church and their practical preparation usually takes place among the able-bodied children mainly by the people who are not prepared to work with the unsighted or visually impaired children (Kuczyńska-Kwapisz & Kwapisz 2020).

The practical preparation requires getting to know the presbytery as the central place of the celebration of the Eucharist. The children are introduced to this place where they can touch the altar and the objects of the cult that are placed there and used during the liturgy: the tablecloth, the liturgical books and the paten with the host, the can with communicants, the chalice, the ampules with wine and water. The children can get to know these objects by touching them as long as they need to learn about them. At the same time, the person who is preparing the children describes the objects in detail and explains what they are used for. The person refers to the knowledge that the children acquired during the religious education class. The children are brought to the Tabernacle so that they could touch and get to know the Holy Sacrament themselves. Next, they get to know the pulpit where the priest proclaims God's word, and the other objects in the presbytery: the pulpit at the altar, with the seat and the microphone of the celebrant, the space where the altar boys sit and other objects. In the same way, the children get to know the whole space in

the church and the objects located there. The children get to know the side altars, the pulpit, the baptismal font, the confessionals and the pews where they can sit. During the preparation for the First Holy Communion, it is important to indicate the seats for the children and to teach them to come in and out of the pews, to come to the places where they receive the Eucharist and to come back to the pews. In these activities, the children are accompanied by their catechists, teachers and properly educated parents. The parents are prepared for that during additional meetings with priests. Despite the preparation, the unsighted and visually impaired children are not usually able to independently come to the altar to receive the Communion and to come back to the pews (Interviewee 1).

The direct preparation for the First Holy Communion involves the common preparation of the sacrificial gifts. The children with their catechists, with the priests and with the parents prepare the communicants, wine, water and other sacrificial gifts that are brought to the altar during the Holy Mass. They also prepare the liturgical books that they read during the mass. The texts are written in Braille's alphabet. The children are prepared for the prayers of the faithful, which are read during the liturgy in a similar way. Such a way of preparing the liturgy for the unsighted or visually impaired children in the specialist educational centres is more beneficial than the preparation in the integration system in which such children are engaged into the process and into the course of the ceremony to a much lesser extent (Interviewee 1).

The preparation for the First Holy Communion is strictly connected with the preparation for the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. In the case of the unsighted or visually impaired children, the process of preparation is also specific, different from the process of preparation of the able-bodied children. However, the procedure of going to confession is difficult for them. There are various confessionals of different types and sizes. That is why the unsighted or visually impaired children use the help of the able-bodied to go to confession. They also use help in coming back to their pews. Before their first confession, the unsighted or visually impaired children are shown the confessional in which they are to confess. They get to know the shape, the size and the unique structure of the confessional. It is particularly important to show them if they are to kneel down or sit down for confession, as well as to tell them about the type of the latticed opening (Interviewee 2). It is also important to teach the children how to confess their sins. The children learn the formulas by heart but not all of them are able to properly learn them. It is caused by the intellectual impairment, which may sometimes coexists with the visual impairment, or because of the weaker ability to remember things or because of the stress (Interviewee 1). Therefore, it is the role of the confessor to help the penitent to confess his/her sins in a way that is suited to the child's conditions and to help him/her repent (Interviewee 1).

## The cooperation between the parents and those responsible for the children's preparation

The cooperation between the parents and those who prepare the children for the First Holy Communion depends on the place where the practical preparation is carried out. In case when it takes place in the headquarters of the pastoral care of the blind, where the preparation is usually carried out in the chapel of the specialist educational centre, all of the parents can participate unless they live far away from the centre. And if the preparation takes place in the parish church of the centre and the parents live nearby, they can all take part in the preparations.

Priests and catechists place emphasis on the equal extent to which the children and the parents are prepared for the First Holy Communion. It concerns both the spiritual and the organisational preparations. The celebration of the First Holy Communion should be a deep religious experience both for the children and for the parents (Skreczko 2007). Those who prepare them for the celebration indicate that it is difficult to prepare an unsighted child without the active help of his or her parents. They mainly expect the parents to be internally engaged into the preparation and actively participate in the course of the ceremony. According to those who prepare the children, the parents should treat the participation in the sacrament seriously and responsibly (Interviewee 3). It should be reflected in the fervent concern for the preparation and in their testimony of religious zeal. It is the parents' role to support their child in his/her entering the supernatural reality. This support should be reflected in accompanying the children in the formation meetings and helping them during their stay in their family home. The parents should take care for their children to get to know the contents presented during the religious education classes and make the child understand them adequately to their intellectual potential. For many parents, the preparation of their child for the First Holy Communion and for confession is the time to remind of their own preparation and of the contents learned in their youth as well as the occasion to strengthen their own faith (Lipiec 2007).

The cooperation of the parents with those who prepare the children for the sacraments also concerns the practical preparation. It is a common practice in many parishes in Poland that children who receive the First Holy Communion are assisted by their parents. It gives the parents the possibility to accompany the child in this important event and in the process of preparation. The parents can take the child from the pews to the altar and take him/her back. They can earlier lead the child to the confessional to help him/her go to confession, to prepare for the sacrament and to do penance (Interviewee 2).

Those who prepare the children for the sacrament try to engage the visually impaired children and their parents into the active participation in the First Holy Communion. The children and their parents prepare and bring to the altar the

sacrificial gifts: the host, wine, water and others. At the beginning of the liturgy, the parents' request for the children to be offered the Eucharist and at the end of the Mass, they thank for It. It is a common practice for the parents to prepare the prayer of the faithful with their children. The parents, mainly the fathers, often get engaged into the ministry at the altar (Interviewee 1).

Another problem in the cooperation with some of the parents is their low religious awareness (Przygoda 2020). Such parents see the First Holy Communion as a secular celebration. They pay the most attention to organising a party for the family and friends and to the gifts that the children receive on the occasion. It is mainly a cultural and social event for them, and the religious and deeper meaning of it is of lesser importance (Interviewee 1).

There is also a group of parents who do not wish to be engaged into any religious or social events, restricting their activity to their family life. They are reluctant to participate in the preparation, restraining themselves and participating only in a few meetings. They think that the preparation should be carried out by professionals, that is by priests and catechists (Kiciński 2003).

Because of the low religious awareness and activity of some of the parents, noticing the need to deepen the religiosity of the parents of the unsighted or visually impaired children, some priests organise additional formation meetings, regardless of the preparation meetings for the children. Before the COVID-19 pandemic period, they organised 5–10 of such meetings per year, while during the time of the pandemic restrictions there were much fewer of them. The educators tried to organise as many meetings as there were before the pandemic as a part of the practical preparation (Interviewee 1).

The formation meetings of the parents consist of the prayer and of a theological conference. The issues discussed at the meetings concern the spiritual theology, dogmatic theology and moral theology as well as the study of the Bible. The lecturers try to convince the parents to participate in the life of the Eucharist with their children and to prepare for the First Holy Communion together with them; they are also encouraged to lead their further life based on receiving the sacrament. The parents are reminded about their responsibility for the development of the religiousness of their children. They indicate that the children's Eucharistic activity is not only limited to the day of the First Holy Communion and the week after that during which the children gather in the church to receive the Communion together. What is more, they emphasise that the celebration should be based on the religious and spiritual aspects while the external aspect connected with parties and gifts is only an additional supplement. Such a spiritual and theological formation of the parents aims at deepening their religiousness and enhancing their activity in the ecclesial community (Interviewee 2).

Another aim of the meetings with parents is their elicitation into the process of the children's preparation for the First Holy Communion and for confession. It was noticed that the process of the children's preparation is more effective with the active participation of their parents. Priests and catechists indicate to the parents the necessity to help the children get to know the truth of faith and the Christian morality rules. It is the parents' role to revise with the children the issues taught at the religious education classes and explaining to them all the doubt that appear at the course of learning. That is why at the meetings with parents the educators discuss the same issues as at the meetings with the children, but the way of discussing them is suited to the needs and abilities of adults (Interviewee 3).

## The conclusion

The preparation of an unsighted or visually impaired child for the First Holy Communion and for confession is a more difficult process than the preparation of an able-bodied child. The influence of the vision impairment on the cognition and communication results in the fact that this preparation has a slower pace and is more of an individualised process. The differences in the intellectual development, in the stage of revalidation and other conditions, require more time for the children to prepare for these sacraments. They need more engagement from their catechists and priests in the theoretical and practical preparation. What is more, the parents' engagement is also required as they represent various religious attitudes. This cooperation aims at a better preparation of the children for their First Communion and for their further religious life and activity in the community of the Church as well as deepening of their own religiosity and spiritual life.

In recent years, the COVID-19 pandemic caused severe limitations in the preparations. The number of formation meetings decreased and they were much shorter than they used to be. This resulted in limiting the number of issues discussed at the meetings to only the most important ones. After the pandemic limitations came to an end, it is necessary to restore the previous form of preparation. It is also required to increase the number of formation meetings and the quantity of the theological and typhological issues discussed and to engage parents to a greater extent. Their presence positively influences the knowledge acquisition of the children and it develops their technical skills connected with receiving the Holy Communion and going to confession. Such meetings can positively influence the deepening of religious formation of the parents.

Although contemporary schools educate visually impaired children in the inclusive education, according to the interviewed, visually impaired children are comprehensively prepared for the First Holy Communion in the specialist educational centres. Theoretical and practical preparation is conducted integrally with the education of parents. It

results in the vast range of religious knowledge of children who are more efficient in their religious practice and receive more efficient help from their parents. It is also necessary to cooperate with the children's parents on religious grounds. This cooperation aims at more efficient preparation of the children for the First Holy Communion and for their further religious and spiritual life as well as for their active participation in the ecclesial community and for deepening their own religiosity and spirituality. However, this is not a common practice for all parents; therefore, priests should put more effort into activating them for cooperation. After the pandemic, it is necessary to organise more regular and frequent formation for children and parents in order to prepare them more effectively.

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D.L. is the sole author of this article.

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### Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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