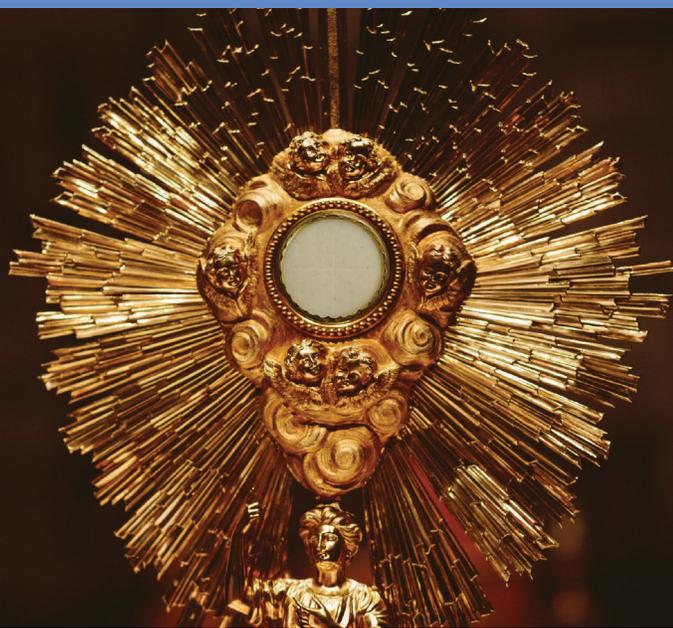


Using *Forgiven* and *Presence* to Make a Powerful Sacramental Impact



“*Forgiven* and *Presence* were ‘a natural and perfect fit’ for the sacramental preparation retreats.”

Angel Schneider

Director of Communications
St. Francis de Sales Church, Ohio

At one time, the sacramental preparation program for second graders at St. Francis de Sales Church in Newark, Ohio—40 miles northeast of Columbus—required the children’s parents to attend three sessions prior to First Reconciliation and three sessions prior to First Holy Communion.

The sessions had a twofold purpose. The first was to go through the practicalities of what would happen on the days of First Reconciliation and First Holy Communion. The second was an attempt to catechize, recognizing that many parents wanted their children to receive the sacraments either to continue family tradition or because “sacraments” was a box to check off on the parents’ to-do list.

The sessions employed a lecture format that “didn’t engage the heart or senses,” said Angel Schneider, who then was serving as the director of religion for St. Francis de Sales School.

Several years ago, the parish scrapped the parent sessions and reworked what had been “Pray-and-Play” days for the students into two retreats—one before each sacrament, in which students in the parish school and those in the religious education program, as well as their parents, would participate.

“We wanted to create a retreat for the entire family in a way that was memorable and exciting for everybody,” Schneider said.

The children still had fun activities. In “Golfing with God,” students were charged with putting the seven steps of Reconciliation in their correct order. Their score gave them a “handicap.” Those with all seven steps in the right sequence got to putt from a line closest to a golf hole set up in the school’s junior high hallway. Those with six steps in order putted from the line second-closest to the hole, and so forth.



“The strength of the *Forgiven* and *Presence* videos lies in ‘the powerful imagery and stories that made the presence of Jesus in these sacraments come to life and make sense.’”



Angel Schneider

While the children rotated through their activities, their parents watched the three videos from *Forgiven: The Transforming Power of Confession*, interspersed with opportunities to answer and discuss questions from the series' accompanying workbook.

There was also time for parent-and-children activities, a shared lunch, a field trip to the church's confessional, and a time for everyone to discuss what they had learned and why they felt Confession was important.

The first year was a learning experience for the parish staff and catechists.

After parents watched the first two *Forgiven* videos, Schneider said, "They wanted to go to Confession right then and there." Some, she added, had not been to Confession in decades.

For the next year's group, the parish invited additional priests to come in so that the parents could go to Confession on the day of the retreat.

"It's so powerful for these kids to see their parents go to Confession," Schneider said.

The retreat prior to First Holy Communion was set up in a similar format. Children and their parents made a First Communion banner together. While the children made unleavened bread to share with their parents at lunch, parents watched *Presence: The Mystery of the Eucharist* and discussed the three episodes. At the end of the day, children asked their parents if there had ever been a time when they went to Mass and didn't receive the Eucharist. Parents asked their children what they would say to Jesus in prayer after they had received their First Communion.

In response to feedback in the first year's evaluations, the second-year retreat included a 15-minute time for adoration of the Blessed Sacrament after lunch, an experience that was new for many parents, Schneider said.

"A little taste of adoration in this setting was very powerful for parents," Schneider said.

While the number of times that parents were required to come for sessions prior to each sacrament decreased from three times to once, the parish was still asking parents to give up the bulk of a Saturday to attend each retreat.

"We wanted to make sure that the time we were asking of our families was worthwhile," Schneider said. For the parents, *Forgiven* and *Presence* were "a natural and perfect fit" for the sacramental preparation retreats.

The overwhelming feedback from parents, she said, was that they were "blown away by the *Forgiven* and *Presence* videos and the in-depth discussion."

The family sacramental retreats have resulted in "a cultural shift" in the parish, Schneider said.

The *Forgiven* and *Presence* videos helped parents realize aspects of the sacraments that "they had never known or never fully understood," she said. They now "have a deeper understanding that informs how they approach those sacraments."

"Retreats are conversion engines for people," Schneider said.



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