

Growing in Faith Together



Introducing Family Catechesis
at St John Fisher, North Harrow

FAMILY CATECHESIS PROGRAMME

Welcome

Dear families,

Welcome to Family Catechesis at St John Fisher. This programme has emerged from a process of deliberation, discussion, prayer and reflection with priests, catechists and parents in a wide number of parishes both near and far. It is rooted in the painful experience each year of so many families not returning to the celebration of the Eucharist, the Mass, after their children have received First Holy Communion. We realise that the parish has a part to play in this so we want to help you as a family to **Grow In Faith Together,**

We appreciate how family life and faith life have changed since parishes first took over sacramental preparation from our schools. Rather than a simple 'one size fits all model' we have discerned the need to journey with individual families along their journey of faith and for a programme that accompanies parents and children throughout their journey, not simply focussing on preparation for a single Sacramental encounter.

We hope you will find family catechesis a joyful experience of faith, family and community here at St John Fisher. This is the first year we are running this programme so we want to especially thank in advance the catechist, helper and welcomer families who will support us all in this journey.

Every blessing

Fr Graham Stokes (parish priest) & **Jan Bennett** (parish catechist)
Solemnity of the Assumption, 15th August 2023

Your Role as a Parent

Being a parent is an enormous privilege and when we bring our children for baptism we promise to teach them the Catholic faith and bring them up in the church. We are the first and best teachers of our children. In *'The Joy of Love'* Pope Francis recognises the vital role parents play in the faith of their family and he says *'Family catechesis is of great assistance as an effective method in training young parents to be aware of their mission as evangelisers of their own family.'* (*Amoris Laetitia, The Joy of Love, 287*)

Family Catechesis

Family catechesis assists parents and children to grow in their faith together rather than teaching children without, or separately from their parents.

Our Family Catechesis programme is for all families with children between the ages of 5 and 12 wherever you are in your faith journey. Some of you may already be regular attenders at Sunday Mass but others may not yet be as engaged as you would like. GIFT endeavours to help you as families grow in your faith together with the support of our priests and parishioners who have already journeyed or are currently journeying with their own families and will welcome you and share their experience.

We want to encourage you to participate in the life of the church. Gathering with the parish community here on a Sunday (or Saturday evening) to worship God in the celebration of the Mass is a key part of living our faith in addition to times at home when you pray together and talk about what we believe as a family as well as other parish activities you participate in. In this way we express our desire to be full members of the community and for our faith to grow. We want to provide a place where as a family you can learn what engaging with your faith looks like and then to give you the confidence to live that faith day by day.

How 'GIFT' works

We will offer **monthly family sessions on Saturday mornings** to which all families will be invited. GIFT is not a programme and so has no beginning or end date. This reflects our individual ongoing faith journey. We will start with Mass where the topic of the morning will be introduced and then move to the parish centre where together we will engage in structured activities and conversations which will help us to reflect on what faith means to all of us, children, parents, catechists and priests, recognising that we are all on a separate journey towards God.

We will also offer **monthly parents' sessions on a Tuesday evening** so that you too can gain in your own understand of our faith and to help you explain this at home. We recognise from our work with parents in previous years that for many, catechesis ended when they were not much older than their children are now and that some may lack confidence and be intimidated by what '*passing on the faith*' entails. We all need to understand our faith better and to grow in our relationship with Jesus Christ.

GIFT – the gateway to the sacraments.

As we journey together, and participate fully in the life of the church, families will begin to think about celebrating milestones on their children's faith journey such as First Reconciliation and First Holy Communion. Discerning when children are ready to receive these sacraments is an important factor in any family's faith journey. The church also has a role in discerning readiness. Receiving sacraments is not about someone reaching a certain age – it is about recognising the child's and the wider family's understanding of what it means to live a life of faith in the church and participate fully in that.

When you and we, feel that your child is ready to receive the sacraments we will offer additional separate sessions specifically designed to prepare them and each family will have a catechist mentor to journey with them during the period of preparation. Not every child will be ready to receive the sacraments at the same time and this will mean that we will celebrate the reception of the sacraments at different times throughout the year. Hopefully small numbers of children will be ready to receive the sacraments together so that they can share that celebration with one another and their families and the wider parish community. But there not be a set time at which everyone comes forward together to receive the Eucharist for the first time. Once the sacraments have been celebrated for the first time, families will continue to attend GIFT.

Joining the Family Catechesis Programme

Just like any relationship, our relationship with Jesus and his church needs nurturing and supporting so that we can fully realise the life that was offered to each of us in our baptism. GIFT aims to help you and your children truly experience and know God's love. We are looking forward to supporting you as you grow in faith yourselves and in your role as teachers of the faith to your children.

Fr Graham, Fr Axcel or Jan are happy to discuss this with you after Mass and to provide you with more information on what is involved. We will provide you with a registration form so that you can let us know your family's names and the ages of your children. Details of the various sessions being offered will be publicised in the newsletter and on the parish website.

Prayer for my family

Lord Jesus, be with my family.

Grant us your peace and harmony,
an end to conflict and division.

Gift us with compassion to better understand each other,
wisdom and love to assist each other,
and trust and patience to live peacefully together.

Grant, that through the intercession of your mother Mary
and St Joseph, our family may become a holy family
accepting each other, working together in unity,
selflessly dedicated to one other and to you.

Amen.

FAQs

Q1. Is this another First Holy Communion Programme?

No. GIFT is designed to help parents to deepen their own faith and be ready to pass on the faith to their children. So while preparation for First Holy Communion can be part of this process, it is so much more as it involves the whole family. GIFT is not just another name for our previous Holy Communion programme.

Q2. What is the structure of GIFT

There will be monthly family sessions on Saturday mornings to which you will be invited. We will gather for Mass, pray, share and learn about our faith. Together we will engage in activities and conversations.

In addition, we will offer parents' sessions on a weekday evening each month via Zoom for parents to deepen their own understanding of the faith and to help you to explain this faith in the home.

Q3. Why did you make the change this year?

It has been painfully recognised that many of the children who receive their First Holy Communion don't attend Mass regularly, or are not engaged in the Church's life during or after their preparation.

The real sadness is that so many of our children have become "lost sheep" through no fault of their own so early in their faith journey. Although there is a higher expectation in how we engage as whole families in GIFT, it is for the sake of our young people that we have made this change.

Q4. Is it only for parents with children in year 3 / FHC age

No - GIFT is for all families with children aged between 5 and 12. You might already be engaged with your faith and the Church and be looking to deepen your understanding for the sake of your child, or you might not yet be as engaged as you would like to be and hence seeking the sacraments for your child is your motivation.

Q5. How many sessions are there?

The whole reason we are investing in our young families is to help parents on their own faith journey. This is ongoing and we pray that it will encourage you to engage in activities and become an active member within the parish.

As everyone is at a different place in their journey there is no set number of sessions but rather an encouragement to become engaged in the parish and in your faith, and so help you to pass the faith on to your children.

Q6. Do I have to come to all of the sessions?

We all have many demands on our time and different family dynamics; we recognise this and occasionally clashes will occur. However, growing faith is important for both parents and children. Therefore, we expect regular attendance, but, more importantly engagement.

Q7. It was much easier for my older children do I have to do this again?

Yes. We recognise that faith growth in families has been lacking in the past and as it is key to passing on the faith to the next generation, we are making this a priority.

Q8. What is expected of us as parents?

To fulfil the commitment you made when you asked for your child to be baptised; to bring them up to keep God's commandments as Christ taught us.

GIFT will help you to deepen your faith and engage with the Church more fully and to be able to keep the commitment you made. In terms of duration, ideally all families with children between the ages of 5 and 12 will be engaged with GIFT.

Q9. How do I know when my child is ready to receive the sacraments?

Not everyone will be ready at the same time and part of the journey in the faith is to discern the readiness of your child, irrespective of age. When the time comes parents and parish will together discern and agree their readiness.

Q10. When will I know the date of my child's FHC.

One of the joys of GIFT is that when the family and child are ready, then preparation for receiving the sacraments will begin. There is no set date for the celebration of the sacraments and so there is a lot of flexibility as to when this will take place. This does mean that there is no date set as you commence the GIFT sessions and as you engage in the process. When it is discerned by both parents and the parish that your child is ready, a convenient date can be set.

Q11. Can our children celebrate their FHC with their friends?

Of course. It would be wonderful if small groups of children and their families would prepare together and then celebrate together.

Q12. When does GIFT start?

Our first GIFT session will take place on Saturday 9th September 2023. Further dates will be advised via the parish newsletter and website. To find out how to sign up see Q14

Q13. How much does this cost?

There is a cost for the resources and facilities so we suggest an annual donation of £25 per child. We would never want the cost to be a barrier and so please let us know if this might be the case.

Q14. How do I register for the course?

Please see Fr Graham, Fr Axcel or Jan at Mass and ask for and complete the application form. Once you are registered you will receive regular updates about times and sessions.

Q15. What are the alternatives?

If you feel that this is too much of a commitment at this time, you can always wait until you feel ready to be able to engage with GIFT as your circumstances change. GIFT runs throughout the year and you can choose to join other families on the journey at any time.