DIOCESE *of* ERIE
Sharing the Catholic faith in northwest Pennsylvania

Sensory-Friendly Mass:

A guide for parishes

Pastoral guidelines for welcoming and accompanying persons with sensory needs at the Eucharist.





Rationale

Many Catholic families with members with disabilities do not attend Mass for various reasons. They may feel stigmatized or fear being disruptive. They have had a negative experience while attending in the past. They may feel that it is just too difficult.

Having a Mass that is specifically welcoming to these families is an essential step in bringing them back to church. A Sensory-Friendly Mass does not require a tremendous amount of change on the part of the parish.

Many people benefit from the stigma-free environment of a Sensory Friendly Mass. These liturgies benefit people with sensory processing issues, autism, intellectual and developmental disabilities and adults with Alzheimer's disease and dementia.

Developing a Sensory-Friendly liturgy (even once a month) for the special needs community would allow for a more welcoming environment for families like these. It would remove the stigma for them, and empower them to more fully enter into the sacrifice of the Mass.





The goal is to welcome, support and help all members of the Body of Christ participate more fully in the Eucharist.

Celebrate the same Eucharist with the same reverence

The Eucharist remains the center of Christian life. A Sensory-Friendly Mass is not a lesser or informal celebration of the Eucharist. The priest should celebrate the Mass prayerfully, reverently, and according to the approved liturgical books. Sensory adaptations should focus principally on the environment, pastoral approach, and manner of participation.

Foster an environment free of stigma

The most important characteristic of a Sensory-Friendly Mass is an environment in which individuals and families do not fear being judged because of their behavior.

The priest should therefore:

- Expect that people may move during Mass.
- Avoid calling attention to an individual's behavior.
- Avoid asking parents or caregivers to remove someone simply because the person is making noise or moving.
- Welcome alternative seating, fidgets, noise-canceling headphones, and other appropriate aids.
- Understand that participation may look different from person to person.
- Communicate through word and example that everyone belongs.

Do not presume to know someone's needs

Sensory challenges vary considerably from person to person. What is calming for one individual may be distracting or uncomfortable for another. Priests and parish ministers should listen to individuals, families, caregivers, and advocates when planning the celebration rather than presume to know their needs.

Explain the purpose without labeling people

Public communication should be welcoming and positive. Avoid language suggesting that people with disabilities are a problem to be accommodated. Instead, emphasize that the parish desires to welcome all members of the Body of Christ and to provide an environment in which everyone can participate.

Ministers of Hospitality

Hospitality ministers are particularly important at a Sensory-Friendly Mass.

They should understand that:

- Movement is permitted.
- Vocalizations or other sounds should not automatically be interpreted as disruptive.
- Individuals may leave and return to the church.
- Families may use alternative seating.
- Fidgets, headphones, communication devices, and other sensory aids may be used.
- Parents and caregivers should not be made to feel embarrassed.
- The appropriate response to unexpected behavior is patience and welcome.



Hospitality ministers should never attempt to publicly redirect a person because of sensory-related behavior. If assistance is needed, the minister should quietly ask the caregiver what would be helpful.

The Physical and Sensory Environment

A Sensory-Friendly Mass should intentionally reduce unnecessary sensory stimulation.

Possible adaptations include:

Lighting



- Lower the intensity of the lighting when possible.
- Avoid unnecessary changes in lighting.
- Avoid sudden or flashing lights.
- Consider the effect of bright lighting around the sanctuary and entrance areas.

Sound



- Avoid unnecessary loud or sudden sounds.
- Keep microphone volume at a comfortable level.
- Be attentive to sudden sounds from doors, bells, microphones, or other equipment.

Seating



Families should be free to choose seating that works best for them.

Consider making available:

- Seating near an exit.
- Seating toward the back or sides of the church.
- Additional space for individuals who need to move.
- Alternative seating when appropriate.

Sensory aids



Families should be explicitly welcomed to bring appropriate sensory aids, including:

- **Noise-canceling headphones.**
- **Communication devices.**
- **Alternative seating.**
- **Other items that help an individual participate.**

Music

Music should be carefully planned with the sensory needs of the congregation in mind.



Possible adaptations include:

- Using a smaller musical ensemble.
- Limiting amplification.
- Avoiding sudden changes in volume

The goal is not necessarily to eliminate music but to consider how the musical environment can facilitate rather than impede participation.

Holy Communion

Persons with disabilities have the same right to receive the Eucharist as other Catholics when they meet the ordinary requirements for reception.



Priests and extraordinary ministers should:

- ☑ Exercise patience.
- ☑ Avoid rushing communicants.
- ☑ Be attentive to individual circumstances.
- ☑ Make reasonable accommodations when needed.
- ☑ Speak with families beforehand when special arrangements may be helpful.

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The Office of Faith Formation offers courses through the National Catholic Partnership on Disability for accessible, learner-centered and practical training.

Scholarships are available.

For more information and resources available to purchase, please contact the Office of Faith Formation.