Session 4: Use Lent to create a powerful, spiritual retreat for your children

Objective: Explore exactly how to make Lent a time of “intense spiritual preparation” in a way that is suited to children.

The final period of preparation for the sacraments of initiation is a time of “intense spiritual preparation.” So, what does “intense spiritual preparation” look like for a seven, ten, or fifteen-year-old? Well, for 14-year-old Cody, it looked like this.

On the Second Sunday of Lent, folks in the children’s RCIA group were talking about our strengths and weaknesses and what we were focusing on for our lenten journey. Cody, who had been in and out of the foster care system, received a fair amount of pressure from a pretty rough crowd at school. He said this:

For Lent, I’m trying to stay focused on school and basketball and not get messed up with the wrong people. I want Jesus to help me make the right choices.

Cody felt like Jesus was leading him and helping him to “turn away” from the wrong crowd and focus on Christ. The gospels of the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Sundays of Lent helped Cody to listen and turn his heart to God.

Prepare for a great mystery

The RCIA says that this final period before the celebration of the sacraments is a time for interior reflection more than “catechetical instruction” (RCIA, no. 139). In other words, this is not the time to teach about each of the sacraments. It’s a time for “being prepared to celebrate the paschal mystery” (RCIA, no. 138). Through reflection on the gospels and the celebration of the liturgical rites of this period, the children are prepared to celebrate the paschal mystery at the Easter Vigil.

Meat and potatoes for Lent

The liturgies of Lent, namely the scrutinies and the presentations, are the “meat and potatoes” of this period. By preparing for the liturgies, celebrating the liturgies, and then reflecting upon them afterward, the children are prepared for that “Great Liturgy,” the Easter Vigil and the sacraments of initiation.

Here’s the “meat and potatoes” that the scrutinies and presentations provide for the children.
The Three Scrutinies
- Heal all that is weak or sinful
- Strengthen all that is upright, strong, and good
- Free them from evil
- Protect them from temptation
- Give them strength in Christ
- Complete their conversion

The Presentation of the Creed and the Lord's Prayer
- Gives them the light of faith
- Fills them with a spirit of adoption

(RCIA, nos. 141, 147)

As you can see, it’s a big serving of meat and potatoes we’re giving the kids. The celebration of these five major liturgical rites is a lot of content for the six weeks of Lent. These rites are the “lenten retreat” for the children and their families. Let’s take a quick look at the dynamics of this lenten retreat.

**The lenten retreat**
The dynamics of this lenten retreat is one of liturgical catechesis. It works like this from week to week:

1. Prepare for the scrutiny
2. Celebrate the scrutiny
3. Reflect on celebration of scrutiny

You repeat this process for the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Sundays of Lent. Then, you follow this same process for the celebration of the presentations, which occur during the third and fifth weeks of Lent. But, we’ll talk about the specifics of how all this works in a later session.

For the time being, let’s go back to the period of purification and enlightenment and remember where it takes us—to the celebration of sacraments at the Easter Vigil.

**A peek at the peak of the journey**
Having completed the lenten retreat and the final spiritual preparation of Lent, the children and their families are led through the celebrations of Holy Week and to the sacred Triduum, which culminates at the Easter Vigil. It is at the Vigil that children experience the wonder of the paschal mystery.

- They are incorporated into the life of Christ by being created anew in baptism.
- They are anointed with sacred chrism and made to be more like Christ in confirmation.
- Then they are fully incorporated into Christ’s body through the Eucharist.

The celebration of the sacraments of initiation is the peak of the children’s RCIA journey. Through the sacraments they have become one with Christ and the Church. Their journey, however, continues onward as now they are disciples of Jesus Christ initiated for the life of world.
From sacraments onward to mission

In the next period, we help the children to better understand the sacraments and their mission as young disciples. But, before moving on to the fourth and final period of children’s RCIA, let’s take a moment to review how the period of purification and enlightenment leads the children to the sacraments. Please go to Exercise 4 for further reflection on purification and enlightenment with children.