

Guidelines for Religious Formation Programs for the 2020-2021 Program Year

Dear Parish Catechetical Leaders and Coordinators,

On behalf of the Office of Religious formation and the Diocese of El Paso, thank you for your dedication to your catechetical ministry that serves children, youth, families and adults in our diocese. These uncertain times can cause anxiety, hopelessness, and despair for so many, thus our catechetical work and ministry in sharing and nurturing our faith and hope in Jesus Christ is critical at this time.

It seems Covid-19 has thrown us “out of the box” and challenged us to be creative, flexible and pastoral. This is a *kairos* moment, a perfect opportunity, to be creative and reimagine our catechetical role to foster meaningful relationships with Jesus Christ and accompany our young people and families to grow as disciples. This document offers guidance and several options for the 2020-2021 Religious Formation program year. We hope that the new virtual options will allow us “to cast a wider net” and reach out with a new zeal to young people and families.

Take time to review these guidelines with your pastor, PCL, coordinators, catechists and religious formation staff to discern what model will best suite the needs of your parish. Please feel free to reach out to the Office of Religious Formation for assistance in choosing a model for your parish.

Virtual catechesis is strongly recommended

Each parish has the responsibility for the care and wellbeing of all persons that enters our building for Religious Formation. The diocese highly recommends that all religious formation be conducted virtually and remote.

Unless a parish can ensure social distancing and sanitization requirements (as outlined by the CDC, after all religious formation gatherings) can be maintained throughout an event or session, faith formation should not be in-person.

Parish programs that decided to offer in-person catechesis must follow the safe ministry protocols outlined in **Appendix A** and the approval of the pastor must be obtained. The parish must also develop a plan in response to an outbreak connected to the parish program.

As the program year progresses a parish may decide to shift from online to in-person catechesis. It is important that the parish program has the permission of the pastor, follows the safe ministry protocols outlined in Appendix A, and has a response plan.

Online platforms and Learning Management Systems

The following online platforms and learning management systems are recommended for use in religious formation. Catechist tutorials, for these LEM's and apps, in written and video format can be found at officeofreligiousformation.com

Confirmation Youth - Google classroom and Remind App (communicating with parents)

First Holy Communion Children - Class dojo and remind App

Class dojo has safety protocols set in place for use with children and is highly recommended.

Suggested Religious Formation Models

There is no one program that can meet the needs of the diverse parishes in the Diocese of El Paso. Therefore the Office of Religious Formation has highlights three models to guide parishes in providing catechesis the 2020-2021-program year. These models can be found in **Appendix B**.

These options listed are adjustable, interchangeable, and are to be adapted to the particular needs and resources of the individual parish community as well as the changing realities of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Online Resources from the Publishers

All Catholic publishers have developed many at-home and online resources. **Appendix C** lists the resources available and the contact information for the publishers.

Digital Communication

As our world and communication moves into an increasingly digital and online environment it is important to ensure a safe online environment for religious formation. Make sure that all religious formation staff, catechists, aides and helpers have a clear understanding of the ***Virtual Person to Person Communication in a Youth Ministry Setting*** document issued by the Safe Environment office. This document **can be found in Appendix D**

The Diocesan Office of Religious Formation is available to assist with your parish formation program especially during the 2020-2021-program year. An ORF staff person will be reaching out to you on a regular basis to answer any questions and offer our assistance. *Aqui estamos para servir.*

Bendiciones, Veronica Rayas, Ph.D., Director
Office of Religious Formation

Appendix A

Safety Protocols for in-person Religious Formation

Prior to planning any in-person religious formation it is necessary to contact the Diocesan Office of Religious Formation. These recommendations will be reviewed and revised as necessary on a regular basis to ensure that they are adequate responses to changing conditions of the virus. Recommendations may be relaxed or increased based on the recommendations of federal, state, and local health departments.

Prior to Engaging in Religious Education Gatherings:

1. Cleaning/Sanitizing Common Space/Touch-Points

While surface spread of COVID-19 is less common than previously reported, continue to disinfect all common touch surfaces prior to the event.

- This includes, but is not limited to: common area and meeting room light switches, door knobs, chairs or tables in use, restrooms, equipment, etc.
- Use an approved CDC disinfectant:
 - <https://www.epa.gov/pesticideregistration/list-n-disinfectants-use-against-sars-cov-2-covid-19>
- “It may be possible that a person can get COVID-19 by touching a surface or object that has the virus on it and then touching their own mouth, nose, or possibly their eyes. This is not thought to be the main way the virus spreads, but we are still learning more about how this virus spreads.”
 - <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-gettingsick/how-covid-spreads.html>

2. Event Temperature Checks

During Religious Education Gatherings:

1. Physical Distancing

Participants will continue to socially distance themselves at events, especially when indoors or in enclosed spaces. Appropriate distancing will be based on the most recent recommendations from the CDC, state, or local health departments. At the time of this publishing, the current recommended distance is 6 feet.

- <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/socialdistancing.html>

2. No Physical Contact

Avoid physical contact with one another. This includes but is not limited to: hand shaking, hugging, fist bumps, high fives, or any games/activities where

physical contact is required. This is believed to be the MAIN way the virus is spread, through close physical contact with an infected individual.

- <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/how-covidspreads.html>

3. Attendance Sheet/App to track participation.

Religious Formation Staff are required to track attendance of all participants and acquire names and contact information (including contact information of parent/guardian in the case of minors). Proper care for participants requires that we know who is in attendance at all times. Individuals known to have contracted or are/have been exhibiting symptoms of COVID-19 should not return until after a 14-day self-quarantine followed by at least 72 hours of no symptoms. Individuals who have been exposed to COVID-19 should not participate in activities until they have self-quarantined for 14 days from the date of exposure.

All cases must be documented and records kept in the parish Office of Religious Formation.

4. Face Coverings/Masks:

All catechists, participants and adult leaders must wear face coverings while in any parish buildings.

- <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/cloth-facecover.html>

5. Meeting spaces

If possible, utilize larger classrooms or parish hall to allow for adequate social distancing.

- <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/disinfecting-buildingfacility.html>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/cleaningdisinfection.html>

It is recommended that participants do not share materials (notebooks, writing implements) or personal items such as water bottles.

After Religious Formation Gatherings:

1. Reporting if a Participant, Chaperone or Staff Member shows symptoms or results in a positive Covid-19 test after an event:

Advise individuals to follow CDC reporting guidelines should a person become ill and tell him/her to call his/her doctor.

The Pastor, Director of Religious Education, or other individual designated by the pastor should make a record of the incident and ensure proper follow-up.

Appendix B

First Holy Communion Preparation

1. FAMILY CATECHESIS (PACKET DISTRIBUTION)

DESCRIPTION:

Parish Religious formation office assembles catechetical packets for registered families. Catechists will conduct virtual meetings (bi-weekly or monthly) with parent or family guardian to go over lessons with the parents, focus on the faith themes and cover key points, answer questions, assess needs, etc. Faith sharing among parents will include best practices along with support and encouragement.

PACKET CONTENTS:

Use the original student text (do not photocopy unless instructed to do so by the publisher), Diocesan (or other) Prayer Book, supplies for projects not typically found in homes, along with lesson plan and or directions to submit work that is to be turned in to the parish. Inform parents of how to turn in paperwork, worksheets, or lesson assessment in hard copy form or online submission.

Class Dojo is recommended as a platform for communicating with parents about assignments and creating online portfolios, that includes the (Group) class story. An activity log for parents with check off lists of objectives can be helpful for the parent or guardian.

Packet pick-ups may be scheduled at monthly intervals or bi-monthly. Please read and follow the procedures for packet distributions from the TEA.

Parent manual

Create a parent manual with PCL or office contact information, package pick-up dates, clear expectations, and step-by-step instructions for each lesson to be taught during the month. Utilize the catechist manual for vocabulary if the publisher does not provide parent-led lessons. Include videos that can be accessed on devices. Be sure to explain how young disciples will be accountable for their learning.

IMPLEMENTATION:

Encourage families to set a regular time each week to complete the lessons. Most weeks the parent will be facilitating a learning session. Consider reserving one week each month for a family project – a service opportunity, creating a saint book, constructing a home altar, etc. Families should discuss following the activity.

This model serves all students regardless of Internet availability and technological devices but does require organizing a packet pick-up process. For families with multiple children parishes should choose curriculum that allows the parent to present one theme; children will use resources for their grade level or resources suitable for multi-age learning.

2. LA FAMILIA'S CATECHESIS

DESCRIPTION:

The Office of Religious Formation will make available Unit 1 and 2 of La Familia's catechesis, a methodology of reading storybooks and a weekly family meal with discussion themes and activities. La Familia's catechesis honors the wisdom and religio-cultural faith traditions lived within the Mexican/Mexican American family for hundreds of years.

PACKET CONTENTS:

Unit 1 and 2 eBooks that contain storybook and weekly lesson plan and online resource packet for parents is included for free. Additional activity pack with supporting worksheets and manipulatives are available for a minimal fee.

IMPLEMENTATION:

Families follow the four-step process:

1. Read the storybook to your child, (preferably at bedtime).
2. Gather as a family around a meal and share the teaching and activities in the lesson plan.
3. Reflect upon or discuss the topic anytime during the week as the topic comes up.
4. Parents connect with a parish catechist bi-weekly for faith sharing and best practices.

3. Family Catechesis (Hybrid Digital Learning Approach)

DESCRIPTION:

Lessons for each of the faith themes would be available either as digital workbooks or through online links. Most major publishers have been working to put their physical texts online as eBooks, made available for purchase in this format or included with the purchase of a physical text. See Appendix C for Publishers online resources.

PACKET CONTENTS:

The PCL or coordinator will follow the textbook faith themes and utilize an online platform to post activities in the digital workbook with supplemental material including videos, reflection questions, and family activities. The catechist or catechetical leader will record introductory videos to each lesson that provides content and asks the parent to serve as facilitator of discussion that follows. Parish Catechetical Leaders should choose a platform that is mobile device friendly so that parents without computers can use their smartphones. Ensure there is a way to track progress and or submission of theme assessment.

IMPLEMENTATION:

Lay out the curriculum chosen for the parish, choose the appropriate lessons and post them on the online platform. Record a video introducing the theme and giving

the objectives for the lesson of the week (this may be one of your catechists or you may have catechists record videos for their own group or grade level). There should be a short introductory video for each lesson. Parents or guardians will then facilitate the discussion or activity provided and can post their results and or assessment (video, audio, image, worksheet) on Class Dojo or other online platform. Class Dojo will allow for a disciples portfolio and allow the PCL or catechist to keep track of assignments completed.

Confirmation Youth

1. CONFIRMATION PROGRAM (ONLINE)

DESCRIPTION:

Using the parish-approved curriculum to guide the lessons for each of the faith themes, catechists or PCL's can create videos to introduce the content of each faith theme. Catechists will then host a weekly online gathering with confirmation youth for further content and faith discussion. Online platforms such as Google classroom and apps like Flipgrid and edpuzzle can be used to post assignments and assessments. Most major publishers have been working to put their physical texts online as eBooks, made available for purchase in this format or included with the purchase of a physical text.

PCL OR CATECHIST RESPONSIBILITY

The PCL or coordinator will follow the approved textbook faith themes and work with catechists to develop the content videos and online gatherings. The PCL or catechist will use an online platform to post activities in the digital workbook with supplemental material including videos, reflection questions, and activities. The catechist or catechetical leader will record introductory videos to each lesson that provides content to be viewed before the gathering and facilitate the weekly gathering and discussion. Parish Catechetical Leaders should choose a platform that is mobile device friendly so that parents without computers can use their smartphones. Ensure there is a way to track progress and or submission of theme assessment.

IMPLEMENTATION:

Lay out the curriculum chosen for the parish, choose the appropriate lessons and post them on the online platform. Record a video introducing the theme and giving the objectives for the lesson of the week (this may be one of your catechists or you may have catechists record videos for their own group or grade level). There should be a short introductory video for each lesson.

Using an online meeting platform, two catechists will gather a group of up to 12 confirmation disciples for the weekly session. Sessions should include prayer videos, theme content, break out room discussion, and large group review. Use the online platform to post assignments and review and share theme assessments.

Through creative assessments, video, audio, picture, art piece, or worksheet the young disciples can share what they have learned and reinforce the content.

Choose an online platform for the disciples online portfolio that will allow the PCL and/or catechist to keep track of assignments completed.

Appendix C

Resources for Parish Religious Formation Programs

Loyola Press – For current users of the text series Christ Our Life there are numerous, free, at home resources available. Parents can always access at-home resources at and www.christourlife.com/family. Family resources are available, including at-home, parent led lesson plans.

Our Sunday Visitor – Alive in Christ Parish Digital Books and Home Lesson Plans. You can access the digital books by going to the Student & Family Tab:
<http://aliveinchrist.osv.com/family>

Pflaum – Pflaum is offering texts of the Sunday liturgies along with reflections **free of charge** as an aid to worship, especially for those who cannot attend Sunday liturgies because of illness or because they have been cancelled. In addition, there is a list of resources to help parents provide interaction during periods of school closure.
<https://www.pflaum.com/free-online-resources-to-use-at-home-during-covid-19-outbreak>

RCL Benziger – If a parish uses the Blest Are We or Be My Disciples program, they have access to a free online e-book for both participants and catechists.

Free online catechetical resources that are liturgically based are available here:
<https://www.rclbenziger.com/catholic-resources>

Lectionary Resources from RCL Benziger - **free to everyone** – available for primary, intermediate, and Jr high levels. There are Gospel Reflections designed to be used with families and in intergenerational settings along with a “Question of the Week.” Go to <http://rclblectionary.com/>

Sadlier – Sadlier offers online resources for parents, catechists, and parish catechetical leaders free of charge with no login necessary. Everyone has access to these resources whether or not they are current Sadlier customers.
<https://religion.sadlierconnect.com/login.html>

St. Mary's Press – There are online resources for the parishes using St. Mary's Press materials. At-home guides as well as e-books and other supportive materials are available, including support for parents teaching from home. For anyone using St. Mary's Press, contact them directly for access to online support for using their materials at home.

Appendix D

Virtual Person-to-Person Communication in a Youth Ministry Setting

We are in an unprecedented time in our schools and parishes. Due to COVID-19 our schools are closed and Masses suspended. While we may not be able to be physically present with our young people, technology can provide some vehicles for us to stay in relationship with them. The following document will help all of us direct our energies in safe and effective ways. All listed in the document is in addition to what is found in our Code of Conduct:

In the following document ADULT = *An individual who is eighteen years of age or older AND is no longer in high school and has completed Virtus Safe Environment Program as well as a background check through Fastrax.*

Before Holding a Virtual Person to Person Conference:

- Youth ministers and adult leaders should review the Diocese of El Paso Code of Conduct and the Diocese Social Media Policy.
- While there are many benefits of Virtual Person to Person communications, we must ensure that what we do satisfies [Children's Online Privacy and Protection Rule \("COPPA"\)](#).
- Youth who participate in Virtual Person to Person communications in a youth ministry setting must be at least 11 years old and in middle school. Please provide guidelines to the youth and parents via email before even beginning the youth group meetings via video.
- Clear communications must be provided to parents regarding Virtual Person to Person conferences so that they are informed of the dates, times, and reasons for the conferences and have an opportunity to decide that their child not participate. *(Email or direct phone call with parents are acceptable).*
- Parents must be given the ability and the corresponding links or phone numbers to join the Virtual Person to Person conferences at any time *(Email or text message are acceptable)*. Encourage parents to attend the first meeting and give their permission on video.
- Youth ministers must notify youth and parents that broadcasting a video stream from their end is optional. They must be given the opportunity to join with only an audio connection on the ~~two~~ conference.
- Parents and youth must be notified that the Virtual Person to Person conferences will be recorded for the safety of everyone *(Email or text message are acceptable)*.

- Two adults (*who have completed Virtus Safe Environment Program as well as a background check through Fastrax*) must be present on each Virtual Person to Person conference.
- All streaming sessions must be recorded, and great care must accompany the handling of the recording after the conference. Access of the recording involving youth should only be given with a valid reason to the youth recorded in the conference, their parents, or parish and diocesan staff. Virtual Person to Person conferences that include minors must not be posted publicly online.
- The use of Virtual Person to Person conferencing as a tool of youth ministry must be approved in advance in writing (*email is acceptable*) by the youth minister's supervisor. Two adults should have access to the recording.
- The physical location of the recording or live session should be a professional setting such as a classroom or home-office. It should not be an intimate setting such as a bedroom. Be mindful when choosing to broadcast live that you check the background for any materials that may be distracting, inappropriate, or potentially offensive, both audio and visual. Having a wall behind them would prevent others possibly walking behind them causing a distraction,
- Adults are permitted to initiate communication with minors between 8:00 AM and 9:00 PM. Person to Person conferences must be limited to this time frame.

Adults must remember that they are adult professionals who are engaged in ministry with a minor. Appropriate boundaries must exist between adults and minors so that effective ministry may occur. Adults are not friends or buddies with the minors they serve. All electronic interaction with youth, including Virtual Person to Person conferencing, must be conducted as if the adult minister would be willing to say or give the same response in the presence of that minor's parents.

Tips in Setting Up the Virtual Person to Person Conference:

- Schedule a meeting rather than invite people to your personal chatroom. This will generate a link that you can share with others and will prevent people from conferencing at any time.
- When sharing a link, try not to post it social media, doing this allows anyone to join the conference. Instead, email the link to your youth ministry contact list and on social media tell them to email for the meeting information.
- Meetings have a maximum of 100 people but can be cumbersome for 25+ people. If you're going to have that many, consider using the breakout rooms feature (make sure you have enough Adults for each breakout room)
 - When setting up your account, make sure to remove the ability for anyone to share their screen with the rest of the group. (If using Zoom see Zoom tips attached)

During the Virtual Person to Person Conference:

- Adults and youth must be dressed professionally and modestly.
- Begin with a discussion of rules of conduct for the video conference. (See list at bottom “**Etiquette to Share with Participants**”)
- As an adult leader, be ready to mute or turn off the video of a participant if something distracting or inappropriate comes up.

Code of Conduct for Youth Participants (should be shared with parents beforehand):

- Please dress as if meeting in person, your clothing should be modest and appropriate (no pajamas please).
- Please make sure nothing inappropriate or unseemly is in your surroundings when broadcasting video and audio. Please make sure your setting is tidy.
- Two-way streaming from a restroom is never acceptable.
- Please use care to join from a non-intimate setting such as a home-office or similar room.
- Parents are invited and encouraged to attend if they would like.
- Please know sessions are recorded for the safety of participants and leaders.

Supplement: Tips While Leading a Virtual Person to Person Conference

- As host, arrive 5 minutes early to start the meeting. They can join without you but it can be awkward to join a conference with nobody else.
- Be sure you’ve selected ‘Record’ for the conversation, especially if working with minors.
- It’s generally a good idea to wait 5 minutes before starting to account for latecomers and technology issues.
- As you’re waiting to begin, greet people as they arrive!
- Please start meetings with prayer, but note that it is difficult to have everyone pray in unison with the audio lag time. It often works better to have the leader read or speak the prayer and then have the group respond “amen”.
- Have one adult leader focus on speaking and guiding the conversation. The other adult leader can monitor the chat feature for questions or comments from the group.
- When leading a discussion or asking for input, it is helpful if the leader calls on specific people to ask for their comment. Call upon each person to give them an opportunity to contribute.
- Be mindful that some families may have limited or no internet available. Some may have data caps. If you are having video meetings, try to use platforms that allow people to join either via computer to call in and join only for sound.

Etiquette to Share with Participants

1. When you’re not speaking, please mute yourself to reduce background noise. This is usually found at

- the bottom left of the screen. You should definitely unmute and jump in to make comments and share!
2. You can utilize the chat feature to make side comments, share links, or add anything extra.
 3. You can use hand signals like a thumbs up or a raised hand if you approve of a comment, want to answer yes, or have something to say.
 4. Remember that you're videoconferencing, so we can see you at all times. You can turn off video (without leaving the call) if you need to.
 5. We will be recording the session, not to share with lots of people, but just to have a record.
 6. Conversation won't be as fluid as an in-person discussion, so be patient and it'll sometimes have gaps of silence that are just fine.
 7. Make sure your computer or phone is in a stable position. Moving or jittery video is distracting. During this time, we ask that you refrain from eating or walking around as it can also distract others from our conversation.

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