

Faith Formation Handbook

Immaculate Heart of Mary Parish

Revised July 2026

Mission Statement

*“The definitive aim of catechesis is to put people ... in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ.” —
Catechesi Tradendae, St. John Paul II, 5*

The goal of the Faith Formation program at Immaculate Heart of Mary Parish (IHM) is to help students grow in their understanding of the Catholic faith and in their knowledge and love of Jesus Christ. Through this formation, we hope that each student will grow closer to the Lord, love His Holy Catholic Church, follow Christ throughout life, and live as His disciple and friend.

At IHM, we believe that formation in the Catholic faith requires a real partnership between parents and the parish. At their child’s Baptism, parents accepted the responsibility of being the first and primary educators of their children in the faith by word and example. The parish is honored to support parents in this sacred responsibility by offering formal catechesis, sacramental preparation, prayer, and opportunities for Christian community.

Parents and guardians are expected to read this handbook carefully, discuss its expectations with their children, and are required to sign and return the agreement form at the end of this document. Enrollment in Faith Formation indicates a willingness to support and follow the policies of the parish program.

Program Expectations

Faith Formation Attendance

Good attendance includes arriving on time and remaining for the entire session. While occasional lateness or absence can happen, families are asked not to allow this to become routine. Our catechists are volunteers who prepare carefully with the needs of their students in mind. Regular participation helps students build a strong and consistent knowledge of the Catholic faith, with the hope that they will come to know it well and love it deeply.

Students are permitted no more than four (4) excused absences per year. If a child will be absent, parents should notify the child’s catechist or the Director of Religious Education (DRE) in advance. Families facing unusual circumstances should contact the DRE so that the parish can work with them pastorally and help the student remain engaged in formation.

Mass Participation

The celebration of the Eucharist at Holy Mass is the “source and summit” of the Christian life. At Mass, we participate in the Paschal Mystery of Christ — His dying and rising — made present for us in the Eucharistic sacrifice. Faith Formation does not replace the sacraments. Rather, it is meant to form children and youth for fuller, more faithful participation in the sacramental life of the Church.

In addition to participating in Faith Formation classes, students and their families are expected to attend Mass on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation. Sunday Mass is the center of Catholic life and the most important way families live and hand on the faith together. It is very difficult for children to understand and embrace what they are taught about the Church, the Mass, and the Catholic faith if they are not also brought to Mass. Faith Formation is meant to support the faith lived at home and celebrated at Mass; it cannot take the place of Sunday worship.

Prayer and Living Faith at Home

Parents are asked to pray with their children at home regularly, especially on Sundays, the Lord’s Day, and to speak with them about the faith. A steady rhythm of family prayer helps children learn how to speak and listen to God, understand the faith more deeply, and most importantly, encounter Jesus Christ and grow in love for Him. If your family needs help beginning or strengthening this practice, please ask. The parish is happy to offer guidance, resources, and support.

Special Needs and Accommodations

All children are welcome in Faith Formation. To help provide a safe, comfortable, and fruitful environment for every student, parents are asked to communicate any special needs, learning needs, allergies, medical concerns, dietary restrictions, sensory needs, or other accommodations to the child’s catechist and the DRE. This information allows the parish to plan appropriately and to support each child as well as possible.

Student Code of Conduct and Participation

Following the command of Jesus, “Love one another as I have loved you,” catechists, students, parents, and guests are expected to treat one another with Christian charity and mutual respect. The Faith Formation program should be a safe and positive environment where students can learn, pray, ask questions, and grow in faith.

Student Participation

Students are expected to attend class consistently, participate respectfully, complete assigned work when applicable, and cooperate with their catechists and classmates.

Electronic Devices

Cell phones and other electronic devices should not be used during class unless the catechist gives permission for a class activity. If a student uses a device without permission, the catechist may collect the device and return it at the end of class. Repeated issues may result in the device being collected at the beginning of future classes or in a parent meeting with the DRE.

Discipline Policy

Disruptive, disrespectful, unsafe, or inappropriate behavior will be addressed first by the catechist through a verbal reminder or warning. If the behavior continues, the parent or guardian will be contacted by the catechist. In serious or repeated situations, the parent or guardian may be asked to pick up the student, and a meeting may be required with the DRE and/or Pastor before the student returns to class. Continued refusal to

follow program expectations may result in dismissal from the Faith Formation program, at the discretion of the Pastor and DRE.

Bullying, Harassment, and Safety

Bullying, harassment, threats, intimidation, physical aggression, or behavior that endangers another person will not be tolerated. Any concern should be reported promptly to a catechist, the DRE, or the Pastor so that it can be addressed appropriately.

Communication, Cancellations, and Schedule Changes

Class cancellations due to inclement weather, emergency situations, facility issues, or other serious concerns will be communicated through Flocknote as soon as a cancellation is necessary. Families are responsible for making sure the parish has current contact information. Schedule changes and important reminders may also be communicated by Flocknote, email, parish announcements, or printed notices sent home with students.

Child Safety

Drop-Off and Pick-Up Procedures

To ensure the safety of all students, parents and guardians are asked to accompany children to their classroom at drop-off and to come to the classroom to pick them up promptly at the end of class. Students may be dropped off no earlier than ten minutes before class begins and should arrive no later than the scheduled start of class. This procedure is especially important because of parking-lot traffic before and after Mass. If someone other than a parent or guardian will pick up a child, the parent or guardian must notify the DRE or catechist in advance *in writing*.

Safe Environment Training

In order to provide a safe environment where all of God's children can encounter Jesus Christ and learn about His Church, the Diocese of Erie requires parishes to provide age-appropriate safe environment training for Faith Formation students each year. This training will take place during class time on a date chosen in coordination with diocesan requirements and parish scheduling.

Parents or guardians who have questions about this training, or who wish to request that their child be excused or provided an alternative arrangement, must submit the request in writing to the Faith Formation office no later than the first week of classes.

Adult Volunteers and Clearances

All adults who serve in Faith Formation must comply with diocesan child protection requirements, including required clearances, safe environment training, and any other documentation required by the Diocese of Erie before working with minors. The parish is committed to following diocesan policies for the protection of children and youth.

Emergency and Medical Information

Parents and guardians are responsible for providing current emergency contact and medical information at registration and for updating the parish if that information changes during the year. In the event of illness, injury, or emergency, parish staff or volunteers will make reasonable efforts to contact a parent or guardian. If immediate medical attention appears necessary, emergency services may be contacted.

Sacramental Year Information and Policies

Sacramental Preparation Attendance

The sacraments are great gifts from God, and students should be properly prepared to receive them with faith, reverence, and understanding. Students preparing for a sacrament must attend class regularly and punctually. Because sacramental preparation requires consistent participation, a student who misses more than four classes during the year of sacramental preparation may not be permitted to receive the sacrament with the class, at the discretion of the Pastor and DRE. In such cases, the student will be required to participate in a future sacramental preparation program before receiving the sacrament.

First Reconciliation and First Holy Communion

Students preparing for First Reconciliation and First Holy Communion are expected to participate faithfully in Faith Formation and all required sacramental preparation activities. First Holy Communion is not simply a one-time event, but the beginning of a lifelong relationship with Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. Families are asked to make Sunday Mass a priority so that children learn to love and participate in the Eucharist regularly.

Confirmation Preparation

At Confirmation, students are strengthened by the Holy Spirit to live as missionary disciples of Christ and to be “witnesses ... to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). To help ensure that students are prepared to witness to the Catholic faith, students are expected to attend Faith Formation in 6th, 7th, and 8th grade, as well as Confirmation preparation during 9th grade.

If a child has not attended Faith Formation at IHM during grades 6-8 but wishes to be confirmed in 9th grade, the parent or guardian should contact the DRE to discuss the student’s preparation and any additional formation that may be needed.

Confirmation Sponsor Policy

Choosing a sponsor for Confirmation is an important part of sacramental preparation. Students are encouraged to choose someone who exemplifies a living relationship with the Holy Spirit and who inspires them to live out their Catholic faith. A Confirmation sponsor must meet the following requirements:

- Be a fully initiated Catholic who has received Baptism, Holy Eucharist, and Confirmation.
- Be at least sixteen (16) years of age.
- Be a practicing Catholic who regularly attends Mass on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation and strives to live the Catholic faith.
- If married, be married according to the laws of the Catholic Church.
- Not be the mother or father of the student being confirmed.

Order of Christian Initiation for Children

Parents whose child has not received the sacraments at the usual times in the Diocese of Erie — Reconciliation in 2nd grade, Eucharist in 3rd grade, and Confirmation in 9th grade — should contact the DRE and their child’s catechist to discuss an appropriate plan for sacramental preparation and reception. The parish will work with the family to provide formation suited to the child’s age, background, and needs.

Records, Confidentiality, and Privacy

The parish maintains Faith Formation records, including registration information, attendance, sacramental preparation information, emergency contacts, and other records needed for the proper administration of the

program. Personal, family, medical, and sacramental information will be treated with appropriate care and shared only with those who have a legitimate need to know for the student's safety, formation, or sacramental preparation.

Photo and Media Consent

By enrolling in and attending Faith Formation activities, students and parents/guardians acknowledge that photographs, video recordings, and other media may be taken during classes, events, retreats, and parish activities. These images and recordings may be used by the parish for educational, promotional, informational, and archival purposes, including publication on the IHM website, parish social media accounts, bulletin, and other official parish communications.

Parents or guardians who do not wish for their child's image or likeness to be used must notify the DRE in writing. IHM will make reasonable efforts to honor such requests but cannot guarantee exclusion from all group or public-event photography.

Policy Disclaimer

The policies in this handbook are intended to guide the ordinary operation of the IHM Faith Formation program. The Pastor and Director of Religious Education reserve the right to interpret, modify, revise, or apply these policies as circumstances require, always seeking the good of the students, families, catechists, and parish community.

Areement to Abide by Faith Formation Policies

By signing below, the student and parent/guardian acknowledge that they have received, read, understood, and agree to abide by the policies contained in this Faith Formation Handbook.

Student Name (print):

Student Signature:

Date:

Parent/Guardian Name (print):

Parent/Guardian Signature:

Phone or Email:

Please detach and return this form to the parish office with the Faith Formation registration form.