

Religious Education Program Update

It is time to begin another school year. But this year won't be like any we have seen in the past. COVID-19 has shifted many things. But one thing that never changes is our faith in a God of infinite love, a faith that enables us to walk with compassion and hope through all situations.

The Faith Formation Ministry at Our Lady of Mercy knows the importance of ministering to our youth. Video presentations can't substitute for the dynamic created among peers and with catechists that takes place when we gather in person. At the same time, the safety of both students and volunteers is a priority for all.

Bishop Persico has taken the lead in articulating a commitment to faith formation even in this time of pandemic. While acknowledging that faith formation ministries will need to make changes in order to adjust to this reality, he has also made it clear that parishes must continue to provide religious education.

Our Lady of Mercy has looked to the policies of the Harbor Creek School District in determining how best to approach the start of this year of faith formation. The availability of bus transportation for the Tuesday program, the ability to accommodate youth while maintaining a 6 foot distance and the comfort of families having their children in social settings were among the many factors considered. After much prayer and discussion, it has been decided to begin the school year with a hybrid model.

Children in elementary and junior high grade levels will be provided with both physical and electronic resources. Each week, we will gather in grade level clusters on-line with volunteer catechists to review lessons. Parents will be given easy lesson plans to assist them in any additional work they may wish to do with their child. Jr. High youth will continue to gather for their monthly "Youth Event". This may take place outdoors in a context where youth can maintain a safe distance or it may take place in cyber space. Likewise youth in senior high will use a combination of self-directed electronic lessons, On-line gatherings with their catechists and large group events at the parish when they can be conducted safely.

If the Harbor Creek School District closes to physical classrooms, any physical gatherings planned for faith formation will be moved on-line. If the Harbor Creek School District opens up to full-time in-person instruction, Our Lady of Mercy will make plans to invite children back into the building for faith formation. If this happens, we will follow all state guidelines to create a safe environment including the possibility of shifting to Sperry Hall and other spaces that will permit youth to sit at a distance. Masks, hand sanitizer and cleaning between classes along with other CDC guidelines will be implemented. Any family who would be uncomfortable allowing their child to attend physical classes if we were to be able to offer it would have the option of continuing to teach their child at home. However, depending on the number of volunteers and families participating in any option, catechists may not be able to meet with children in person and on-line at the same time.

Religious education registration will take place by mail this year. Returning families will receive all forms in early August. Signed forms can be returned by mail or the collection basket at Mass. New families can download the registration form from the parish website or call the Lifelong Faith Formation Office to have a form mailed to them. Registering children for religious education implies consent for remote learning methods, including the use of conferencing platforms, email communication and web-based lessons.

All families registering for religious education are asked to provide an accurate email. We will communicate any alterations to the religious education process to families by email. Remote learning assignments may also be sent via email.

Volunteers are the backbone of the faith formation ministry. Whether we offer religious education on-line or in-person, faith-filled catechists and aides are critical. The on-line model requires more volunteers than the traditional model. In addition to the catechist, the diocesan child safety plan mandates two adults with clearances and in-servicing be present at any gathering of youth on-line for faith formation.

We are in need of volunteers willing to assist with several grade levels, Gr. 1, Gr. 6 and Gr. 7. In addition, we need adults willing simply to be a presence at each class. If you are willing to help us this year in any capacity, please contact Irene at 899-6132 or ilucas@ourladyofmercychurch.org to learn more.

Faith formation is a lifelong journey. Our Lady of Mercy is committed to offering opportunities for faith formation to children, adults and families through this current health crisis. Large group events such as the parish mission, will be streamed. Small groups will gather via Zoom or shift to larger spaces where people can keep a safe distance. The parish Facebook page will post links to religious videos and faith based websites. The parish library remains open for parishioners to borrow books. Returned items will be quarantined prior to re-shelving. The parish subscription to formed.org offers a wealth of podcasts, videos, eBooks and live events for Catholics of every age.

COVID-19 has disrupted all of our lives. None of us has a blueprint for how to navigate through a pandemic. The situation changes daily; new information keeps being disseminated. Thank you for your patience and cooperation as we do our best to figure out how best to provide faith formation to our children, teens and entire parish community.