

RECEPTION OF THE SACRAMENTS AND MEMBERSHIP IN THE PARISH

Dear School Families:

As new children join our student body each year, family members begin to inquire about the availability of Sacraments and their participation in parish life. Certainly all families are invited to join the parish and make Our Lady of the Atonement their spiritual home.

However, unlike other schools, we do not require membership in the parish or specified contributions to the church to govern how much you pay in tuition at the academy. We believe each family should have complete freedom in determining a spiritual home without making money an issue in the decision. Individuals and families who join Our Lady of the Atonement should do so because the parish meets their spiritual needs.

As most of you know, Our Lady of the Atonement is not a *territorial* parish, but a *personal* parish. In other words, we do not have set geographic boundaries in which people have a “right” to belong simply because of their street address. We were erected by Archbishop Flores to serve persons who were primarily converts from the Anglican (Episcopalian) tradition. Over time, our membership has come to include persons from a variety of faith backgrounds, including many life-long Roman Catholics. Over the past 24 years of our history, people have joined our parish knowing that the liturgy (the Mass) is considerably different in language and style from what exists in other parishes. Additionally, some of our customs may be somewhat different than what may be experienced in other places. All of this is explained in greater detail in “*An Introduction to the Parish*,” from our website at <http://www.atonementonline.com/intro.php>. Although different, nevertheless our devotional life and way of worshipping is totally consonant with the official liturgy of the Catholic Church, having been officially approved by the Vatican in 1987.

SACRAMENTAL PARTICIPATION IS TIED DIRECTLY TO ACTIVE MEMBERSHIP. Because we are a personal parish, other territorial parishes overlap our physical location, and these parishes in theory claim the Catholic persons located within their borders. Two neighbors could live side-by-side on the same street in the subdivision where the school and church are located. Both neighbors may reside in the territorial parish of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Helotes, yet a distinction is made because one is an active, registered member at Our Lady of the Atonement and one is not. This is the only way we can distinguish between who rightly belongs where.

Why is this important? It’s important because the Catholic Church insists on an official recording for reception of the Sacraments. Baptism, Marriage, Confirmation, Burial of the Dead, and First Holy Communion are officially recorded in sacramental registry books. The parish actually recording these Sacraments becomes the “church of record” in the order and structure of the Archdiocese of San Antonio. That is why *active* membership is required in the parish to receive Sacraments at Our Lady of the Atonement. There are, however, exceptions to this general rule.

We recognize that non-parishioner children enrolled at The Atonement Academy may desire to receive the Sacraments with their fellow classmates. Non-registered parents

may obtain a **letter of permission** from their pastors where they attend holy Mass and are members. This letter will recognize the active membership of the child and parents in another Catholic parish, but allows the child by way of permission to seek the Sacraments at Our Lady of the Atonement. Letters of permission from pastors are regularly given if the family is known, active, and registered in that parish. Parents without a letter of permission may not register for the Sacraments here, nor may their child receive them.

Current students at The Atonement Academy will be offered opportunities for Sacramental reception early next year. First Penance, First Holy Communion, and Confirmation will come in January 2008. Archbishop Gomez will come on Saturday, January 26th at 10 a.m. Confirmation and First Communion will occur at the same Mass at that time.

If your family is a registered and active member of our parish, your child will have the opportunity to receive at that Mass. Please REGISTER for both First Communion and Confirmation using your parish online registration account, and “add” a sacramental form to your listing for both First Communion and Confirmation. Please register at this time at <http://www.atonementonline.com/churchregistry/signin.php>. Your child must be in Second Grade or above to receive.

If your family is *not* registered here, then you will need to obtain a letter of permission from the pastor in the parish you do attend prior to the Sacramental reception of your child. Please obtain that letter at this time. When you have that letter, please turn it into Mrs. Benzaquen at the business office, or mail it to her attention at 15415 Red Robin, SATX 78255. When you have obtained the letter of permission, please register online as a “non-Parishioner.” The site allows you to register for First Communion and Confirmation even though you are listed as a non-parishioner. Please register here at this site <http://www.atonementonline.com/churchregistry/signin.php> by creating a new account. Your child must be in Second Grade or above to receive.

If you are inactive in the practice of your faith, this presents a real problem for your child. It is unlikely that a pastor will grant his permission to receive the Sacraments outside the parish if he does not know you, or if there is no record of your attendance.

I encourage each and every family to think seriously about attending some Catholic parish for the sake of your child’s spiritual life. It seems inconsistent to a child to attend Mass Monday through Friday; to attend a Catholic school where religion and prayers are taught and prayed daily, but then to have all this missing on the Lord’s Day -- Sunday. We need your support in putting into practice those things your child is being taught at the academy.

If you have *no* spiritual home at this time, we invite you to join our parish now. Please do not wait to register and attend “sometime later.” Active, registered membership for six months is required to be eligible to receive the Sacraments, so it is too late to register now for a January reception of sacraments, but it is never too late to begin a sacramental and grace-filled life! By “active,” we mean that you attend weekly on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation. It is not enough to fill out the online form, attend one Sunday, but never be seen again! It is important that your membership includes some kind of offering as prescribed by Holy Scripture and the Precepts of the Church.

That's another way we can record your active, weekly membership. Equally, it's important that we know you by name and that we speak often. You will find that the clergy of this parish stand outside the church doors after Mass because we do want to get to know you.

Do you have a specific need? Have you missed the Sacraments in your life? It may be possible for us to assist you with second marital unions not recognized by the Church. Perhaps you have not been to confession in years. Perhaps you don't know how to "come back home." Please, give either Fr. Phillips or me a call at 210.695.2944 and we will help you find a way forward.

Do you desire to learn more? Another 12-week "*Catholic Inquiry Class*" is being offered at the parish, beginning again in January 2008. This class will answer some basic questions about Catholicism and perhaps strengthen your faith. If you have been inactive and away from the Church for some time, this class will be of help to you. Additionally, a weekly Adult Bible Study is being offered by Fr. Phillips on Wednesday evenings. No registration is needed for this class, and all of our religious education classes are offered free of charge.

Lastly, a word on the age for Confirmation: There was confusion last year among some non-parishioners concerning the age in which a child may receive the Sacrament of Confirmation. In the Eastern rites of the Catholic Church, Confirmation is given at the time of infant baptism. In the Western rites, the Code of canon Law allows Confirmation to be administered at the age of reason, after age 7. It has been the custom in this parish and approved by the Archbishop, that children in Second Grade or above be eligible for this Sacrament. The Church teaches that: "the Sacraments convey grace to the recipient, and are in no way dependent upon merit or charitable acts to be efficacious." Therefore, we believe that early reception strengthens the spiritual character of the child and prepares him by way of God's grace to meet the temptations and complexities of modern society.

I hope this lengthy letter has helped you in your understanding of Sacramental life here at Our Lady of the Atonement. If you have additional questions, please do not hesitate to give me a call or E-mail me at DnJames@AtonementOnline.com.

Faithfully yours in Christ Jesus,

Deacon James P. Orr
Director of Religious Education