

APPENDIX C

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Bishop Peter Comensoli,
Broken Bay Diocese,
PO Box 340,
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Dear Bishop Comensoli,

I write to draw your attention to some problems uncovered by members of the *New Perspectives for Catholic Education Group* (NPFCE Group) in the Sacramental Programs for Reconciliation and Eucharist currently in use in Broken Bay Diocese.

NPFCE was formed last year to investigate the extent to which existing religious education is responsible for the failure of our schools to produce practising Catholics. The group was given an interview by the Archdiocese of Sydney Education Office and Mr Hamell, the head of the Broken Bay Diocese Education Office, late last year. Since then we have been looking at the content of the *To Know, Worship and Love* course used in Catholic schools and the Broken Bay catechist booklets used in State Primary Schools. The high school catechist study materials have not as yet been made available to us.

As part of the above, the group also looked at the content of the Broken Bay Diocese Sacramental program for Reconciliation and Eucharist and discovered that neither program gives children the full facts about these sacraments before they receive them for the first time. It also appears that students are also not given sufficient training about these two sacraments in their later schooling in that they are not told about mortal and venial sin and about the need to be in a "state of grace" before they make their first Holy Communion. As a result they are not provided with the link between the two sacraments and, therefore, fail to see the need for regular confession.

In Catholic schools, students are told of mortal sin in year 5 and it is mentioned again briefly a number of times in high school. However, it is given little emphasis. Students are not taught how to decide which sins are grave enough to be mortal and have to be confessed. Furthermore, they are not given instruction on the need to be in a "state of grace" other than a vague mention of this requirement in the year 11 & 12 text book.

All of this is surprising given that Holy Communion is the centre of our faith and we must be in the "state of grace" to receive it. I am sure that you will agree that the Sacrament of Reconciliation and the concept of mortal and venial sin constitute a lynch pin between the two sacraments. We have a tendency to commit mortal sins and the Sacrament of Reconciliation allows us to have our sins forgiven so that we can receive Holy Communion while in the "state of grace". This also provides us with a reason for regularly examining our conscience.

Surprisingly, in the state schools primary catechist lessons, mortal sin and the "state of grace" requirement for Holy Communion are not mentioned and it is our belief that they are not mentioned in high school teaching materials either although, as already mentioned, we have yet to gain access to these.

It is our view that students' concepts of the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Holy Communion are only acquired during the sacramental programs and that students follow this concept thereafter.

Astonishingly, it was stated in a Broken Bay Diocese catechist certificate course on "Ecumenism" that the Maitland-Newcastle Diocese has, in the past, allowed Protestants attending Catholic services to receive Eucharist, regardless of the "state of grace" requirement.

In almost every parish, very few parishioners actually attend Confession and yet almost everyone goes to Holy Communion on a Sunday. Clearly, there is a problem here, since it would appear that most people are not observing the "state of grace" requirement. As a matter of interest, would you let me know when the importance of regular confession was last preached from the pulpit or discussed in parish newsletters, since there is clearly a widespread belief that Confession is optional these days? Indeed, those I have heard from, think it unlikely that ordinary people would commit mortal sins!

Sadly, this problem has been there for years, but bishops and priests have either not noticed it or have chosen to ignore it. Surely, the lack of attendance at Confession coupled with almost universal attendance at Holy Communion would have set off alarm bells? By doing nothing, aren't we allowing mortal sin to happen?

Paragraph 1385 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church states:-

"To respond to this invitation we must prepare ourselves for so great and so holy a moment. St Paul urges us to examine our conscience, 'Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread or drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgement upon himself'.²¹⁶ Anyone conscious of a grave sin must receive the sacrament of Reconciliation before coming to communion."

The implication of this paragraph seems to be that the Church must educate all who are to receive the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Holy Communion so that they can determine if they have committed a mortal sin before allowing them to receive either the Sacraments of Reconciliation or Holy Communion.

Paragraph 1457 states:-

“According to the Church’s command, ‘after having attained the age of discretion, each of the faithful is bound by an obligation faithfully to confess serious sins at least once a year’. ⁵⁶ Anyone who is aware of having committed a mortal sin must not receive Holy Communion, even if he experiences deep contrition, without having first received a sacramental absolution, unless he has a grave reason for receiving communion and there is no possibility of going to Confession. ⁵⁷ Children must go to the sacrament of Penance before receiving Holy Communion for the first time. ⁵⁸

The Church has a duty to provide education to children so that they can, in turn, fulfil their duty under the paragraph which is that children need to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation before making their First Holy Communion.

The Catechism is backed up by the Code of Canon Law

Canon 989 “All the faithful who have reached the age of discretion are bound faithfully to confess their grave sins at least once a year”.

This implies that children should have been instructed so that they can do this when being prepared for the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Interestingly, the need to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation has not been encouraged in our parish until recently.

Canon. 916 states:- “Anyone who is conscious of grave sin may not celebrate Mass or receive the Body of the Lord without previously having been to sacramental confession, unless there is a grave reason and there is no opportunity to confess; in this case the person is to remember the obligation to make an act of perfect contrition, which includes the resolve to go to confession as soon as possible.

Canon 916 implies that everyone receiving Holy Communion including children have to have the capacity to determine if they have committed a mortal sin.

Both the Catechism and the Code of Canon Law are expected to be complied with. Yet this is not happening.

Those providing religious education in our schools and in State schools have a responsibility to provide ongoing education in regard to the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Holy Communion. In this connection, we will be asking Mr Hammill of the Broken Bay Catholic Education Office to grant us an interview where we hope to discuss some issues we have with the course *To Know, Worship and Love* in regard to these two sacraments and other issues shortly.

We have asked Father Jose Philip of the Frenchs Forest Parish to deliver this letter to you because, as parish priest, he is responsible for the programs in the Frenchs Forest Parish and this is something of which he should be made aware. I understand that he attends the periodic meetings with the Diocesan Vicar and yourself. We believe that this is an important matter which should be dealt with by you personally and not by a member of your staff without reference to you.

We appreciate that the publication of the Sacramental programs occurred prior to your becoming bishop of the Broken Bay Diocese. We believe that the sacramental programs for Reconciliation and Eucharist need to be reviewed and then revised to accord with the requirements of the Catechism and the Code of Canon Law.

Children receiving these sacraments for the first time should be taught what a mortal sin is and how to decide which sins are mortal and which are venial. They should be taught what being in a "state of grace" is and of the requirement to be in a "state of grace" before receiving Holy Communion. This learning should be strongly reinforced by religious education with strong emphasis in subsequent years in Catholic schools and in Catechist lessons in the State schools.

Action also needs to be taken to explain to congregations in our churches which sins are mortal, as many parishioners do not correctly understand the concept. The same needs to be done to explain the concept of "state of grace" and the requirement that only those in the "state of grace" can receive Holy Communion.

Yours sincerely,

John Kennedy

For New Perspectives for Catholic Education Group

The following signatories support John Kennedy's letter:-

John Taylor, Garrick Small, Catharine Chu, Dr. Leonard Chu, James Manwaring, Reg Wong, Peter Beswick, Warren Roche, Terry Kennedy and Royce Crittle.

*Contact details of all signatories are provided on an attached spreadsheet.