

RADICAL BELONGING

Archdiocesan Guide for Sacramental
Preparation with Autistic Young People

'I have called you by name; you are mine.' Isaiah 43:1-4



THE ARCHDIOCESE
of BIRMINGHAM

MARK PAINE



Foreword

At the recent Mass in Rome to celebrate the proclamation of St John Henry Newman as Doctor of the Universal Church, Pope Leo reflected that ‘from a Christian perspective, education helps everyone become saints.’ In these words, the Holy Father was echoing the sentiments of Pope Benedict XVI when addressing young people during his visit to the United Kingdom in 2010 - ‘what God wants most of all for each one of you is that you should become holy.’

St John Henry Newman reminds us that God has created each one of us to do Him a definite service and our lives express the mystery of God’s calling through the variety of gifts He has given to us. Education is one such gift that allows us to fulfil our calling from God. Our desire to learn encourages us to grow and helps us to understand the gift of our humanity and how we relate to one another.

As we know, every person is a unique creation of God and we are each called by name. As such our lives reflect the diverse nature of our humanity in which His love thrives. As we seek to deepen our faith and respond generously to God’s call through learning and encounter, we recognise that how we learn about God and encounter Him in the world around us will not be the same for every person.

It is with this in mind that I am deeply grateful to Deacon Mark Paine for highlighting the Church’s important work of helping our young people with complex needs and who may need additional support, together with those adults working with them. I am also very grateful for these carefully prepared and practical resources which I hope and pray will enable and encourage those who use them to grow more deeply in their faith and in their relationship with God.

**✠Bernard Longley
Archbishop of Birmingham**

Mark Paine is a deacon of the Archdiocese of Birmingham. He has 28 years’ experience in primary education, with a particular interest in Special Educational Needs. The father of two Autistic children, he was diagnosed as Autistic himself in his late forties. Since he was a student, he has had a passion for radical inclusion in the Church and ensuring that the Gospel and the Sacraments are available to all, regardless of difference.



RADICAL BELONGING

A parish is a home, not a hurdle. Our task is to recognise the image of God in every person, to welcome their presence as gift, and to make straight the paths that lead them to the sacraments.

This guide offers a pastoral, practical pathway for catechesis with autistic young people, including those who are non-speaking.

It reflects a theology of dignity, belonging, and mission, and draws on current best practice in inclusive catechesis.

Who is it for?

The guide has been written primarily for catechists in parishes and those responsible for sacramental preparation in our schools.

It is intended to provide those who have no experience or specialist knowledge of Autism and related neurological differences with practical advice, along with the theological and doctrinal basis for this.

With the growing number of young people with complex needs in our mainstream schools, guidance is urgently required if they are to be able to access the sacraments now and in the future. This guide aims to provide catechists and teachers with advice on how to achieve this.

There are helpful guides to definitions, acronyms, glossary terms and further resources at the end of this resource.

Adaptive Catechetical Approaches for Autism

'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.' Galatians 3:28

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

EACH PERSON IS UNIQUE

Adaptive catechesis must recognise that 'When you have met one person with autism, you have met one person with autism' (Stephen Shore).

START WITH THE INDIVIDUAL

Welcome 'one learner at a time,' learning about their gifts, interests, needs, and communication style. Tailor the teaching to the learner, not the learner to the teaching.

THE GOAL IS FULL PARTICIPATION

The aim is not simply knowledge acquisition but meaningful engagement and belonging in the faith community.

A LEARNER'S CAPACITY IS FOR A RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS CHRIST

The purpose is not to judge their intellectual knowledge of God.

THE PERSON WE ARE WALKING WITH IS ALREADY IN A RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS CHRIST

It is our responsibility to recognise and nurture this.

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION



‘So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.’ Genesis 1:27.

Scriptural witness

● **Imago Dei:** God creates every person in his image. Difference is not deficit; it is a facet of God’s creative generosity.
Genesis 1:27; cf. Wisdom 11:24–26

● **Christ’s welcome:** Jesus rebukes barriers and gathers children to himself. He puts those at the margins at the centre of the new community.
Mark 10:14; Luke 14:21–23; Matthew 18:5

● **One body, many members:** The Church is diminished when any member is absent. Each person’s presence is necessary for the common good.
1 Corinthians 12:12–27; Romans 12:4–8

Doctrinal anchors

● **Dignity and social justice:** The divine image is present in every person; authentic justice begins in reverence for that dignity. CCC 1702, 1929–1930

● **Sacraments of initiation:** Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist ground all Christian life and mission; preparation should be proportionate to capacity, never punitive or exclusionary.
CCC 1212–1216, 1285, 1322–1327

● **Readiness and capacity:** Admission to Holy Communion requires that children understand the mystery ‘according to their capacity’ and be suitably disposed; readiness can be shown in diverse, non-verbal ways.
CIC can. 913 §1–2; CCC 1391–1392

● **Participation and belonging:** Parishes realise their vocation when they remove barriers to participation and welcome difference as a gift that enriches the whole community. This ethos is central to inclusive ministry and catechesis.

‘We are a single flock under the care of a single shepherd.’ (cf. John 10:16)

The parish is the ordinary locus of belonging; its life is enriched when it learns to welcome and adapt for all its members.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

for Inclusive Catechesis



'Providing services and facilities for people with disabilities is not just an act of social assistance, but a matter of justice.' Pope Francis

PRESUME COMPETENCE:

Start from the belief that each learner can know, love, and respond to God; do not equate speech with understanding.

PRIORITISE BELONGING:

Integrate, do not sideline. Adapt mainstream parish life before creating parallel tracks; offer dedicated supports without segregating.

KEEP IT SIMPLE AND CONCRETE:

Use plain language, visual supports, and predictable routines. Teach through doing: prayer, gesture, symbol, song, and service.

REDUCE SENSORY BARRIERS:

Attend to sound, light, space, movement, and transitions. Small, predictable adjustments often bear great fruit.

HONOUR COMMUNICATION DIVERSITY:

Accept all communication—speech, AAC, signs, gestures, behaviour—as meaningful. Offer choices and time to process.

WORK WITH THE FAMILY:

Parents and carers know their child best. Plan together, check assumptions, and share strategies.

FORM THE PARISH:

Offer simple catechesis to the whole community: why we adapt, how we welcome, what to expect.

FOCUS ON GROWTH, NOT PERFORMANCE:

Celebrate faithful participation and signs of discipleship. Avoid narrow or purely verbal 'tests.'

SAFEGUARD WELL:

Keep boundaries, consent, and dignity central in every adaptation and interaction.

PLAN, REVIEW, AND LEARN:

Use short, clear plans. Evaluate gently. Adjust and try again.

METHODS & SUPPORTS SHAPED FOR AUTISM

Communication and learning

MULTIMODAL INPUTS:

Combine spoken words with visuals, objects, symbols, and actions.

TIME AND PACING:

Offer extended processing time; use short, single step directions; build in pauses.

INTEREST-LED ENGAGEMENT:

Link catechesis to a child's interests; use repetition and routines that feel safe and familiar.

SOCIAL NARRATIVES:

Create short, visual 'what to expect' stories for the Church, confessional, and liturgical moments.

AAC INTEGRATION:

Model prayers and responses on the child's AAC device or board; accept alternative forms of participation (e.g., showing, pointing, signing).

Sensory and regulation

SENSORY AUDIT:

Check lighting, echo, temperature, smells, and seating. Offer ear defenders, fidgets, and movement breaks.

QUIET SPACES:

Provide a clearly marked calm area with minimal stimuli and a regulation kit.

PREDICTABLE TRANSITIONS:

Use visual schedules and countdowns to move between activities.

Wisdom

Under-
standing

Counsel

Fear
of the
Lord

Knowledge

Piety

Fortitude



Relationship and behaviour

CO-REGULATION FIRST:

A calm adult helps a child become calm. Prioritise safety and connection over correction.

FUNCTION OVER FORM:

Behaviours communicate needs; adjust the environment before adding demands.

SHORT, STRENGTH BASED SESSIONS:

20-30 minutes may be optimal;
end on success.

SACRAMENT-SPECIFIC GUIDANCE



‘All liturgical celebrations in the parish should be accessible... so that, together with their brothers and sisters, each of them can deepen, celebrate, and live their faith.’ Pope Francis.



Aim: To welcome the child into Christ and the Church with reverence and peace.

Preparation:

- **Family meeting:** Identify sensory needs, preferred times, and signs of distress/calm.
- **Rehearsal:** Short, visual walkthrough of the rite; handle the shell, water, and oils ahead of time.
- **Adjustments:** Soften lighting; reduce amplification; have a quiet room available.

Celebration:

- **Placement:** Reserve accessible seating; allow movement.
- **Timing:** Consider a quieter Sunday Mass or a smaller celebration, without isolating the family.
- **Symbols:** Emphasise touchable signs—water, oil, candle—with gentle pacing.

Follow up:

- **Welcome rite:** Brief public acknowledgement at a subsequent Mass; invite the community to support the family.



Reconciliation:

Aim: To introduce God's mercy with clarity and gentleness.

Preparation:

- **Concepts:** Good/Not good using stories, pictures, and real-life examples; focus on relationship more than moral catalogues.
- **Formats:** Offer face to face with visual supports; in certain specific circumstances allow presence of a parent or other trusted adult at a distance. Best practice is for the priest to be known to the child and aware of their methods of communication.
- **Scripts:** Provide short sentence starters on cards or AAC (e.g., 'I am sorry for...').

Celebration:

- **Environment:** Choose a quiet space with familiar visuals.
- **Length:** Keep it brief; accept non verbal signs of contrition (showing a card, nodding).

Readiness indicators:

- **Awareness:** Shows understanding of right/wrong in simple terms.
- **Ownership:** Can indicate 'I did this' via any communication.
- **Desire for repair:** Demonstrates wanting to make things right.



Eucharist (First Holy Communion):

Aim: To foster real communion with Jesus and the Church, according to the child's capacity.

Preparation:

- **Core truths:** 'Jesus is truly present,' 'Jesus feeds us,' taught with objects, icons, and gestures (genuflection/bow, sign of peace as appropriate).
- **Practice:** Visit the altar, taste an un-consecrated host; use social narrative for Communion line; rehearse receiving on the tongue or in the hand.
- **Health and safety:** Check swallowing and texture tolerance; consult with parents and clinicians where needed.

Celebration:

- **Seating and flow:** End of the procession, with a parent or catechist; alternative route if crowds overwhelm.
- **Sensory supports:** Ear defenders, visual card to indicate 'ready,' small sips of water after.
- **Participation:** Accept alternative reverence (hand on heart, slight bow) if kneeling is difficult.

Readiness (per capacity):

- **Recognition:** Indicates that the Host is not ordinary bread.
- **Desire:** Shows wanting to receive Jesus (verbally or otherwise).
- **Disposition:** Can follow a simple prompt to receive reverently.

Ongoing:

- **Post Communion reflection:** Short, sensory friendly thanksgiving; home rituals that echo Eucharistic themes (gratitude, sharing).

If attending Mass is difficult, gentle, structured steps toward fuller participation can be integrated into First Eucharist preparation, since participation in the Mass is integral to Eucharist.



Confirmation:

Aim: To strengthen baptismal grace and belonging to the mission of the Church.

Preparation:

- **Symbols and actions:** Wind, fire (battery candle), anointing with chrism; short prayers to the Holy Spirit.
- **Choice:** Offer a limited list of saints with simple, visual stories; accept a sensory or service-based patron connection.
- **Rehearsal:** Practice the anointing gesture; offer scent exposure to chrism ahead of time (or alternative if overwhelming).

Celebration:

- **Environment:** Quiet waiting space; minimal queuing.
- **Sponsor role:** Coach sponsors to co regulate and prompt as needed.
- **Anointing:** Bishop and servers informed of adaptations; child may present a card with their chosen name if speech is difficult.

Readiness:

- **Belonging:** Shows attachment to Jesus and the Church's life (in their way).
- **Desire:** Indicates wanting to be confirmed.
- **Basic sign:** Can participate in the anointing with support.

ROLES, RESPONSIBILITIES & TRAINING

'You yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house.'

1 Peter 2:5.



**BISHOP AND
DIOCESAN TEAM**

**Set policy that presumes inclusion,
funds training and evaluates practice.**



**CATECHETICAL LEAD
(RE/CO ORDINATOR)**

**Build individual plans; coach volunteers;
curate visual/tactile resources.**



SAFEGUARDING LEAD

**Ensure adaptations uphold dignity,
consent, and privacy; train on touch,
photos, and communication boundaries.**

**The Birmingham Diocesan community
model highlights the vocation
to advocate for differently abled
Catholics and to shape parish life
around belonging and participation.**



**PARISH PRIEST
AND DEACON**

**Lead the culture of welcome;
authorise reasonable adaptations;
liaise with families.**



PARENTS AND CARERS

**Share insights; co create goals;
signal when plans need adjusting.**



WHOLE PARISH

**Learn to see, greet, and support;
accept movement and sounds as
part of our shared prayer.**

1

Listen:

Hold a simple parish listening exercise with families; map current barriers and bright spots.

2

Prepare spaces:

Conduct a sensory audit; establish a quiet area; assemble a 'welcome kit' (ear defenders, fidgets, visuals).

3

Equip people:

Deliver a 90 minute training on autism aware ministry; model AAC and visual supports.

4

Plan personally:

Use the Individual Catechesis Plan template (below) for each learner; review termly.

5

Adapt liturgy:

Trial one or two low effort adjustments (e.g, dim lights before Communion; visual mass guide); teach the congregation why.

6

Review gently:

Gather feedback after each sacramental celebration; keep what works, release what does not.

Implementation in Parishes



A parish that becomes more welcoming of difference blesses every parishioner and strengthens the Church's mission.

TOOLS & TEMPLATES

Sensory & Participation Checklist



ENVIRONMENT:

☐ Lighting:

- Bright spots reduced?

☐ Sound:

- Amplification/modulation appropriate?

☐ Smell:

- Incense/fragrances planned with alternatives?

☐ Seating:

- Access to aisle/exit and quiet space?

SUPPORTS:

☐ Visuals:

- Schedule, key symbols, social story printed?

☐ Regulation:

- Ear defenders, fidgets, water available?

☐ People:

- Named helper briefed and present?

TRANSITIONS:

☐ Arrival:

- Clear plan from door to seat?

☐ Movement:

- Simple cues and routes?

☐ Exit:

- Calm space and de-escalation plan?

VISUAL SCHEDULE



Arrive



Sit with family



Sing/Sign



Listen/Watch



Communion



Quiet Space



Goodbye

Social narrative (First Communion, short)

Title: Today I receive Jesus

Pages:

- I will go to church with my family.
- I will walk in a line. I can hold Mum/Dad's hand.
- The priest gives me the Host. I show my hands or open my mouth.
- I can bow or place my hand on my heart.
- I go back to my seat. I can be quiet or rest.
- Jesus is with me.

Individual catechesis plan (Template)

Learner: Name and Preferred Name

Strengths and interests: What lights them up

Communication: Speech/AAC/signs/gestures; processing time needed

Sensory profile: Supports and triggers

Goals (term): 2-3 simple, observable goals

Strategies: Visuals, objects, pacing, roles in Mass

Family partnership: Home practices, prayer routines

Review date: Notes and next steps

AAC prayer starters (card or device)



ASSESSMENT OF READINESS & DOCUMENTATION

Baptism:

☐ **Family Intent:** Parents/guardians desire Baptism and commit to nurturing faith.

☐ **Pastoral plan:** Supports identified for the rite and parish welcome.

Reconciliation:

☐ **Signs of conscience:** Simple recognition of right/wrong; can indicate sorrow.

☐ **Mode of expression:** Speech, AAC, or gesture accepted.

Eucharist:

☐ **Recognition:** Distinguishes the Eucharist from ordinary food.

☐ **Desire and disposition:** Indicates wanting to receive; can receive reverently with supports.

☐ **Health check:** Safe swallowing confirmed where relevant.

Confirmation:

☐ **Belonging and desire:** Expresses wish to be confirmed and to follow Jesus.

☐ **Participation:** Able to engage in anointing with support.

Record keeping:

☐ **Consent:** Photo/touch permissions recorded.

☐ **Plan:** Individual Catechesis Plan filed and reviewed.

☐ **Safeguarding:** All adaptations logged and approved.



FORMATION

For Ministers & Community



Core session (90 minutes):

- **Autism 101:** Diversity, communication, sensory profiles, and the 'double empathy' insight.
- **Theology of welcome:** Dignity, belonging, and mission.
- **Practical tools:** Visuals, AAC, social narratives, sensory setups.
- **Case studies:** Walkthroughs for each sacrament.
- **Rehearsal:** Role play co regulation, processions, and receiving Communion with adaptations.

Ongoing:

- **Reflection:** Short debriefs after liturgies.
- **Peer support:** Pair new volunteers with experienced catechists.
- **Parish catechesis:** Brief notices and homily links to nurture a culture of welcome.

GLOSSARY

Young Person Friendly



SACRAMENT

A special moment when we meet Jesus in a real and loving way. It's like a hug from God we can feel.

EUCCHARIST

A holy meal where we receive Jesus in the form of bread. It's quiet, sacred, and full of love.

GRACE

God's invisible gift that helps us grow in love. It's like sunshine we can't see but feel on our skin.

ALTAR

A special table in Church where the Eucharist is celebrated. It's dressed with cloth and candles.

SIGN OF PEACE

A gentle gesture or word to share peace with others. A wave, a smile, or a quiet "peace be with you."

VESTMENTS

Special clothes worn by priests and deacons. They show the season and the sacredness of the moment.

BAPTISM

The beginning of our journey with God. Water is poured gently, and we are welcomed into God's family.

RECONCILIATION

A time to say sorry and feel forgiven. It's like cleaning our hearts and starting fresh.

BLESSING

A prayer that wraps us in God's care. Sometimes with words, sometimes with a gentle sign or touch.

TABERNACLE

A quiet, golden box where the Eucharist is kept. It's like a resting place for Jesus.

HOLY SPIRIT

God's breath of love that helps us feel brave, kind, and close to Jesus. It's like wind we can't see but can feel.

GLOSSARY

Acronyms



TERM

Meaning

- Sensory-Friendly Explanation

ACA

Adaptive Catechetical Approaches for Autism.

- Inclusive teaching methods tailored for autistic learners.

AAC

Augmentative and Alternative Communication.

- Tools that support communication beyond speech (e.g., devices, boards, gestures).

ASC/ASD

Autism Spectrum Condition/Disorder.

- “Condition” is preferred in UK pastoral contexts.

CCC

Catechism of the Catholic Church.

- Official summary of Church teaching.

CIC

Code of Canon Law.

- Church law governing sacraments and pastoral practice.

EHCP

Education, Health and Care Plan.

- May guide support needs in parish catechesis.

NAIT

National Autism Implementation Team.

- UK-based resource hub for autism strategies.

RE

Religious Education.

- Faith-based learning in schools and parishes.

SENCO

Special Educational Needs Coordinator.

- Key ally in school-parish collaboration.

SEND

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities.

- Use with care—focus on gifts and needs, not labels.

GLOSSARY

Catechists



TERM

Meaning

- Sensory-Friendly Explanation

Imago Dei

"Image of God".

- Every person reflects God's beauty and dignity.

Sacraments of Initiation

Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist.

- The three sacraments that begin our life in the Church.

Catechesis

Faith formation and teaching.

- Learning about God through stories, symbols, and prayer.

Inclusion

Welcoming all, with adaptations.

- Making sure everyone can belong and participate fully.

Readiness

Preparedness for a sacrament.

- Shown through interest, understanding, or reverence - not just words.

Disposition

Inner attitude or openness.

- A calm, respectful heart ready to meet Jesus.

Co-regulation

Shared calm between adult and child.

- When a trusted adult helps a child feel safe and settled.

Social Narrative

Visual story explaining what to expect.

- A short picture guide for church or sacraments.

Sensory Audit

Review of space for sensory triggers.

- Checking light, sound, smell, and movement to reduce overwhelm.

Visual Schedule

Picture-based plan of events.

- Helps children know what's coming next in Mass or catechesis.

Regulation Kit

Tools to help calm and focus.

- Fidgets, ear defenders, water bottle, soft cloth, etc.

Neurodivergent

Describes people whose brains work differently (e.g. Autistic, ADHD).

- A term of dignity and community, not deficit.

May this document be a gentle guide, helping each child feel welcomed, understood, and cherished as they journey toward the sacraments.

This resource is offered as a pastoral and educational guide to support inclusive Religious Education and sacramental preparation for Autistic pupils and those with related needs.

It reflects current understanding, diocesan practice, and theological reflection within the Catholic tradition, but does not replace official Church teaching or individual discernment by families, catechists, or clergy.

Adaptations and examples are provided to assist in planning and accompaniment; they should be interpreted flexibly and adjusted to suit local contexts and individual pupils.

All efforts have been made to ensure theological accuracy and pastoral appropriateness. Feedback and ongoing dialogue are welcomed to improve future versions.

Mark Paine 2025



APPENDICES

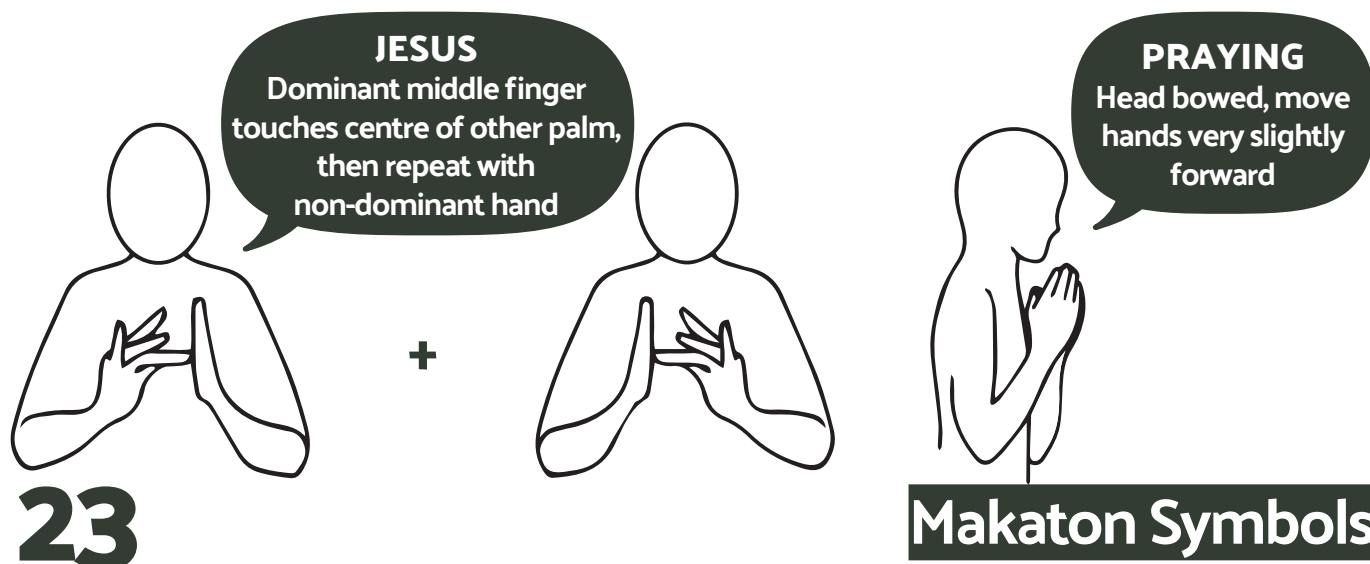


A Sample parent conversation guide

- **Hopes:** 'What would make this a joyful experience for your child?'
- **Signals:** 'How will we know they're calm, overwhelmed, or need a break?'
- **Supports:** 'What helps at home or school that we can mirror here?'
- **Participation:** 'Which roles in Mass feel possible and meaningful?'
- **Plan:** Agree simple cues, adaptations, and exit strategy.

B Reasonable adjustments menu

- **Timing:** Early/late rehearsal; shorter celebration slots when possible.
- **Seating:** Aisle placement; space to move; reserved pew.
- **Senses:** Dimmed lights; reduced amplification; incense alternatives.
- **Flow:** Alternative Communion route; minimal queuing; visual markers.
- **People:** Named buddy; sponsor coaching; family proximity.



C Quick-reference mass visuals

Cross, book, bread, cup, kneel/bow/stand, peace, sing, pray, quiet, exit



Sources reflected in this guide include diocesan advocacy and parish guidelines on autism ministry, parish-based approaches to catechising children with developmental disabilities, and public statements emphasising dignity, inclusion, and practical adaptation in parish life.

D Organisations and resources

A selection of leading organisations and resources:

- Faith and Light (International)
- Light of Truth & Accepting the Gift (UK)
- National Apostolate for Inclusion Ministry
- Loyola Press, Liguori Publications, RCL-Benziger:
For adaptive catechetical kits and curricula.

Current Scholarship, Journals, and Key Publications

Keeping abreast of evidence-based approaches and lived experience stories is vital.

Notable titles include:

- **Handbook of Adaptive Catechesis** (Chronister)
- **Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality** (Reynolds)
- **Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities** (Eric Carter)
- **Amplifying Our Witness: Giving Voice to Adolescents with Disabilities** (Conner)
- **Going to Church (Beyond Words Series)**
(Sheila Hollins, John Swinton, Katie Carpenter, Illustrated by Lucy Bergonzi)
- **Special Needs Ministry for Children** (Verbal)

ADAPTIVE MATERIALS FOR SACRAMENTAL PREPARATION



RESOURCE/KIT	KEY FEATURES	SUITABLE FOR NON-VERBAL LEARNERS
Adaptive First Eucharist, Reconciliation, Confirmation Kits Loyola Press (Rizzo) www.loyolapress.com/	Pictures, tactile aids, visual instructions.	Yes
Handbook of Adaptive Catechesis Liguori (Chronister) www.liguori.org/	Lesson planning, parent engagement, theology.	Yes
Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Program RCL-Benziger www.rclbenziger.com/	Multilevel, includes social stories.	Yes
My Picture Missal App Loyola Press https://download.cnet.com/my-picture-missal-app/3000-20415_4-76112739.html	Visual, interactive Missal.	Yes
Social Visual Guides Little Puddins (McGuinness) https://littlepuddins.ie/	Customizable social stories for Communion	Yes
Autism Toolbox NAIT www.autismtoolbox.co.uk/	Templates, visual strategies.	Yes

