

Cárta and Religious Events and Celebrations, such as First Holy Communion and Confirmation

Everybody is aware of the unique atmosphere that surrounds these milestones in the lives of children of primary school age.

The boys and girls themselves spend many hours during the year learning about the Sacrament for which they are preparing. Special Masses and ceremonies are held at key points along the journey of preparation. Songs, hymns and prayers are practised and learned by heart. Retreats are held.

Priests, parents and teachers work hard to ensure that the days of First Holy Communion or Confirmation are not just the culmination of all of this preparation by children, but the reaching of a new level of spiritual development, which will enhance their relationship with God and help them to lead more developed lives as Christians in the future.

Of course, achieving such milestones is a cause for joy and celebration: a day of happiness for the children involved, for their families, relations, neighbours and friends. Parents have always gone to great lengths to ensure that the day has a special atmosphere and no child can be unaware of this. Most will remember the occasion for the rest of their lives.

When all of this is considered, the extent to which both of these Sacraments have been overshadowed in recent times by the focus on large donations of money becomes a cause for concern. Certainly, past generations were given modest gifts of money to mark the occasion, but there is now a strong feeling that these have become greatly disproportionate, with a number of undesirable effects:

- financial pressure on parents who feel it is difficult to opt out when it is the prevailing culture
- an unrealistic sense of expectation on the part of children to whom these sums are given
- a sense, almost, of competition between some as to who can “make the most”
- the eroding of the traditional wisdom that money is something not to be taken for granted: that it is earned and should be respected
- lastly, and most regrettably, the virtual obliteration of the true reason for the celebration of these two Sacraments, as mentioned above, such that when children are questioned afterwards about their memories of the day, the theme of money often seems to be the overriding consideration

Nor is this development attributable to children themselves: they are in these matters no more than the product of the influences upon them. While it may be said that it is the responsibility of parents and guardians to lead the way in matters such as this, it can be very difficult to swim against the current or be seen to be the “odd one out”, especially when the expectations of children are involved.

For this reason, it is suggested that a scheme such as *Cárta*, flagged well in advance and with the support of interested parties such as Parish Councils, schools and parents’ associations, may well be a means to offer parents and guardians an acceptable and voluntary alternative, in which they may participate without feeling vulnerable.

Naturally, an overnight transformation of the ingrained culture is not a realistic expectation, but if a start is made, and if meaningful and proportionate alternatives are suggested along with the *Cárta* scheme, there is every reason to hope for a positive outcome and a consequent enriching of the experience for the young people involved, as well as the lessening of the burden on adults.

While parents and guardians need to be the main promoters of the Sacraments to their own children, there is also traditionally a strong input from both school and parish. If an initiative by, for example, a Parents’ Association is supported by the other two groups, then it has a greater chance of success.

Thanks to the Principal and Staff of Ballinora NS for kindly hosting the *Cárta* documents on the school’s website at www.ballinorans.ie