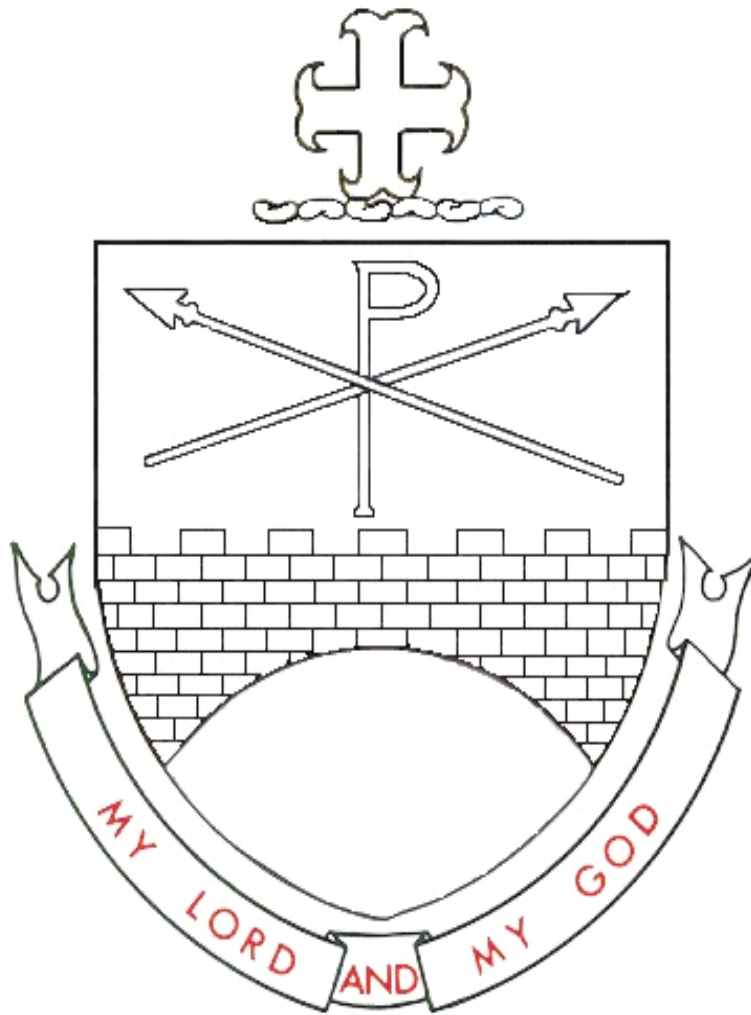


ST. THOMAS PREP



PARENT HANDBOOK

2024 - 2025

ST. THOMAS PREP

One St. Thomas Plaza
Old Bridge, NJ 08857
#732-251-1660
www.saintthomasob.com

“Parents have the first responsibility for the education of their children in the faith, prayer and all the virtues. They have the duty to provide as far as possible for the physical and spiritual needs of their children.”
(Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2252)

September 2024

Dear Parents,

Welcome to St. Thomas PREP (Parish Religious Education Program). As Catholic parents, it is our obligation to model our faith by what we say and what we do. We are called to nurture and provide for our children—body, mind and spirit. Faith formation begins within the family and PREP is a support for the foundation that is provided with the family in the home. Faith formation is a lifelong process that includes involvement in the life of the parish. Your active presence at St. Thomas the Apostle strengthens and affirms the whole community that we are all welcomed into through Baptism.

We ask your cooperation as parent and the primary teacher of your children in the teachings of our faith so that they may continue in growth as a follower of Jesus. Attend Mass weekly as a family as well participate in the Sacrament of Reconciliation with your children. Pray with your children. Give as much priority to PREP as you give to other activities of your children. St. Thomas PREP welcomes parent volunteers.

As a parent, you have the most influence on your child’s faith life. You are their first and best teacher. Jesus is the light of the world. Together we will... Follow Him!

God’s Blessings,

Andrea Madonna
Parish Catechetical Leader

ST. THOMAS PREP

One St. Thomas Plaza
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www.saintthomasob.com

ST. THOMAS PREP STAFF

Mrs. Andrea Madonna, Parish Catechetical Leader

Mrs. Terri Cutrone, Administrative Assistant

Mrs. Suzanne Taureck, Secretary

ST. THOMAS PREP OFFICE HOURS

Monday: 9:30 AM to 3:30 PM

Tuesday: 9:30 AM to 6:00 PM

Wednesday: 9:30 to 3:30 PM

Thursday: 9:30 AM to 8:00 PM

**PLEASE CALL THE PREP OFFICE AT #732-251-1660
DURING OFFICE HOURS WITH ANY QUESTIONS YOU MAY HAVE.**

PARENTS PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING IMPORTANT MESSAGES:

- **All** handouts and notices will be posted on our website as well as communicated to you via email.
- We want to do our best to be able to communicate with you and that is why it is most important that you supply us with a **valid email address** that you check on a daily basis as well as a phone number with an answering machine you check on a daily basis.
- The best way to stay informed is to check our website: www.saintthomasob.com on a **weekly basis** for important information regarding your child's PREP class.
- Your child's calendar and required prayers will be on the website for you to print. Just click on your child's grade level and you will be able to print their prayers and their calendar.



OUR PARISH MISSION STATEMENT

"To make disciples, as we know, love and serve God and one another."

St. Thomas the Apostle Parish is a Christian Community of the Roman Catholic Tradition of the Diocese of Metuchen. We are a People who freely and joyfully gather for prayer and worship. We are a People who stand beside one another on the journey of knowledge and growth in what it means to be Disciples of Christ. We are a People who are called by Jesus Christ to be a caring and compassionate family. We are called - in His name - to serve others. We are a People who are called to be open and hospitable to all. We are called to welcome the stranger. We are called to extend Christ's love and embrace to all who come to Him in faith, hope and love.

OUR STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

In fidelity to our parish Mission Statement, **St. Thomas the Apostle Parish Religious Education Program (PREP)** strives to provide an atmosphere where children and youth can experience God's love through a growing knowledge of Jesus and the Gospel message, can experience community through worship and prayer and can gradually commit themselves, according to their age and ability, to living out Christian values in their everyday life.

St. Thomas PREP and the parish community look to the family, the "**domestic church**" as the most important Christian influence; since it is in the home that a child learns that faith. Religious formation classes reinforce the traditions of that faith and each child's Roman Catholic identity while the parish supports the child in learning to celebrate that faith in community.

St. Thomas PREP commits itself to close collaboration with the family and the parish community to fulfill its purpose.

ST. THOMAS PREP PARKING LOT POLICY

All drivers who enter the St. Thomas parking lot are expected to demonstrate the highest level of courtesy and respect in order to ensure everyone's safety. Safety procedures **MUST BE IN EFFECT AT ALL TIMES.**

ARRIVAL

1. **During nice weather**, students will line up in the **"Safety Zone"** prior to the beginning of class. We will enter the school by grade. **Please park your car and walk your child to the "Safety Zone"**. For parents of younger children, please remain with your child until he/she is brought into the building. Please arrive five minutes before class time. **(Supervision of your children begins five minutes before class time. Please do not leave children unsupervised in the parking lot.)**
2. **During inclement weather**, students will be admitted into the school building as soon as they arrive and will line-up in the school hallways. Parents can drop-off students in front of the school. Stop your car and direct your child to depart from your vehicle on the passenger side. Once your child is out of the car, you may drive away.

DISMISSAL

1. Park your vehicle in any of the empty parking spots.
2. Leave your car and proceed to the **front doors of the school**.
3. Parents **must meet their child** at the **front doors of the school**. **Children ARE NOT PERMITTED to meet their parents in front of the church, down the sidewalk or roam the parking lot looking for their ride home.**
4. **DO NOT PARK IN THE FIRE LANE** while waiting for *your child*. **(THE FIRE LANE INCLUDES THE FRONT OF THE SCHOOL BUILDING. Do not park along the sidewalk in front of the school).** You will receive a ticket from Old Bridge police.
5. Proceed **with your child** to your **parked** vehicle.
6. The Barkley Road driveway **IS NOT** open for entrance or exit.
7. The **Highway 18 exit** in front of the school **IS NOT** open for exit.

WHEN THE DISMISSAL BELL RINGS, THE CHILDREN WILL BE DISMISSED FROM THE FRONT DOORS OF THE SCHOOL.

- Children will not be permitted to go home with a visibly impaired driver, if necessary, the police will be called.
- Parents are responsible to ensure timely pick-up of their children from PREP. Regular late pick-ups are difficult on PREP staff and will be addressed by the PCL.

ATTENDANCE

- The Diocese of Metuchen only allows 3 absences per year.
- Please call the PREP Office if your child is going to be absent.
- Students are expected to bring their books each week to class.
- Students are expected to make up missed work due to an absence/illness.

Students are expected to be present and prepared for each class unless illness or another serious reason prevents their attendance. If a situation arises, please call the PREP Office to make us aware of such a situation. **If your child is absent, please send in a note of explanation signed by a parent to their next class. There are no excused absences.**

Each course of study at each grade level is done sequentially. **Excessive absences makes it impossible for your child to grasp concepts.** Perhaps more importantly - a child who only comes occasionally will not have a sense of “*belonging*”. Developing a sense of community and an identity with the parish are vital aspects of our overall program.

Students absent more than three (3) classes, (any combination of absences, early dismissal or lateness, that equals 3) **will be required to complete SUMMER HOME STUDY under the guidance of a parent before advancing to the next level.** You will be notified if home study is necessary. If excessive absences occur, the student will have to repeat the same level again.

If your child becomes ill, you will be called and asked to pick-up your child in the PREP Office.

EARLY DISMISSAL

- **PLEASE NOTE: 1 EARLY DISMISSAL = 1/2 ABSENCE.**
(Child leaves prior to 5:35 PM OR 7:20 PM).
- Please do not schedule doctor/dentist appointments during class time.
- Early dismissal for any type of sports related activity is not permitted.
- A student leaving early **MUST** have a reasonable excuse signed by their parent and given to the catechist at the start of class. The catechist will send the note to the PREP Office. **Parents must ring the PREP doorbell, sign out their child and a staff member will get the child from the classroom.**

LATENESS

- **PLEASE NOTE: 1 LATE ARRIVAL = 1/2 ABSENCE.**
(Child arrives after 4:25 PM OR 6:10 PM).

Lateness interferes greatly with a child’s progress and is disruptive to both the catechist and to the class.

EMERGENCY CLOSING

In the event of inclement weather, parents are asked to check our website: www.saintthomasob.com

IF CLASSES ARE CANCELLED, WE WILL LEAVE A DETAILED MESSAGE ON OUR ANSWERING MACHINE BY 3:00 PM. PLEASE DO NOT CALL THE PASTORAL CENTER.

BEHAVIOR

It is PREP Policy to discipline with love and understanding. Catechists will assist students in setting classroom guidelines that reinforce Christian attitudes. Jesus asks us to love God and our neighbor as ourselves. As we all strive to follow Jesus, we must be aware of showing respect and courtesy to each other.

PREP catechists are VOLUNTEERS and are not expected to handle serious or on-going discipline problems. Parents, your cooperation is necessary in helping your child to live God's law of love in the classroom. For students who have a problem with classroom behavior, **HOME STUDY** may be the solution. This would require the parent to work with the child at home, while reporting on the child's progress to the PREP Office.

- **If a student is sent to the PREP office for behavior issues a parent MUST COME to the office to pick up that student.**
- **Any student who is unwilling to cooperate with the "Student Code of Behavior" will be asked to withdraw from the Religious Education Program.**

STUDENT CODE OF BEHAVIOR

- Students are expected to show respect to all in their words and actions.
- Students must conform to the attendance policy stated in this handbook.
- Students should comply with the classroom rules set out by the Catechist in the interest of providing a good learning environment.
- Students should not do anything that could cause physical harm to themselves or to others.
- Students must not destroy, deface or remove property from the building.
- Students are responsible for completing all in-class and homework assignments to the best of their ability and according to the time schedule provided.
- Students are not to chew gum or wear a hat or coat during class time.
- Students are not to get out of their seat without permission.
- Students who exhibit any inappropriate behavior (in the judgment of the PCL) will be asked to withdraw from the program.

CALENDARS

Student calendars can be found online on our website: www.saintthomasob.com. Please consult the PREP calendar for closings and holidays. **Also, please check the calendar when your child is absent to make-up the work that was covered in class.**

CELL PHONE POLICY

Cell phones may be brought to St. Thomas PREP (Parish Religious Education Program) under the following conditions:

- Phones **MUST be in the OFF POSITION and KEPT OUT OF SIGHT** for the entire duration of any and all educational activities including, but not limited to, classroom instruction, class trips, church visitation, etc.... **Cell phones must be kept out of sight upon entering the building and until the student has exited the building. If a cell phone is brought out during class, the catechist will collect it and turn it over to Mrs. Madonna in the PREP office. A parent will need to retrieve the cell phone from the PREP Office.**

CELL PHONE POLICY (CONTINUED)

- **Do not communicate with your child by text during PREP class.** Contact the PREP office with concerns.
- If a parent needs to contact his/her child regarding a late pick-up or other problem, **please call the PREP Office at #732 251-1660** and we will relay the message directly to your child/ren. In this way we can monitor their safety until the child/ren are picked up.
- **NO** cell phones can be used for picture taking.
- **NO** harassment or threatening of persons via cell phones is permitted.
- Cell phones may not be used for game playing, internet, email access, conversations, music, gambling or making purchases of any kind.
- **NO** other communications devices are allowed.
- Those who violate any of the rules regarding cell phones or other devices will forfeit their privilege of bringing them to PREP and may be asked to leave the program.

CHANGE OF ADDRESS / TELEPHONE # OR EMAIL ADDRESS

Please notify the PREP Office **immediately** if you have a change of address, telephone number or email address. It is so important for us to have your most current information. **Transcripts can be requested if you are moving out of the parish.**

CHILD ABUSE POLICY

New Jersey State Statutes require that the Division of Youth and Family Services (DYFS) be notified immediately if a Catechist and/or Parish Catechetical Leader suspects that a child has been abused.

CUSTODY

In the case where the custody of a student has been restricted by the courts, a copy of the court document **MUST BE on file in the PREP Office.** St. Thomas PREP abides by the provisions of the Buckley Amendment. Thus, non-custodial parents will be given access to academic records and to information regarding the academic progress of their children, **unless there is a court order specifically stating that the non-custodial parent is denied access to such information.**

FIRE / EVACUATION / LOCK-DOWN DRILLS

These drills will be conducted during the year to insure the safety of our students. In the event of an actual emergency, children will be taken to a pre-arranged evacuation area.

FOOD ALLERGIES

Food allergies are a growing health concern for children across the country. Even a miniscule amount of the allergenic food is sufficient to cause a life-threatening reaction and inadvertent contact (via nose, eyes, mouth) can be sufficient to put a child in danger.

It is the goal of St. Thomas PREP to provide an allergen-free environment for children with food allergies, so that they may enjoy a safe and respectful place to grow in their faith.

Recognizing that strict avoidance of the allergen is the only way to prevent a potentially life-threatening reaction, we ask your cooperation with the following policy: **NO FOOD AND DRINK OF ANY KIND WILL BE PERMITTED IN ST. THOMAS SCHOOL DURING PREP CLASSES.** This also includes all foods that are considered to be safe. Parents and/or guardians of highly allergic children **MUST** alert the special needs of their child to the Parish Catechetical Leader, catechist and nurse, so that all precautions can be taken.

ILLEGAL SUBSTANCES & WEAPONS

Drugs, alcohol, tobacco and weapons of any kind are not allowed on Church property. If a student is found to be in possession, the student will be detained until the police are notified.

PROGRESS REPORTS

Progress Reports are distributed in **January** and at the end of the **PREP year**. It is a good policy to discuss the report with your child. **Progress Reports MUST BE SIGNED by the parent and returned to PREP the following week.**

VOLUNTEERS

We are so grateful to our many volunteers for their time, dedication and preparation they give to the PREP ministry. We ask our parents, high-school teens and other adults to volunteer and help reinforce the value of Catholic Christian education in our community. You can volunteer to become a: **Catechist / Classroom Aide / Office Aide / Parent Volunteer.** If you are interested in volunteering, please call the **PREP Office at #732-251-1660.**

Please note just like in the public school system, **the Diocese of Metuchen requires fingerprinting and background checks for all those over age 18** who regularly come in contact with minors.

WEBSITES:

Below are websites that offer continued faith formation and activities for you and your children:

- ❖ www.diometuchen.org
- ❖ www.saintthomasob.com
- ❖ www.usccb.org
- ❖ www.loyolapress.com
- ❖ www.dynamiccatholic.com

WORSHIP

Family worship at Mass is the most important part of our curriculum. As the primary and principal educators of your children, it is important that you are faithful to Church. Worship with your children at a weekend Liturgy. Let them see young and old alike at Mass in community prayer and celebration. Remember that they cannot bring themselves, so you, who are their greatest influence, must show them the way.

CURRICULUM

Children **“learn”** religion through experience; particularly by watching and imitating those they love best. **Faith** is something that is **“caught”** rather than **“taught”**. Classroom learning informs, gives data, and reinforces what the children should be experiencing.

There will be times during the year when your child's catechist will assign supplemental work that will need your supervision. In addition, parents of children in all grade levels are asked to teach their children the prayers assigned to each level. Please see our website for grade level prayers. At the discretion of the catechist and PCL, a student may not be allowed to continue to the next level if he/she has not completed assigned work and memorized prayers.

FAMILY LIFE EDUCATION

As mandated by our Bishop, there is a new **Safe Environmental Program by Virtus** being taught to your children. This program is called **“Empowering God’s Children”**. It is a series of videos teaching Boundaries and Safety References to your children. VIRTUS is a registered trademark of National Catholic Services in the United States.

Each year the children will receive two of the following lesson plans following a three-year cycle according to our Diocese:

- Lesson 1- Physical Boundaries: Safe and Unsafe Touching Rules.
- Lesson 2- Safe Adults, Safe Touches and Special Safe Adults.
- Lesson 3- Boundaries: You Have Rights!
- Lesson 4- Secrets, Surprises and Promises.
- Lesson 5- Being a Safe Friend.
- Lesson 6- Boundaries: Feelings and Facts.

Level 1 (Usually Grade 1)

PRAYERS: Sign of the Cross ~ Our Father ~ Hail Mary ~ Glory Be

“Finding God: Our Response to God’s Gifts” is published by Loyola Press. This program provides an invitation into a way of living in relationship to, family, parish and neighbor. This program provides sound and substantial lessons in faith and delivers those lessons through experiential activities that make these essential lessons part of a lifelong practice. “Finding God” involves the whole child: mind and heart, body and soul.

The children will also learn and experience our faith by hearing the Word of God from the approaching Sunday Liturgy. We explain scripture to the children on their own level of development so that they may participate more fully (along with their families) in our Sunday Liturgies- the centerpiece of our lived faith.

If your family has not been attending Mass on a regular basis, please make every effort to attend Sunday Liturgy, as your child will be studying the Mass and starting to prepare for First Penance and First Eucharist.

Level 2 (Usually Grade 2)

PRAYERS: Sign of the Cross ~ Our Father ~ Hail Mary ~ Glory Be ~ Act of Contrition ~ Mass Responses

In Level 2, the emphasis shifts to a study of the sacraments as the children review Baptism and prepare for the reception of Reconciliation and Eucharist. Your family’s attendance at weekend Mass is of the utmost importance to your child’s readiness to receive these sacraments.

To initiate children into the **Sacrament of Reconciliation**, we use the program **“Blessed” - First Reconciliation” published by Dynamic Catholic**. The book offers powerful lessons to help the children and their parents learn and prepare for the Sacrament of Reconciliation through prayer, active learning and videos. It also gives the child an opportunity for moral education and conscience formation.

Level 2 (Continued - Usually Grade 2)

To initiate children into the **Eucharist**, we use the program **“Blessed” – First Communion” published by Dynamic Catholic**. Through their life experience (as presented in this program), the child gradually and progressively is initiated into the life of the Eucharist, culminated by their First Communion.

Level 3 (Usually Grade 3)

PRAYERS: Grace Before & After Meals ~ Our Father ~ Hail Mary ~ Glory Be ~ Sign of the Cross ~ Act of Contrition ~ Prayer to St. Michael

“Finding God: Fishers of Men – Church & Holy Spirit” is published by Loyola Press. The program is grounded in Scripture, Church Tradition and prayer to inspire and guide a child’s faith formation. It provides an invitation into a way of living in relationship to God, family, parish and neighbor. It involves the whole child: mind, heart, body and soul.

Level 4 (Usually Grade 4)

PRAYERS: Apostles’ Creed ~ Act of Contrition ~ Prayer to St. Michael

“Finding God: Blessed Are the Poor – Beatitudes & the Ten Commandments” is published by Loyola Press. The program is grounded in Scripture, Church Tradition and prayer to inspire and guide a child’s faith formation. It provides an invitation into a way of living in relationship to God, family, parish and neighbor. It involves the whole child: mind, heart, body and soul.

Level 5 (Usually Grade 5)

PRAYERS: Rosary/Mysteries ~ Apostles’ Creed ~ Act of Contrition ~ Prayer to St. Michael

“Finding God: The Bread of Life – Sacraments & Worship” is published by Loyola Press. The program is grounded in Scripture, Church Tradition and prayer to inspire and guide a child’s faith formation. It provides an invitation into a way of living in relationship to God, family, parish and neighbor. It involves the whole child: mind, heart, body and soul.

CONFIRMATION PREPARATION Levels 6, 7 & 8

Our parish preparatory program for the Sacrament of Confirmation is based upon the teaching of the U.S. National Directory for Catechesis, which reads that parishes should present catechesis for Confirmation that:

- Teaches that Confirmation increases and deepens the grace of Baptism, imprinting an indelible character on the soul.
- Teaches that Confirmation strengthens the baptismal conferral of the Holy Spirit on those confirmed in order to incorporate them more firmly in Christ, to strengthen their bond with the Church, associate them more closely with the Church’s mission, increase in them the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and to help them bear witness to the Christian faith in words and deeds.
- Teaches about the role of the Holy Spirit, his gifts, and his fruits.
- Is developmentally appropriate and includes retreat experiences.
- Includes instruction on the Rite of Confirmation and its basic symbols: the imposition of hands, the anointing with Sacred Chrism, and the words of the sacramental formula.
- Ensures that parents and sponsors are involved in the catechetical preparation of the children for Confirmation. (Article 36)

Level 6 (Usually Grade 6)

PRAYERS: Prayer of St. Francis ~ Stations of the Cross ~ Act of Contrition ~ Prayer to St. Michael

“Finding God: I Am Who I Am – The Old Testament” is published by Loyola Press. The program is grounded in Scripture, Church Tradition and prayer to inspire and guide a child’s faith formation. It provides an invitation into a way of living in relationship to God, family, parish and neighbor. It involves the whole child: mind, heart, body and soul.

Level 7 (Usually Grade 7)

PRAYERS: Mass Responses ~ Review of all prayers ~ Prayer to St. Michael

The theme of *“Finding God: – Following Jesus” is published by Loyola Press.* The program is grounded in Scripture, Church Tradition and prayer to inspire and guide a child’s faith formation. It provides an invitation into a way of living in relationship to God, family, parish and neighbor. It involves the whole child: mind, heart, body and soul.

Level 8 (Usually Grade 8)

PRAYERS: Review of all prayers ~ Prayer to St. Michael

The students **DO NOT** attend weekly PREP classes. The preparation for **Confirmation** includes: Community Service, **regular** Mass attendance, Saint Report, **MANDATORY twice a month** Confirmation sessions, Confirmation Retreats and Confirmation rehearsal. The Sacrament of Confirmation is conferred on those students upon the completion of this course. **Confirmation preparation is not just a matter of information but of formation—changing lives to be more Catholic.**

“Confirmed in the Spirit” is published by Loyola Press. Each chapter builds on the previous chapter guiding young people to embrace the lifelong Catholic practices of worship, prayer, stewardship, service, pursuit of wisdom and moral decision making as they prepare for Confirmation and the next phase of their lives as Catholics.

CHILDREN'S CATECHUMENATE

For children who **have been baptized** but have **no formal religious education** and **HAVE NOT** received their First Eucharist. **It is a two year process:**

- **First Year**
These children will attend regular **PREP** classes on their grade level, and **after the first year will be accepted into the Children's Catechumenate.**
- **Second Year**
These children will attend regular **PREP** classes on their grade level, and during their second year **will receive additional instruction.** The PCL and catechist will determine the child’s readiness to receive the initiation sacraments during the Easter season. Parental support, guidance, example and participation are **mandatory** during the catechumenate process.

SPECIAL NEEDS PREP

Special Needs classes are held every Monday in our school from **4:30 to 5:30 PM.** **Registration is necessary.** Please contact the PREP Office at **#732-251-1660** for further information.

REGISTRATION

ONLINE registration is held in the spring or forms can be picked up at the Pastoral Center or in the PREP Office. **Please check the parish bulletin and our parish website for registration information. 500** children participate in our religious formation classes, and it is important for each family to register in a timely manner and return their registration form promptly, especially if a specific day is requested.

- Registrations are processed and classes are filled as forms are received on a first-come, first-served basis.
- Copies of all sacramental certificates must be submitted for each new student and transcripts are needed for students transferring into our program from another program.
- Our parish bulletin and website provide reminders to return your forms promptly.
- No child will be denied Religious Education due to a family's financial restraints. If there is a financial hardship, please contact the PREP Office. You will be required to fill out a Financial Assistance Form and supply your latest Income Tax 1040 form for consideration.
- Once classes start there will be **no refunds** issued if you remove your child from PREP classes.