

Technology helps second-grader prepare for first Communion

By Dan Russo

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EDGEWOOD, Iowa - Second-grader Taylor Garrison got the best birthday present ever April 12 - her first Communion. She received the sacrament at St. Mark's Church in Edgewood on the day she turned 8.

Her journey to meeting Jesus in the Eucharist wasn't easy, but came about through a combination of hard work, modern technology - like an iPad and the Internet - and God's grace.

"I feel really excited," she said told The Witness, newspaper of the Archdiocese of Dubuque, in an interview a few days before the special ceremony. "It was a little difficult, but I really wanted to have my first Communion."

As a member of a military family, she currently lives at Fort Knox, an Army post in Kentucky, where her father is stationed. Because the Catholic resources there were lacking, Taylor's parents, Pam and Shane Garrison, looked elsewhere to enroll their daughter in a preparation class for the sacrament.

"There are no religious education teachers here," said the mother.

Both natives of Iowa, the Garrisons tried to sign up Taylor for first Communion classes at a parish near the Rock Island Arsenal, an island in the Mississippi River between the cities of Davenport, Iowa, and Rock Island, Illinois.

The family was hoping to get stationed there this summer after being on that base once before. Previously, their son had made his first confession in that parish.

But the parish officials said preparations could not be done at a distance, as the family wanted, because their policy was to teach religious education only to children physically living in the parish community. Pam Garrison was discouraged, but did not give up.

“I truly believed God would make it happen,” said the mother. “I just kept thinking, ‘Why should my daughter suffer the consequences for her dad’s profession?’”

Shane Garrison had already done four overseas tours of duty, including two in Iraq and one in Afghanistan, so the family was used to overcoming adversity. The Garrisons called St. Mark’s in Edgewood, the parish where Taylor’s maternal grandmother belongs.

Jody Kerns, the director of faith formation, was a little taken aback by the Garrison’s request, but decided she and the community had to do everything they could to help.

“For me as the director of religious education, it was a very difficult and unusual situation,” recalled Kerns. “You have to weigh in the fact that our church does not want to turn people away.”

To prepare Taylor for the sacrament of reconciliation and Communion, Kerns began teaching her in digital meetings using a program for tablets and smartphones called “FaceTime.” She was able to speak face to face with the girl using cameras on a regular basis and sent her study materials to do on her own.

Beginning in early January, Taylor participated in the parish’s Wednesday night first Communion classes. Parents would hold up the tablet while Taylor was on FaceTime and move it around the room so she could interact with the nine other students and

teacher.

“Taylor was very motivated,” said Kerns. “In the beginning, I was very concerned. We’re starting in January. I was like, ‘Dear Lord, how are we going to get this girl prepared?’ You feel the presence of God and the Holy Spirit putting everything into place for you.”

St. Mark’s family life committee had decided to spend funds several years earlier to make sure the parish facilities had wireless Internet and TV screens. This served Taylor and her family well. She was a little behind on memorizing prayers and other elements of the classes, but she caught up quickly.

On March 28, the Garrison family traveled to Edgewood from Kentucky so that Taylor could take part in a daylong first Communion retreat. It was the first time she actually met her classmates in person.

“Taylor came into the room and sat down that day with them and there was never a beat skipped,” recalled Kerns. “She fit right in.”

During the retreat day, which included Mass and several hands on projects, Taylor had her first confession with Father Steve Lundgren. She and her family traveled back home and before they returned for first Communion, they participated in a rehearsal via FaceTime.

“The whole church has welcomed us,” said Pam Garrison.

“Everyone has been nice,” added Taylor.

Kerns was happy her parish was able to find such a unique solution for the Garrison through modern technology and good old-fashioned creativity.

“I don’t know of any parish that has ever done anything like this,” said Kerns. “For

me this experience has been a joy. I feel our parish has been living out our faith. Our parish is doing exactly what Jesus would want us to do, reaching out to people and not turning them away.”

Russo is the editor of The Witness, newspaper of the Archdiocese of Dubuque.

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