

## SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF A RELIGIOUS RITE

The ceremony of gathering twelve-year old children together in each parish for the first sacrament of the Eucharist is not an old custom. The primitive Church took Christ's word literally: "Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you." (John, VI, 53), from which it was generally thought that children who died before having received communion were as damned as if they had not been baptised. The initiation of neophytes required successively both sacraments and confirmation. When the custom was established of baptising the new born (2nd and 3rd centuries) they received communion at the same time. As they were incapable of eating the host, the blood of Christ was conferred upon them in the guise of wine.

This custom still remains in force in the Eastern churches, while it rather abruptly disappeared, from the 12th century on,

Translated by S. Alexander.

in the Latin church. In 1215, the Lateran Council prescribed waiting for the *age of discretion*, without defining when that was; the Council of Trent declared anathema against anyone who acted before that moment. Many priests retained the traditional ancient custom of having the baptised child drink some drops of common table wine in the chalice. This practice survived for a long time in the first communion of the new born. Abbé Andrieux in his book on *First Communion* (Beauchesne, 1912, p. 72), says that in his native Champagne, the parents gave the new-born some drops of good wine to drink at the end of the family dinner following the baptism.

If first communion was conditioned by the *age of discretion*, it was necessary to define this or, at any rate, approximately fix its date. The Spanish Council of Tarragona (1329) declares that paschal communion is obligatory at the age of fourteen on for boys, and twelve for girls, a curious distinction confirmed by Gerson in his *Regulae morales de Eucharistia*, when he declares all those *qui secundum leges videntur habiles ad nubendum* obliged to take paschal communion. In his *Doctrina pro pueris eccl. Parisiensis* he admits children from the ages of twelve or thirteen to the altar table. Now, St. Thomas simply asked them to be able to know the difference between ordinary bread and Eucharistic bread and to be capable of devotion to the Sacrament.

Little by little, there was introduced a new distinction between the *age of reason* at six or seven years when the child should know good from evil and must expiate his faults by confession; and the *age of discretion*, which the rituals avoid setting a time for, but which will prove to be at first communion. In 17th century France, under the influence of Jansenism, there was a tendency to postpone first communion until fifteen, sixteen or even twenty years of age. Nevertheless, Mme de Sévigné had hers at eight.

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In the meanwhile, the tradition of collective and solemn first communions was established. It resulted from the generalized teaching of the catechism imposed on the clergy by the Council of Trent. Abbé Andrieux has entirely misunderstood this im-

## *Social Significance of a Religious Rite*

portant point, and that is the only serious gap in this work of a somewhat Gallican tendency. On the other hand, the historians of the Company of Jesus have made this very clear, because of a capital role in religious teaching played by their priests in certain regions, for example in the Spanish Low Countries. A ceremonial is described in the *Méthode de catéchisme* by Saint-Nicolas du Chardonnet at Paris (1656) urging "an experience of forty years." In the Low Countries, Father Alfred Poncelet finds the first example dated at Leyden where on Easter Tuesday, 1620, the Jesuit mission in Holland had fifty-two children of both sexes take communion together, an example which was followed at Tournai in 1645, and at Bruges in 1656.<sup>1</sup> The question of chronological priority is secondary. What should be emphasized is that the custom was born out of the catechism and that it was originally practiced with extreme simplicity. Children had to have a candle which the priest would give to the poor. The candle, a survival of an initiation rite, will remain obligatory in first communion as well as in baptism. The bishops recommend that all children be modestly garbed and that the ceremony be brief, ending with the parish mass. In 1725, Benedict XIII, authorized children to be dressed in white, *in habitu angelorum*, but he advised them rather to come in their everyday clothes, provided they be suitable, without pomp or pretension. Practices differed according to regions. At the time of the French Revolution communicants simply wore a white armband. In certain districts perhaps the girls were dressed in white as this passage from the *Génie du Christianisme* (I, 7) would indicate: "It is at twelve years of age, it is in the spring-time of the year that the adolescent unites himself with his Creator... Young girls dressed in linen and boys decked out in foliage march on a road sown with the year's flowers..."

Chateaubriand might well have embellished reality somewhat. He emphasizes the coincidence of first communion and spring-time. Primitively linked to paschal duty, the ceremony detached itself from it little by little because at Eastertime the clergy were

<sup>1</sup> Alfred Poncelet, *Histoire de la Compagnie de Jésus dans les anciennes Pays-Bas*, 1926, vol. II, p. 316; E. de Moreau, *L'Eglise en Belgique des origines au début du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, 1944, p. 185; *Histoire de l'Eglise en Belgique*, vol. V, 1952, p. 342.

involved in other tasks.<sup>2</sup> After some wavering, it was set around Pentecost. Some 18th century souvenir-albums have been preserved, mentioning rather different ages and dates: they come from well-to-do families whose children instructed at home could be admitted to the Eucharist outside of the collective ceremony. May we explain in this manner the disparaging criticism lasting up to the middle of the 19th century, a period when first communion is a parish celebration in all French diocese? At the Vatican Council, the French bishops wanted the practice to be made obligatory throughout the Church. Cardinal Gasparri limited himself to recommending it (1897). Pius X established it in Italy (1905).

Then, by the decree *Quam singulari Christus amore* of 28 August 1910, the same Pius X, going back to the Thomistic definition of the age of discretion, authorized first communion as early as first confession, that is to say, toward six or seven years. Logically, to the degree that private first communion became the rule, the collective ceremony should have either taken on new significance, which was the Pope's desire, or else disappear.

Quite to the contrary, it is performed today with an ostentatiousness from which piety has nothing to gain. In many modest families, a first communion burdens the budget for an entire year. In the industrial regions of Belgium the people sink all of their savings into a single one of these celebrations, or go into debt for a long time. And in those circles indifferent to religion, where parents never go to church, expenses are the most senseless of all. The clergy knows it, deplors it, does its best to attenuate the evil, but it cannot suppress the festivity. Paradoxically, the precocious first communion which should have ousted the other, requires that it be maintained. A six year old child can, if absolutely necessary, repent his mistakes and, according to St. Thomas's formulation, distinguish sacramental from ordinary bread; but his religious instruction is null. If the collective ceremony is maintained it is because one of its conditions is teaching, confirmed by an examination. It obliges the

<sup>2</sup> In the region around Liège, *faire ses pâques* is used for communion, or for Easter communion. Traditionally, a first communicant is called a *pâquet*.

## *Social Significance of a Religious Rite*

children to attend catechism. For, many of the families who attach no importance to the sacrament, take its solemnity very seriously and would not deprive their children of it for anything in the world.

The question remains, wherein is derived the exceptional prestige of a celebration so costly for the parents, fatiguing for the children, and by Pius X's decree, deprived of the religious significance which it had from the 13th to the 20th century.

But in the same connection, why has the habit of having some drops of wine drunk immediately after baptism—a survival of the communion of the new-born—been preserved for such a long time? In the *Missal* of the church at Amiens in 1506, one still reads: "The baptised child is touched with the candle... then carried to the altar; there, he is given communion with ordinary table wine, while saying to him: 'May the flesh and the blood of Our Lord preserve thy soul for everlasting life.' A pure symbol, of course since the wine is not consecrated: but simple folk must have been deceived by it and the formulation was certainly bound to lead into error. Thus, the Reims ritual of 1585 condemns both the practice and the formulation. Others compromised. The ritual of Sens permits the priest to bear the infant to the altar, to take a little wine in the hollow of his left hand and with the right to allow some drops to fall into the infant's mouth, saying: "Receive some of the dew of heaven. May you have wine and oil in abundance, in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost." (Andrieux, *Première communion*, p. 70).

If the former practice was so tenacious that it could be destroyed only by practicing it in the wrong way, that is because it corresponds to the archaic feeling that one cannot participate in any group before having drunk or eaten with the tribe. The history of Persephone, bound to the world below for having eaten a pomegranate seed, illustrates the coercive action of manducation in common. When in the 19th century, the parents in Champagne poured some drops of wine on the lips of the baptised infant they enrolled him in the family or religious community: a domestic rite, surviving from a strictly religious rite, behind which may be discerned even much more ancient practices, social and magical at the same time. When Henri d'Albret

rubbed garlic and Jurançon wine on the lips of his new-born grandson, he was adding a national symbol onto a very old liturgy of aggregation, rooted in the deepest levels of the psyche.

These survivals explain a curious error which Andrieux mentions without understanding its origin. Theologians have maintained that at the end of the XVIth century the primitive Church gave communion to the new-born in order to struggle against the idolaters who portioned out to the children the food offered up to the idols. "I have found nowhere," says Andrieux, (p. 86) "even an indirect allusion to this practice." In effect, those who advance this idea (Cardinal William Allen and William Hessels Van Est, Professor at Louvain) have made it up out of the whole cloth. Still unconsciously convinced of the magic power of the *confarreatio*, they have imagined without any further proof, a rite taking its inspiration from it, by which the pagans had forcibly enrolled the new-born into their religious group, and to which the Church was supposed to have opposed an identical method.

The ritual of Sens marks curious transition between the symbolic communion of Amiens and the familiar practice. The ceremony takes place at the altar; the priest may be observed making the prescribed movements of the hands as if it were a question of a veritable liturgy; but the formulation is half-profane; the Savior's blood becomes the dew of heaven; eternal life is replaced by a promise of temporal prosperity. This hybrid rite proves how alive the archaic meaning of manducation in common had remained.

Analogous revisions explain, apart from all religious allegiance, the attachment of the masses to the first collective communion. In the primitive Church the initiation resulted from three sacraments conferred on the same day. The neophyte entered naked into the baptismal pool, then he dressed again in a white tunic in order to receive the Eucharist and confirmation at the same time. Today baptism, first private communion, and confirmation mark three different periods of the child's life. The first solemn communion, as it is generally practiced, does not seem to have its own importance any longer, but is simply a reiteration of the first two and a preparation for the third.

In return, it is unconsciously suffused with pre-Christian

## *Social Significance of a Religious Rite*

images whose persistent vigor contributes to its social vitality. Among primitive peoples, the young people were initiated into the adult community only amidst proofs and changes of dress often preliminary to simultaneous group marriages. In the catholic world of Western Europe, first communion is explicitly a religious ceremony, implicitly a promotion from childhood to adolescence.

There seems to have been a presentiment of this social meaning at the moment when the Eucharist ceased to be bound up with baptism. The theologians of Tarragona curiously set the commencement of Easter obligation (which was to become *ipso facto* that of first communion)<sup>3</sup> at twelve years of age for girls and fourteen for boys. Gerson specifies the meaning of this distinction by referring it to marriageable age. He writes in an epoch when first communicants did not wear any particular vestment, several centuries before they were dressed as little brides and grooms. Analogous meanings reveal themselves as soon as apparently heterogeneous facts are compared.

The entirely military pedagogy of the Jesuits recognized, in more than a single instance, the age-group ethic of ancient times. When in the Low Countries, they take an essential role in the teaching of catechism they set up congregations and sodalities everywhere; they appeal to emulation; they force the children to take examinations, and undergo retreats; they gather them together in processions and cortèges. They utilize for religious purposes, the prestige inherent in any group to which admission is possible via an examination.

They have, therefore, contributed towards giving the ceremony its accessory and unformulated character of promotion to adolescence. Nothing, however, had been further from their minds than to stress this aspect of the festivity by means of clothing having a nuptial association. Neophytes wear the *habitus angelorum* of Benedict XIII;<sup>4</sup> it is certainly not limited to girls, as Andrieux wrongly says, projecting a 19th century practice

<sup>3</sup> See note 2.

<sup>4</sup> In 1728, at the catechumen refuge in Turin, Rousseau still saw a more or less converted Moor "baptised with great ceremony and dressed in white from head to foot" (*Confessions*, II).

into the 18th. And this is also the meaning of the neophyte's garment summed up in the white armband, worn on "everyday clothing."

In the 19th century the decoration and symbolism changes. In 1802, Chateaubriand is the first to speak of young girls in "linen robes" as he is the only one who has ever described boys "decked out in foliage." The idyllic colors of this picture would seem to belie the age of the communicants as twelve. What Chateaubriand finds in his memories, which he probably embellishes, is less the initiation of a neophyte than a springtime marriage rite when nature itself is nuptial.

By a series of transitions unknown to us, the development is completed by the first third of the century: all the children are dressed as brides and grooms. Soon the sons of the bourgeoisie will wear silklined tuxedos, then a complete Eton; the white armband alone still recalls the neophyte's former dress. In more modest groups, they receive, in all cases, their first long trousers. The girls wear veils, the characteristic wedding accessory since antiquity, since it is the *obnubilatio capitis* which gave their name to the *noces*. On the other hand, the white bridal gown does not seem to date back before the 20th century.<sup>5</sup> It has never been adopted except in the upper classes. In former times, the women of the bourgeoisie were married in the attire which, later, they had to wear again on special occasions—often a black silk dress. In this case, also, the stages of the transition are lost to us. What is certain is that from about 1840 to 1920, first communion is carried out in such a manner that an unprepared observer would think he was present at simultaneous group marriages of children disguised as adults. The ambiguity will not startle those who remember that in Greek the same word refers to initiations and marriage.

Since the second World War, many priests feel that Pius X's decree is generally misunderstood and that in order to fulfill it, it is necessary to draw a distinction in role, significance and symbolism, between first admission to the Eucharist and the repetition during the 12th year, the latter becoming essentially a thoughtful

<sup>5</sup> Costly and uncomfortable regional costumes also date from this time. As far as I know, the appearance of these has never been psychologically explained.



## *Social Significance of a Religious Rite*

renewal of baptismal vows and a profession of faith incorporating the child into the Christian community.<sup>6</sup> Such a reform would use for the benefit of a solemn vow the social meanings which first collective communion has been suffused with during the course of centuries. At the same time, the adornment of dress would be reduced to a minimum. Many French and Belgium parishes lend acolyte albs to the boys and muslin tunics to the girls. This last reform is not proceeding without difficulty. The bridal dress is defended by ready-made clothing shops, by a certain maudlin literature which treats them as though they were indeed the *habitus angelorum* and, finally, by the girls themselves, who always eclipsed by their brothers have only two days in their life when they are the center of attention, that of their first communion and that of their marriage: a significant coupling. An inquiry in customs would certainly reveal many synonymous details. I don't know when the practice began of giving adult gifts: a missal, a fountain pen, a camera. The watch, an obligatory present, introduces the child into the adolescent world.

Toward 1910, among the populace of Liège, the hero of the festivity was invited to smoke his first cigar at the end of the banquet. He certainly took less pleasure than pride in an experience which often ended very badly. But with his bowler hat, his first long trousers, proud of the suit which he will wear only once, he feels himself initiated into adult society, like the young Roman who had laid down his *praetexta toga* in front of the altar of the *lares* and dressed himself again in a man's toga over the *tunica recta*, the initiation dress which new recruits and young brides also wore.

Italian practices are rather different than ours. Since religious teaching is given in all schools, the clergy has no fundamental reason to solemnize the twelfth year reiteration rite, which essentially serves among us to assure attendance at catechism. First communion is taken at seven years of age, in groups. This practice holds for Italy, as well as for the very numerous Italian colonies of industrial Belgium where national rites are preserved. Confirmation assumes the character of a promotion rite. At that

<sup>6</sup> See the lucid and courageous book by Gaucheron, *L'Eglise de France et la communion des enfants*, Paris, Ed. du Cerf, 1952.

time, the child receives many gifts. In the Midi, a little girl usually offhandedly will find herself being offered the beginnings of her future trousseau, even the bed linen.

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One may draw analogous social meanings from confirmations in protestant countries, and even more, perhaps, in the lay rejoinders invented by anti-clerical proselytism.

There have been, and there still are, "first rationalistic communions." In East Germany, the State has become aware of the fact that it will supplant Christianity only by taking lessons from it. Collective *initiations* have been instituted, in which adolescents are solemnly consecrated as future members of the Democratic Republic. The *Jugendweibe* also exists in the Federal Republic, organized by groups with Socialist tendencies, although the Party refuses any official patronage. The ceremony, which takes place at confirmation time, involves folk dancing and choirs, but there is also instruction denouncing Christianity as the main enemy of moral progress in the world because it places man's hopes in a fallacious beyond. The *Jugendweibe* which has existed at Hamburg since 1946, enrolled around 30,000 adolescents over a period of fifteen years. This year, it was celebrated in the university festival-hall by 1,350 participants (as against 10,000 Evangelical confirmations). In other cities, it has even much less success.<sup>7</sup>

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When Pius XII proclaimed the physical presence of the Virgin in Paradise, Jung saw in that dogma the greatest event of the century: the integration of the *anima* at the heart of the masculine Trinity and the end of the conflict between Nature and Spirit, resulting from the absorption of the first into the radiant sphere of the second. The dogma learned, not without astonishment, that it was a projection of the collective conscious.

An observance cannot become popular if its rituals are not rooted in the depths of the psyche. But the more strongly they

<sup>7</sup> *Der Spiegel*, May 3, 1961, p. 46.

### *Social Significance of a Religious Rite*

are, the more also they tend to proliferate into vagrant branches, which run the risk of stifling the principal stem.

At the present time, first collective communion is laden with emotions which pervaded ancient rites of aggregation, transition, and initiation. Slowly they have found their place, affirming themselves openly in the 19th century, to the point of obscuring in popular imagination the very meaning of the sacrament which provoked their resurgence. They have become an end in themselves. The Church, conforming to the intentions of Pius X, wishes to give a new sense, that of a profession of faith to the Eucharistic reiteration during the 12th year. It will achieve that only by freeing the faithful from a parasitic ritual which they have developed, without the Church making any objection to it at the time, because it was the creation of a bourgeoisie whom the Church considered its ally. It must count on resistance. The communion of the new-born under the symbol of wine, abolished in the 13th century, was still being practiced at the end of the 16th.