

BOOK REVIEW

First Communion: Ritual, Church and Popular Religious Identity. Peter McGrail. Hampshire, England / Burlington VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2007. Pages xii+199. Hardcover, \$99.95. ISBN 978-0-7546-5741-5.

First Communion in the Roman Catholic Church is a pageant of prereflective significance. Parents and catechists, liturgists and priests seriously prepare for a day that will burn a memory in the religious consciousness of children. Business is boffo for purveyors of religious articles and publishers of catechetical texts. But almost no one is writing about what this all means. No one, that is, except Peter McGrail, whose book *First Communion: Ritual, Church and Popular Religious Identity* is an eye-opener.

McGrail surveys the history, catechesis, liturgy, and ethnography of First Communion. This particular topic demands such a treatment, and McGrail has done more than academic research: he has interviewed parish leaders, catechists, and children. He pulls to the surface the prereflective significance of this emblematic event.

Researching this topic is challenging because First Communion originated and spread in parishes, and records are scarce. McGrail provides an especially helpful investigation on developments in England (40, for example). He also situates the seminal *Quam singulari* (1910) within other reforms of Pope Pius X. The author argues persuasively that lowering the age of First Communion aimed to help parishes elicit a lifelong commitment from Catholics in the struggle against modernism (56-63). But another effect resulted: “Experientially the event became a celebration of childhood” (70). In some contemporary celebrations “What mattered was to see the child, but not to see its communion” (148). Preparation is available in Catholic schools, where it links with other strategies for commitment. But this doesn’t always work. “In practice, the level of commitment to long-term engagement with the local Church on the part of most English Catholics is generally minimal” (99).

The second half of the book presents an intriguing excursus on the ethnography of First Communion. McGrail explores non-ecclesial meanings of the ceremonies (108-114): “generational continuity,” in which families hand down the ceremony each generation remembers; “the one special day,” in which First Communion becomes a transitional moment in life; “the substitute wedding,” in which a girl’s First Communion is perceived as a proto-wedding ritual for which she dresses in a white gown and is escorted by a boy down the aisle; and “mothers and daughters,” in which the ceremony forms “part of the progressive induction of the girl into her future world as a woman” (113). McGrail tackles head-on the power-struggles among parish leaders and parents (117-136), as well as the consumption that plagues the religious interpretations (151-167). Parts of his chapter on the ritual patterns of the contemporary First Communion Mass (137-149) will turn the stomach of a sensitive liturgist. He keenly observes that these innovations evolved from the earliest ceremonies when celebrants “poured their creative energies into non-eucharistic secondary rituals later in the day, such as the renewal of baptismal promises, dedication to Mary and evening processions” (149).

So, what does First Communion mean? McGrail says there is a mismatch between the official answer and the ethnographic one. Officially, the Catholic Church says First Communion is a sacrament of initiation, but families have adopted it as a time to showcase their child. “They focus upon the family, its identity and its status within the local community. On the one hand, the fact that the ritual has been performed for successive generations makes it an ideal vehicle for expressions of family identity and continuity. On the other, the ritual’s highly public nature provides the family with an opportunity to project its self-image and to externalize its broader social aspirations” (170).

McGrail uses the word “initiation” in different senses, and he never proposes a solution in harmony with the Eastern rites: offering First Communion to infants. Instead, he calls for “a fundamental reassessment by the Catholic Church of the nature of the local congregation and of the role of ritual within it” (175). This is a stimulating book, and a most welcome addition to the literature on the history of the rites of Christian initiation.

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