

First Communion

Since the early part of this century the practice of the Roman Catholic Church has been to admit children to First Communion at an early age: at seven or even earlier. There is a tendency in large families for the age to become earlier with each child, as the older children teach the younger and as these aspire to share the status and privileges of the older. The practice has proved spiritually very fruitful: there can be a real grasp by young children of the meaning of Communion, which then becomes for them a focus for the development of a personal christian life. There has been some movement in the same direction in the Church of England, as many in that Church have come to favour an earlier age for First Communion. The matter reached debate in the General Synod, but there was not sufficient support for a change in the rule. So the general Anglican practice, with the equivalent in the Free Churches, remains that First Communion and communicant status follow Confirmation in the early teens.

One result of the Roman Catholic practice is that there are no separate Children's Services in church while the adults celebrate the Sunday Eucharist. Children share their parents' worship, are gradually acclimatised to the celebration of the eucharistic liturgy, and can have it progressively explained to them. They ask questions! Sometimes there are Children's Masses, not only in schools but in parish churches.

A further result is that for Roman Catholic children their First Communion, carefully prepared for and splendidly celebrated both in church and in the family, is a golden moment of childhood clearly remembered all their lives; it is their great moment of personal initiation, their first commitment. The result is that Confirmation is reduced in importance, is less of an occasion, and cannot be experienced as 'the moment of personal commitment'. The First Communion leads immediately to subsequent Communion, to a growing understanding of the Church's liturgy, and to commitment repeatedly renewed within this growing understanding. So commitment is experienced as a process of continual growth rather than as a specially prepared personal decision at some turning-point in life.

A final consequence of Roman Catholic practice is that an interchurch couple have to choose for the children, willy-nilly, whether they are to make their First Communion in the Roman Catholic Church, even if in principle they would prefer to give the children some choice in the matter themselves. It is a choice that cannot be made in a vacuum; it does not come upon the parents out of the blue and cannot be sprung suddenly on the child. Rather is it a choice that will grow out of all other choices the parents have successively made; about baptism, about family practice of public worship, about schooling.

It is perhaps worth mentioning in passing that the Roman Catholic parish priest has the responsibility of seeing that the baptised children of his parish make their First Communion. Hence he has the responsibility of seeing that they are properly prepared for it. But that is not to

say that the parish priest has the right to say when a child is or is not psychologically ready for Communion. Only the parents can really know this and so, if one is to talk of rights at all, then this decision rests with them. But it can be a matter where some tact and delicacy is required, and where good personal relations with the parish priest are needed. In general, the more the parents in the parish are concerned about the religious upbringing and the First Communion of their children, the less will the parish priest need to concern himself or take any initiative.

With the spread of Roman Catholic primary schools there has developed the custom of having First Communion classes where all the children of the same age are prepared together, and this leads up to the day when they make their First Communion together. This then tends to be more a school event than a family event, or at least to be a peer group event since it matters to children to be together with their friends. But efforts are always made to involve the parents and the whole family as much as possible. The whole procedure, however, may cause difficulties for the interchurch couple. They may have reason to be anxious about the exclusivist nature of the teaching given. And it is inevitably a one-church operation leading up, as things still stand, to the exclusion of the non-RC parent from receiving Holy Communion on this very special occasion with his or her own child and perhaps other children. One can only urge that interchurch couples should keep up an unremitting plea, and an increasing one, that the present discipline should be changed to one that is sympathetic to their spiritual need. They should not be discouraged even though several years of effort have so far produced no result. The 'problem' must be seen to increase rather than to go away.

The real preparation of any child for Holy Communion is in the whole life of the family, and schools know very well that their proper task is to build on the basis provided by the family. So, because of the difficulties indicated, it must be a real question for the two-church couple, if the child is to make First Communion in the Roman Catholic Church, whether they should not undertake the particular preparation themselves. And perhaps the ideal might be that this preparation should lead up to First Communion at a house Mass.

Before Vatican II Holy Communion and preparation for it tended to be considered in an over individualistic way. And one has to admit that the provisions for eucharistic hospitality indicated at Vatican II and developed as a discipline in subsequent documents still look no further than the spiritual needs of individuals. They have not reckoned with the spiritual needs of ecumenical families or other ecumenical bodies. Yet by and large Vatican II recaptured the vision of the Eucharist as essentially corporate in nature, and subsequent liturgical reform has emphasised this and made it part of everyday experience. You are the Body of Christ, St Paul was able to say. And for many centuries (until the western mind got busy with its distinctions) the church in East and West held firmly to the deep and mysterious unity between the bodily self and the risen Lord, the community of baptised and believing Christians, and the mystery-body (or body in 'the mysteries') of the Lord in the Eucharist. They are one mystery-reality of God's self-gift to men, which our understanding will not exhaust and should imply receive in faith. It brings us up short

when Augustine can say in an instruction to catechumens: when the priest administering Communion says, 'The Body of Christ', you say 'Amen', meaning 'Yes, we are' (That is a paraphrase.) It is because you are the Body of Christ by baptism that you can and do celebrate the Eucharist. Well, if we are to take seriously Vatican II's saying that the family is the domestic Church, this surely has its application to the two-Church family. They are the immediate reality of the Church, the Body of Christ, for this child. They have a claim, which cannot simply be set aside, to be the christian community in which the child should be prepared for and should celebrate the Eucharist.

All the questions with which two-church parents have wrestled tend to converge at this point of First Communion; questions about dual loyalty or dual membership, both of the parents and of the children. They can only be briefly indicated here.

If the child receives Communion in the Roman Catholic Church, is this with the intention that he or she should then also communicate in the Church of the other parent? As a communicant member of the Roman Catholic Church the child falls within the theoretical rules of Anglican and Free Churches about admitting communicant members, and it may cause considerable difficulty to the minister to admit a Roman Catholic child when he does not communicate children of that age in his own Church. So to avoid any embarrassment. the matter will need to be handled personally with the minister.

Nor, of course, can such an arrangement simply be sprung on the child. It would have to be led up to, and be expected and welcomed, in the light of previous patterns of church-going.

What, in effect, has been the meaning of the child's baptism? This is not a legal question about the way the child was baptised, but a substantial question about the child's upbringing.

One appreciates that at the time of baptism it matters greatly to the parents that the baptism should be shared as fully as possible by both their two Churches; if possible that both should regard the child as a member. The theological understanding that many AIF parents have preferred is that the child should be baptised into the One Church of Christ as it exists in the two Churches of the parents. But often at the point of baptism parents have to a greater or lesser extent been disappointed about securing the co-operation they would have liked, and it has seemed appropriate to say to them; 'Never mind; what really matters to the child is the way he or she is brought up to regard and to experience both the Churches.'

So, do you think that dual loyalty or 'dual membership' is theologically meaningful, and desirable, and practicable? AIF parents have to some extent differed in their answers to these questions. Some have thought that a child of seven cannot psychologically have a dual loyalty; others that the children easily accept the attitude of their parents as something entirely normal, when this is conveyed to them without strain. It may be worthwhile to look back at the questionnaire and appended comments published for and discussed at the Spode House meeting

in September 1978. The comments on questions of dual membership were very diverse and rich in insight, and could not easily be summarised. But it seemed to appear that the more loosely the idea of dual membership was interpreted, the more parents found it meaningful and important, so that a considerable majority were in favour of it both for parents and for children.

As will be apparent, these reflections raise questions rather than provide answers. They are intended to help reflection and discussion between parents or in groups. Holy Communion is at once a sharing with the risen Lord and a sharing with the human community in which he dwells. So for children as well as for parents any real sharing in and with the christian community will press for sharing in the Eucharist, both to celebrate the bond of unity that is already there and to deepen it.

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