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# First Communion in Early Twentieth-century Italy: a Rite of Passage within Childhood

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**Abstract** In traditionally Catholic countries, First Communion has widely functioned as a key rite of passage. In the modern age, and in particular during the eighteenth century, children were not admitted to the sacrament of the Eucharist until adolescence or even until the age of twenty. The ceremony thus represented a rite of passage that marked the transition to adulthood. A reversal of tradition came in some pastoral experiences of the nineteenth century and was officially established by the decree *Quam singulari Christus*

*amore* – ordered in 1910 by Pope Pius X – which set the age for receiving Holy Communion at around seven years. First Communion still retained the form of a rite of passage, albeit without the adultist religious language surrounding Confirmation and without the pessimism about childhood that had been inherited from the past. The new educational outlook initiated by Pius X was also confirmed by his successors. Analysis of official Church pronouncements, devotional literature for children, and selected religious images – examined with an interdisciplinary heuristic approach – allows to shed light on a key shift in the Italian Catholic educational imaginary over the first half of the twentieth century, when Communion was seen as a typical childhood experience, in accordance with the changes underway in the upbringing and socialization of children and with the educational theories that valued children's spontaneity and experience.

**Keywords** First Communion, history of childhood, history of religious education, Italy, 20th century

## Introduction

First Communion occupied – and continues to occupy – a key place in the life of Westerners, especially in traditionally Catholic countries. “Baptismal communion” in early Christian communities has been attested since the fifth century, when infants were admitted to the

Eucharist during the Easter vigil, after receiving Baptism and Confirmation. The Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 established that infants should no longer be given the Eucharist, but rather should be required to wait until they had reached the so-called “age of reason”, defined as the age at which they could rationally understand the meaning of the sacrament and deserve it by virtue of having developed a more solid moral conscience. Over the following centuries, this decree became subject to a variety of interpretations, with the result that children were admitted to the Eucharist at increasingly older ages (see Valsecchi, 1958, pp. 18–44; McGrail, 2007, pp. 7–10).

Even the Council of Trent did not take a clear stance on the matter. Session XIII of the assembly reaffirmed the Lateran ruling without associating an age limit with the age of reason. In addition, the *Roman Catechism* issued by this Council stated that children shown to be without reason because they were unable to distinguish the Eucharistic bread from ordinary bread could not receive the sacrament. The *Catechism* also established that the decision to admit children to First Communion was the responsibility of their fathers and confessors. The vagueness of these prescriptions led to great variability among the practices of different dioceses: while, in Milan, Charles Borromeo granted Communion to ten-year-olds, it was not uncommon for local synods to set an older age for administration of the sacrament. During the eighteenth century in particular, the strict approach advocated by exponents of Jansenism prompted many bishops to delay First Communion until adolescence or even until the age of twenty (see Valsecchi, 1958, pp. 47–56). The ceremony thus began to represent a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood.

In France, the celebration was called *Communion solennelle*, a visible spectacle of faith and devotion that marked adolescents’ entrée into the religious community and thus into society. During the rite, female communicants wore a white dress, while their male counterparts wore long trousers for the first time (see Heyhood, 2007, p. 81) (Fig. 1; Fig 2).



Figure 1, Figure 2. French First Holy Communion souvenirs from the second half of the nineteenth century (Gulli Grigioni & Pranzini, 1990, pp. 112–113).

First Communion was presented as a “reward” for a consistent striving towards maturity (Muroi, 2007, p. 371). Indeed, communicants were required to demonstrate their moral rectitude and religious preparation following a long course of catechetical instruction (see Sonnet, 1987).

Already during the nineteenth century, this praxis began to be reversed in some pastoral settings, a pattern that was officially endorsed in the decree *Quam singulari Christus amore* – ordered in 1910 by Pope Pius X – which fixed the age for receiving Holy Communion at around seven years. The decree initiated a new phase in the history of First Communion, which became the pre-eminent childhood experience that it has remained up to the present day.

In this paper, I set out to reconstruct the origins of this newer tradition and to demonstrate that First Communion retained the form of a rite of passage, albeit no longer marking a new stage in human development but rather a crucial moment during childhood. To this end, I first briefly present the papal decree of 1910 and then, focusing on Italy in the first half of the twentieth century, I go on to examine other ecclesiastical pronouncements, along with selected liturgical texts, devotional manuals and religious images.

The preliminary findings that I present certainly merit further in-depth inquiry with a view to filling the historiographical gap surrounding First Communion. Only a small number of historians have examined the theme. Among these, Jean Delumeau (1987) coordinated a key study that is worthy of mention; however, it only touches on the twentieth century in passing.

### **The Papal Decree *Quam singulari Christus amore***

The papal decree *Quam singulari Christus amore* invoked authoritative sources in support of lowering the age of First Communion to seven years. The first source was the Gospel itself, and specifically the passages in which Jesus meets children<sup>1</sup>. According to the decree, these

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1 These passages were drawn from the Gospel of St. John (13:13-16) and the Gospel of St. Matthew (18:3-5).



Gospel pages “show clearly how special was that love for children which Christ showed” and “how highly He held their innocence and the open simplicity of their souls” (*Decreto*, 1910, p. 9).

The second source was the history of First Communion throughout the Catholic tradition, from the early Christian era, when the Church even administered the Eucharist to nursing infants. The subsequent historical developments were presented in the decree as not in contradiction with the idea of setting the age for receiving Holy Communion at around seven years. To this end, the decree also invoked other key sources on the theological meaning of the Eucharist, including Thomas Aquinas and the *Roman Catechism*.

All of these arguments were intended as a rebuttal of Jansenism and its rigorous perspective on the Eucharist as a reward to be given rarely and only to the worthy. Indeed, the decree was part of the reform of Eucharistic worship championed by Pius X, who wished to promote frequent recourse to Communion among the Catholic faithful. The pontiff pursued this goal by encouraging a profound renewal of Eucharistic worship, beginning in 1905 with his decree *Sacra Tridentina Synodus* which, while firmly condemning all forms of rigorism, encouraged the practice of frequent Communion, to be received daily, if possible. Pius X had two main reasons for intervening in this area. First, he believed that regular Communion could “preserve believers from slipping into error, especially in contexts in which their faith was threatened by cultural currents or religious confessions other than the Roman Catholic one”; indeed, in addition to the errors of Jansenism, the pope was concerned not only about the spread of secularism and Protestantism, but also about how the religious mindset of the day might be influenced by movements within Catholicism with the potential to drive the faithful away “from orthodoxy”, especially Modernism, which he tenaciously opposed<sup>2</sup>. The second reason that prompted Pius X to launch a Eucharistic revival was his conviction that it could “create the conditions for

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2 See the papal decree *Lamentabili sane exitu* and the encyclical *Pascendi Dominici gregis*, the two magisterial documents of 1907 in which Pius X officially condemned Modernism (see Dieguez & Pagano, 2006).

the restoration of a Christian society”, an end to which his entire pontificate was dedicated: Eucharistic devotion, he held, would foster “in believers that faith and charity that ought to inspire action suited to the needs of the times” (Paiano, 2003, pp. 422–426).

This dual purpose – inspired by both a preventive logic, in relation to countering the secularization of society, and a propositional logic, in relation to strengthening Catholics’ faith, commitment to the Church and social engagement – was also pursued in *Quam singulari*, except that in this decree they were expressed in a way that was sensitive to the beneficiaries, that is to say, children. Pius X was inspired by leading doctrines and religious movements that, during the nineteenth century, had opposed Jansenism with a romantic spirituality, in which Communion was intended to be the “object of holy intimacy” with the Lord, an inner experience to be enjoyed frequently, including by children. This idea was supported, for example, by Félix Dupanloup, Gaston De Ségur and Don Bosco (Prandi, 1966, p. 109).

This new religious sensitivity matched a more general shift in attitudes towards educating children within much of nineteenth-century European educational culture (see Becchi, 1996), including in the Catholic sphere. We might point for example, in the Italian context, to the new religious congregations founded during the restoration period and their educational works for poor children (see Pazzaglia, 1998). During the same decades, the spread of certain spiritual devotions (to the Holy Family, Guardian Angels, the Child Jesus, Saint Joseph) led Catholic educators to consider the emotional needs of children more closely, as well as developing new forms of religious instruction that were more attentive to children’s psychological dynamics (see Sani, 1997, pp. 54–55).

However, despite these developments, at the beginning of the twentieth century rigorism had not yet been completely eradicated, to the extent that Pius X’s decree openly condemned it and laid down new and explicit rules for First Communion. “No extraordinary preparation should be demanded of children”, because – the decree affirmed – “they are in the happy state of innocence and purity of soul”; to be

admitted to First Communion children were only required “to distinguish between the Bread of the Holy Eucharist and ordinary bread” and to know and understand the basic “mysteries of the faith” and not “a full and perfect knowledge of Christian doctrine” (*Decreto*, 1910, pp. 12–14). Furthermore, after receiving First Communion, children were not expected to engage in efforts beyond what was feasible at their age, but only to continue to receive “catechetical instruction” and regularly go to Confession and receive Communion (*Ibidem*, p. 15). In short, the decree implied that children were naturally predisposed towards receiving the Eucharist; it thus contributed to generating positive sentiment towards children within the Catholic imaginary.

It should be noted that Catholic educational culture continued to feel the weight of remote legacies. Indeed, still at the beginning of the twentieth century, as throughout the entire history of Christianity, “ideas and images of childhood [were] shot through with ambiguity”: on the one hand, children were represented as innocent creatures, and even further idealized through the cult of child martyrs and child saints; on the other, children were seen as peculiarly susceptible to sin and thus to be disciplined (Nelson, 1994, p. XIX). Nevertheless, the papal decree contributed to the development of a more optimistic view of childhood in Church circles.

This shift is also explained by the new relationship between First Communion and Confirmation. The decree did not address Confirmation and was not intended to invert the theological order of the sacraments of Christian initiation: first Baptism, then Confirmation and finally the Eucharist (Riggio, 1972, p. 411). Yet historians of religion suggest that the decree lent itself to the interpretation that First Communion should precede Confirmation (Muroi, 2007, p. 371). Hence, Confirmation – which the catechism of the period referred to as the “sacrament of the soldier of Christ” – increasingly took on the meaning of a “rite of passage towards adulthood” (De Giorgi, 2005, p. 136), while First Communion became a key moment during childhood.

As we shall see, during the first half of the twentieth century in Italy, First Communion retained the form of a rite of passage, encompassing a preparation, a celebration and the beginning of a new stage

of life experience. Yet, all these steps were conducted in a way that was sensitive to children's needs and were not marked using adult language similar to that surrounding Confirmation.

### **Before, during and after the Rite**

Regarding preparation, the decree established that children should be required to display elementary knowledge of Christian Doctrine to be admitted to First Communion. Thus, small catechisms suitable for their preparation began to circulate. The publication of these booklets was coupled with increasing pedagogical awareness in relation to children's religious instruction (see Carminati, 1995)<sup>3</sup>.

As suggested by the Secretary of the Sacred Congregation of the Sacraments in the Roman Curia, Domenico Jorio, the teaching of religious matters needed to be cut down to the essential, because – as he wrote in 1929 – “it is not right to tire the tender children by taxing their little brains”. Catechists were not to focus primarily on getting their pupils to memorize religious concepts, but rather on providing them with simple, accessible explanations, using examples and pictures, and even filmstrips. However, in addition to these methodological suggestions, Jorio advised catechists to display, above all, “a little more love and patience towards the children” (Jorio, 1929, pp. 27–28).

Indeed, following the decree, the leading theme that may be identified in the sources with a focus on First Communion preparation is attention to the emotional needs of children. As in the romantic spirituality of the nineteenth century, First Communion was presented as an affective experience. Preparing children to receive the Eucharist, priests and educators were invited “to speak – as one cardinal noted in 1910 – not the cold language of reason, but that of feeling” (Capelatro, 1910, p. 5). First Communion was frequently compared to parental, and, above all, maternal love (see *Ibidem*; Annoni, 1922, p. 35).

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3 The roots of this enhanced educational sensibility may be traced back to the late 1700s and the restoration period (see Polenghi, 2016).

The preparation of the rite, therefore, was designed to be an emotionally grounded experience, in recognition of children's particular need for security.

Another recurring metaphor of First Communion was that of an encounter with an important and endearing person on a day that was referred to as the "most beautiful day" in the child's life. An encounter to be looked forward to by the children with trepidation but not with fear. A 1928 prayer book referred to First Communion as the moment at which children could "lay [their] heads on Jesus' heart and receive his caresses" (*Beniamina prega*, 1928, p. 231). Another book asked the children "not to be scared" of meeting Jesus, because, in light of their mischievous behaviour, he would not be as strict as their "schoolteacher or headmaster" (*In adunanza di Beniamine*, 1935, p. 78).

Preparing for First Communion also entailed some duties, such as frequent prayer, acts of generosity, small sacrifices and Confession. However, these duties were presented in a joyful spirit, that did not censure the children's spontaneity. In one spiritual tale published in 1924, a little girl kisses a host that has not yet been consecrated because she knows that God will enter it during Mass and receive her kiss (*Il libro della Beniamina*, 1928, p. 148); another anecdote spoke about the communicants' desire to play with Jesus as the children of Palestine had done when he was on earth (see *Ibidem*).

During the following decades, First Communion preparation retained this sentimental undercurrent, which was also expressed via the metaphor of the friendship between children and Jesus, as attested, for example, in a speech by Pius XII, in which the Holy Father referred to Pius X as "he who knew how to break down the centuries-old barriers that kept [children] distant from their Friend in the tabernacle" (Pio XII, 1951, p. 475).

In the wake of *Quam singulari*, the First Communion Rite was also updated. In liturgical texts published in Italy throughout the first half of twentieth century, the celebration continued to be presented as solemn, as with the earlier mentioned *communion solennelle*. Yet its exterior signs were informed by a new educational approach. As suggested in a 1914 book, the ringing of the bells, the decoration of the church,

the notes of the organ and the vestments of the priest were not to convey a triumphalistic idea of the celebration, but rather “to speak to the eyes of children” (*Preparazione orale*, 1914, p. 66). Other objects used during the rite shared the same purpose: a white ribbon, a candle, a medal (Ibidem, pp. 66–67). All these educational indications for the rite were intended to draw the children into the religious significance of the celebration by means of a highly symbolic material dimension.

During the celebration, the priest was also invited to attend to children’s cognitive needs by delivering a homily that was short, simple and “full of affection”. He was recommended to make use of anecdotes that could easily be understood by all the children (Ibidem, pp. 66). A 1938 booklet of the Rite even proposed saying some parts of the First Communion Mass in Italian (see Gaspardo, 1938). This represented a notable exception to the rule, given that, as we know, Latin was still the official language of the Mass at that time. An exception that attests to the educational aim of sensitively adapting the rite to suit the children’s lived experience.

The social significance of the rite also shifted. As in the past, making their First Communion endowed children with a new role. However, their protagonism was closely related to their young age and did not tend to mark a passage towards adulthood. Among the many manifestations of the new social meaning of the celebration, we might consider, for example, souvenir First Holy Communion pictures. This custom had already become widespread during the nineteenth century, as we saw earlier in relation to the *communion solennelle*. But, in the first half of the twentieth century, the pictures’ iconographical contents changed, not so much in terms of the Eucharistic symbolism, but above all in the representation of the communicants, who – in line with the new sacramental praxis – were clearly represented as children (Fig. 3; Fig. 4). Many souvenir First Communion pictures even featured boys

wearing short trousers, in contrast with the long trousers that, during the nineteenth century, had expressed their entrée into adulthood<sup>4</sup>.



Figure 3 and 4. First Holy Communion Souvenirs made by the Santa Lega Eucaristica in Milano during the first half of the twentieth century (Pagliara, 1999, p. 189).

Souvenir pictures and photos were part of a pedagogy of remembrance: by treasuring these images, the children – later to become adults – would ever recall their First Communion, which would remain in their memory as a spiritual, emotional and social experience that had been an integral part of their childhoods.

4 For examples of such souvenir First Holy Communion pictures, see the following electronic archives: <https://www.varagine.it/picture.php?28522/categories>; [http://www.fondazionemcr.it/UploadImgs/127294\\_LAB19\\_39\\_23Ritratti\\_23\\_8PrimaCom\\_3.jpg](http://www.fondazionemcr.it/UploadImgs/127294_LAB19_39_23Ritratti_23_8PrimaCom_3.jpg) (last access: May, 2022).



A memory that, from the days immediately following the First Communion rite, would accompany them throughout the new phase of their life that had begun at this important moment. As earlier mentioned, the decree established that, after First Communion, children were not expected to exert themselves beyond the abilities of their age. Rather they were invited to remain constant in prayer, regularly attend Sunday Mass and catechism classes, read spiritual texts, be good and polite, obey their parents, avoid bad company, avoid dressing immodestly or vainly, avoid immoral literature, or improper entertainment and parties, and above all go frequently to Confession and Communion (see Maccono, 1929, pp. 14, 18–19; *Catechismo cattolico*, 1932, p. 31).

The spiritual model that children were most often invited to imitate was St. Tarcisus. According to Christian hagiographers, this third-century saint was killed as a child by his pagan peers because he did not want to give them the Eucharist that he kept jealously hidden among his clothing. Tarcisus was emblematic of the *topos* of the *puer senex* (the old child)<sup>5</sup>, that is to say, a child who is mature in his faith and ready to sacrifice himself in the name of religious values (see Scorza Barcellona, 1991, p. 64). However, during the first half of the twentieth century, he was represented somewhat differently in the First Communion sources. Both in a speech by Pius XI (1925) and in a range of devotional books, Tarcisus continued to figure as a child-hero; however, children making their First Holy Communion were only invited to imitate him by making small sacrifices, appropriate to their age. Indeed, it was only following Confirmation that they would become “soldiers of Christ” and thus “martyrs to duty”, like Tarcisus (*Il libro della Beniamina*, 1928, p. 155). Thus, Confirmation opened the door to adulthood, while First Communion remained a rite of passage within childhood itself.

Even after receiving their First Communion, the religious experience of children continued to display a sentimental quality, as documented

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5 For more in-depth background on the figure of the *puer senex* in the classical era and the Old Testament tradition, see Curtius (1993); on the presence of this same *topos* in the educational imaginary of revolutionary-era France, see Polenghi (2003, pp. 100–105).



by widely circulated devotional images (Fig. 5) and also by certain prayers, in which children, when visiting the Tabernacle, did not address Jesus using traditional or conventional prayer formulas, but rather personal sentiments charged with affection, such as in the following text:

Oh, my Jesus, my God, I adore you together with the Angels that surround your altar. The children of Palestine came flocking when You passed by, joyfully surrounded you, told you many nice things, showed you great love. And You loved them dearly; gently You drew their little heads to Your chest and, caressing them, You taught your little friends how to get to Heaven [...]. Jesus, my beloved little brother, before You send me on my way, give me Your beautiful blessing. And bless everyone I love (*Beniamina prega*, 1928, pp. 35–39).

For children, receiving the Eucharist no longer represented the *mysterium tremendum* of the rigorist tradition, but rather a moment of



Figure 5. Holy picture produced by the Santa Lega Eucaristica in Milano during the first half of the twentieth century (Pagliara, 1999, p. 49).

intimacy with Jesus, which, without losing its sacredness, was in tune with the world of childhood.

### Concluding Remarks

Although the present study should be followed up with further documentary research, the sources examined to date allow us to observe that the papal decree *Quam singulari* represented a true turning point in the history of First Communion: a development that, in the course of the twentieth century, contributed to fostering a more optimistic view of childhood in the Catholic imaginary, in sympathy with changes underway in the upbringing and socialization of children and with educational theories that valued children's spontaneity and lived experience. Indeed, even Maria Montessori, whose pedagogical thinking did not originate from Catholic principles, acknowledged that allowing children to make their First Communion at a younger age signalled the rise of a new pedagogical awareness in ecclesiastical circles (see Montessori, 1922, p. 8)<sup>6</sup>. Although the status of the child within Catholic educational culture continued to be marked by ups and downs, the new tradition initiated by Pius X was unprecedented in the extent of the prominence that it accorded to children, both during the Rite of First Holy Communion and within the Christian community more broadly.

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6 On Montessori's relationship with Catholicism, see De Giorgi, 2018.

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