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# Learning communion

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The importance of First Communion to Catholics is well known: that ceremony in which children are confronted for the first time with the essential sacrament of the Eucharist. Currently it takes diverse and multiple forms, but in much of continental Europe it is most often carried out collectively, grouping together children of the same age-group, about eight to nine, in a celebration which the community of practising adults in the parish and members of the children's families take part in. Thus the ceremony is doubly inaugural: not only is the body of Christ received there, but the children make an appearance for the first time as foreground actors in the presence of a considerable assembly. It is not the ceremony itself that I am concerned with here<sup>1</sup> so much as what happens “upstream”: what it assumes from the actors who take part in it and above all from the children.

I shall explore the apprenticeship for communion among young Catholics. What interests me is not so much the acquisition of knowledge on the eucharist -that transmission of information which takes place by means of the preparatory catechism<sup>2</sup>- as the acquisition of know-how, knowing how to take communion.

This examination of modes of taking communion is not exclusively mine. As well as their asking about the eucharistic sacrament, the questions of the future communicants turn very often on what might be called the technique of communion: they ask how they should proceed to receive and consume the host (consecrated wafer) and, more generally, how to behave during the celebration of First Communion. In other words, they want to know what posture to adopt and what corporal dynamic to put into action in order to be communicants.

In order to reply to the children's questions and achieve the coordination of the different participants in the ceremony, the priests and catechists usually organize a general rehearsal, on the eve of the ceremony or a few days earlier. These rehearsals, which I attended a number of

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<sup>1</sup> See Hérault 1996.

<sup>2</sup> Generally, two years of catechism are required before the First Communion.

times in Vendée (France) and in Valle Stura in Italy, are valuable opportunities to observe and try to understand the apprenticeship of communicants.

Obviously, the rehearsal is not confined to the actions set out in the eucharistic liturgy, but more generally covers all the actions of the celebration: the opening, the Liturgy of the Word, and the conclusion. It presents itself as a complex set of actions whose duration often extends beyond that of the ceremony itself, insofar as some of the actions are repeated several times. I shall focus on the act of communion itself.

### **The act of communion**

When examined closely, the act of communion consists of two moments which are intimately linked but which may be distinguished here for our purposes. First there is the positioning of the communicant for the receiving of the host, then the manipulation of the latter before it is ingested. The positioning of first communicants usually takes the form of a movement or procession, but it can also be limited to a change of position - from seated to standing<sup>3</sup>. The manipulation of the host can take two standard forms: either the priest places it directly on the communicant's tongue (which is called "communion in the mouth") or he places it in the one of the hands of the communicant, who carries it himself to his or her mouth ("communion in the hand").<sup>4</sup>

Observation of the rehearsal of these actions suggests that the attitudes and gestures prescribed for the children have nothing to do with technical efficacy. It is not only a matter, for instance, of moving oneself to the place where the host is received - for in Saint Vincent, in Vendée, the children process from the choir and return immediately to receive the host - nor even of adopting a position necessary for this reception. The positioning, like the manipulation of the host, involves a production with its own rules of the type that Erving Goffman (1972) identified, actions which are right and proper and not merely efficacious.

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<sup>3</sup> The children invariably take communion in the choir, where they are generally seated throughout the ceremony, but sometimes they form a procession to receive communion (at St-Vincent and Laverdine in Vendée, for instance), and sometime they simply stand in front of their chairs and the priest comes in front of each of them (Demonte in Valle de Stura and Morton in Vendée). But the adults always come in procession to the bottom of the choir, or to another place in the nave, to receive the host.

<sup>4</sup> In Vendée, most of the adults take communion in the hand; the rare individuals who take it in the mouth are generally elderly. In Valle Stura, the two methods are more equally distributed. Communion in the hand seems to be more recent than in Vendée, as is suggested by the questions from some young adults about the legitimacy of this practice.

Of course, it has been well known since Mauss that even the most commonplace gestures are not concerned with practical efficiency alone,<sup>5</sup> and it would indeed be strange if this were so for the manipulation of the “body of Christ”. But it is worth exploring in detail the prescriptions and corrections set out in the apprenticeship of these gestures, and above all the places in which they are carried out. This should help us to identify the content and the consequences of these proprieties of communion.

### **Rehearsal of the positioning for communion.**

At the time of the rehearsal of the act of positioning, the interventions of the adults bear principally on: first, the positioning of the upper limbs (in order to have the hands joined at the level of the chest); second, the coordination of the children (they must walk well in line, respecting a certain distance between one another); and third, the rhythm of walking, which must be slow.<sup>6</sup>

### **Procession**

**Priest:** *When you have sung, you will follow your catechists. You have your hands joined.* [The children join their hands.] *You follow your catechists.*

The children, separated into two groups, leave their places in the heart of the choir and walk in line behind two catechists, who serve as guides. They describe a large semi-circle and find themselves again in the choir, facing the priest. During their movement, he directs them verbally: *Walk gently, slowly. One behind another nicely.*

While the first ones begin to take communion, the two catechists continue to oversee the approach of the next ones. They correct their postures: they call to order in particular those who have already lowered their arms, they impose silence on those who are talking to their neighbours, they supervise the gaps between each child, the majority having a tendency to touch their partners when the procession has stopped. [Rehearsal, St- Vincent, Vendée.]

What do these prescribed gestures mean? Joined hands seem to belong to the register of gestures of respect and veneration, originating, according to Martimort (1965: 158), in the gesture

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<sup>5</sup> That is also the case for complex technical actions where one might think that the search for efficiency was of cardinal importance. See, with regard to music, Mabru 1995.

<sup>6</sup> These rules give rise to the adults who are present giving demonstrations and verbal instructions.

of homage by vassal to sovereign; and, again according to him, the upright posture is a sign of respect because we rise in front of someone we wish to honour.

The slow rhythm and coordination of the children do not seem to have such an explicit meaning, but Martimort's definition of the procession gives us the essential elements. For him, the procession is “an ordered progress which supposes the real movement of all those who take part in it, and their harmonious grouping in ranks and categories: it is the organic manifestation of a people, not a tumultuous mob” (1965: 631). The work imposed on the children's bodies, in the eucharistic communion which is in one sense interpreted as the communion of “saints”, implies a general attitude which may be defined as “measured” in both restraint and comparison. The children must not only show themselves capable of restraint in their slowness and silence, but also harmonize with their partners' rhythms. There is a search for a common bodily balance. The positioning is not a set of individual acts so much as a group effort. In Demonte, a parish in Valle Stura, the children are invited to stand simultaneously to receive the host, and to wait till the last has taken communion before sitting down. In Vendée, they try to maintain group unity right through the procession by means of corrections of the gaps between the children and also by insisting on common movements: the St-Vincent priest requires that the children present themselves to him as couples before returning to their places in a single movement. Similarly, the gathering of Christians, which is considered to be the Church's most expressive manifestation, requires attitudes and gestures from the faithful whose aim is to avoid, in the words of the Missal, “all appearance of particularism or division”.

This attempt at gluing individuals together is equally palpable in the rules for clothing. In Valle Stura, a white “alb” is used for everyone, that is to say a liturgical dress or uniform. In Vendée, the alb is sometimes used for the profession of faith, but never for the First Communion. Each communicant wears his or her own clothing. But looked at closely, the choice is not different from that of a liturgical uniform. A desire for unity is expressed in this matter of clothing: although families have long been used to this freedom of dress, the question “how to dress the children” invariably arises at meetings to prepare for the celebration. The reply given by the priests, although they do not insist, is definitely not one of non-interference. “The parents have asked and ask every time, that's the big question, how should they be dressed. I say, it's a feast-day, you dress them for a feast-day but within your means, as you wish. Without going over the top of course, because sometimes one sees little girls arrive with hats and incredible dresses”

(*Priest, St-Vincent, Vendée*). “They aren't made to wear the alb for the First Communion. But sometimes I'd rather see them in albs than in a riot of colour, that's dreadful. Some of the communicants' clothes one sees are appalling” (*Vendean priest*). The “incredible” draws attention to the wearer, singles her out and is thus to be avoided; similarly, the “dreadful” which captures the eye and shocks anyone of “good” taste. It seems therefore that the correct dress is the opposite of these two categories, in other words that it plays on the proximity, the assimilation of the communicant with the other children.

Hence, no doubt, the importance of colours: the dominance of white facilitates a visual harmony favourable to the cohesion of the children. The right feast-day dress would seem to be not too studied -what is known in Vendée ironically as *la grande toilette* - but not everyday clothes either, jeans being the example which is deprecated.

This “modesty” in dress is recommended in the old catechisms (e.g. Quinet and Boyer 1939: 502) and extends also to the communicant's conduct. “One must have a modest and collected exterior. This means that one must be clean as to one's clothes, and decorous in one's manners, looks and gestures, with no carelessness or slovenliness” (ib.: 333). It is clear from observing the positioning' that though current behaviour is often described as being less solemn and rigid than in the old days, it is still the result of a work on the body that is demanded and demanding, so as to achieve an experience of non-effervescent cohesion.

### **Handling and ingesting the host**

The rehearsal of the manipulation of the host is perhaps even more the subject of rules and corrections. In Vendée, they only train children to take “communion in the hand”; in Valle Stura, by contrast, the two modes of communion (in the mouth and in the hand) are provided for and rehearsed so that the children can choose the technique they prefer.<sup>7</sup> However, even in this case the training in “communion in the hand” is much more explicit and developed. Can it be that communion in the mouth is so natural that it does not have to be learnt? Possibly, in that receiving the host in the mouth does not require the intervention of the communicant's hands. But to judge from the old catechisms, it does not seem that this form of communion is self-evident.

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<sup>7</sup> However, this choice can only be taken after the celebration, because children are required to take communion in the hand on Maundy Thursday, which is the day of First Communion, and communion in the mouth on Easter Day, when they take communion for the second time.

The communicants of former years recall that it was associated with a number of recommendations on the way to manipulate the host inside the body - fasting, not biting the host, not touching it with the fingers, letting it melt on the tongue before swallowing it, and so forth; these rules were related to the expected effect of the sacrament, for not manipulating the host correctly was risking the loss of the Eucharist's benefit. Nowadays, by contrast, there are no special recommendations about ingestion, at any rate at the time of the rehearsal. The priests' and catechists' interventions bear largely on the treatment of the host before its consumption, especially the position of the hands (one above the other, the left one receiving and the right one handling the host); the amplitude of the gestures (stretching the arms and raising the hands so as to avoid the gesture's becoming "stunted", as a number of priests put it); localizing the ingestion (carrying the host to the mouth in front of the priest, and doing so without moving); and finally, the verbal exchange between priest and communicant, where the response must be fitting.

### **How to receive the body of Christ**

Priest: *When you get near me, you should put your left hand over your right hand.* [He shows the gesture standing opposite the children.] *Understood?*

The children imitate him. Noticing no doubt that some of them do it wrong, he resumes his explanation but turning his back so as to be facing the same way as them: *That's the right hand* [he waves his right hand in the air] *I put it there and above it I put my left hand. Do you understand?* The children try again.

When this exercise is finished, the priest takes the box of wafers and asks the first two children to come in front of him. He shows them the host. *I am going to say the body of Christ. What do you reply?* Fingers are raised and some "amen" are heard. *You reply "Amen". I am going to put the host in your hand. When the host is in your hand, you take it with your right hand. There, without moving. You take communion and you go quietly to your place. You should never walk with the host in your hand. One doesn't take communion on the move.* He caricatures a hurried communicant walking with his arms stretched in front of him, his hands holding the host. *No no.* The children laugh. *If I tell you that, it's because I see it on Sundays sometimes. The same with your hands. To start with, you put your left hand on your right hand and stretch out your hands; but afterwards, you know what happens? They practically have their hands on the ground!* He leans forward, his hands on a level with his knees in the position to receive the host. *You are receiving the body of Christ, so raise your hands to receive it.* He stands again and raises his hands in front of him. *And you have all the time you need to take communion.*

*(Rehearsal in St-Vincent, Vendée)*

The left hand receiving the host, the right one carrying it to the mouth - this is recommended everywhere. But the opposite is possible. A Vendean priest, for instance, accepts the alternative position if the children are left-handed. "*There are those who do the opposite. I ask if they are left-handed. If they say no, I say that the other is better*". This suggests that the division right/left obeys only an imperative of skill: the right-handed would be more comfortable with a receiving left hand and a manipulating right hand; for the left-handed, the opposite. Now it frequently happens at the time of the rehearsal that the right-handed spontaneously adopt the position where the left hand takes the host. Which is understandable in that the gesture is not so difficult that it cannot be done by the right-handed with the left hand and by the left-handed with the right hand. In other words, the technical skill that is invoked is not as decisive as it is held out to be. The division of labour between the two hands, as it is presented, treats the position left-receiving and right-manipulating as the normal position, the other being no more than an acceptable variant. "*If one does it the other way, it's not a sin*" says the priest at Demonte.

That it is the right hand which normally carries the host should not surprise us if we remember Hertz's text on the preeminence of the right hand. Hertz notes that in general the right hand is the one which "takes" and acts, while the left, more of an auxiliary, contents itself with "holding". This right/left distinction is also associated with the sacred/profane distinction favoured by the Durkheimians. In this case, the normal division of manual activity is an extension of the attitudes of deference in the positioning.

This polarization of the rules on the use of the hands might lead one to overlook that the prescribed position for receiving is not technically necessary. One can imagine for instance a gesture of receiving in which a single hand instead of two might be held out. Yet if one considers what this gesture suggests, one can understand the rule better: it is an action with fields of contextual meaning that seem incompatible with handling the body of Christ. Taking communion with a single hand recalls the gesture of begging, which seems inappropriate. It also leaves the other hand unemployed, that is to say free to give a parasitic impression just as inappropriate table manners do. Of course, one might think of other gestures that would be more suitable, but the point of these comparisons is that the gesture, once prescribed, is in keeping both with gestures of receiving and with eating manners, but also comes to constitute the act of taking communion itself in all its singularity.

As well as the position of the hands, the amplitude of the gestures also gives rise to many corrections. The aim seems to be to make the gesture of passing the host visible. Martimort insists that ““liturgical" gestures must be made so as to be visible and understood” (1965: 160). Presenting the host before handing it over is underlining the gift, and stretching out the hands to receive it shows its acceptance (these are also expressed in the words exchanged *The body of Christ* and *Amen*). Communion is receiving a gift, not helping oneself that is what the children experiment with during the rehearsal and they learn to enact it for themselves and the other faithful. That is why gestures must not be “stunted”.

Furthermore the priests insist: “*When you take communion, you must not take the host and go and eat it at the back of the Church. You must do it in front of the priest who gives the communion. He is the minister, you must do it in front of him*” (priest, Demonte). Presented in this way, the consumption of the host appears not as a final gesture but as an essential aspect of the act. There is a right place to ingest the host: not a special geographical space (as the holy altar used to be) but rather a specific interactional space which is established between priest and communicant. The children learn to understand both the roles of the respective participants and also the question of the legitimacy of the host's use.

The rules show a hierarchization of the roles of communicant and priest. There is a lay person and a minister, as the priest of Demonte says. The need to take communion while watched by the priest is also the expression of his right to look, that is to say his control of the use of the host by the communicant. Under this inspection, the communicants must show their mastery of the consumption of the host not only in an appropriate but, above all, in a legitimate manner. Even if the rules governing consumption of the host seem to be much less elaborate than formerly, they are still constraining, and the bodily apprenticeship required is no less imperative.

### **What is being learnt?**

Observation of the rules, recommendations and corrections enacted during the rehearsal of the Communion helps us grasp what the children have to acquire by way of knowledge of the Eucharist. Requiring from them a definite bodily procedure is not simply a matter of organizing a ceremony so that it takes place without foreseeable hitches due to the hesitancy or clumsiness of new participants. The exercises in gesture and posture are not just to make them irreproachable

performers; the rehearsal would be a failure from that point of view, for it is insufficient to give children this capability.<sup>8</sup> Acquiring mastery of the postures extends beyond the rehearsal: long practice is needed to assimilate, for instance, the right rhythm for a procession or the right amplitude for the gesture of taking communion; and a certain amount of knowledge is gained from other sources, such as reading about the evangelical liturgy.

What the children learn during the rehearsal is the existence of proprieties and their significance. Rehearsing on the spot, before the real ceremony, is to get the measure by direct experience of what it means to “be a communicant”.

From this point of view, the rehearsal introduces two essentials for children to become proper communicants: first, their recognition of themselves as actors, and secondly, their identification of the evaluations that are being made by the other parties. The children are not merely allocated a particular role but have imposed on them, through correct bodily postures, the expression of an appropriate internal attitude.

The adults' requirements at the time of the rehearsal might suggest that they are not so much encouraging an individual feeling with regard to the Eucharist - a feeling of personal understanding, devotion and respect - so much as the internal attitude called for from the communicant. The priests and catechists do not seek that the children should express, by their conduct, an original feeling with regard to receiving the body of Christ. Their aim is rather that the children's behaviour should manifest the recommended internal disposition. This can be seen clearly when the rules concern attitudes which are not essentially corporal -for instance, when one of the priests shows children what dialogue between the communicant and God, once the Communion is finished, ought to consist of – but this imperative has a wide bearing on all the actions required of the children. If posture expresses an inner state, it is not through any abandon to subjective eucharistic emotion but by means of the construction of a sensibility that is appropriate to the performance.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The priests and catechists know this well, are not shocked by the children's clumsiness, and help them at the celebration to find their bearings. The two catechists who guide the procession of communicants at St-Vincent do this for the celebration itself as well as for the rehearsal.

<sup>9</sup> For similar elements in music, see Mabru, *ibid.*

### **What should be said to Jesus**

Priest: *After the communion, everyone prays. You think of Jesus and not of what is going on round you. You don't look at your parents or friends. And then, the important thing is what one has to say to Jesus when you take him in one's heart. Claudia, what do you say to Jesus?*

Embarrassed silence from Claudia and the others. The mother of one of them breaks in: *One thanks him, at least.*

Priest: *Yes, one must thank him, thank him for being in me; thank him for life; thank him for my parents. The first thing to say is thank-you. All right? What can one say next? Lucas, what will you say to Jesus when you have him within you?*

Lucas replies, but not loudly enough for me to be able to hear what he says from my place. The priest seems to take up his reply: *Yes, thank you for the Communion, for the feast-day, for all these good things and if one of you has a problem with a school-friend, or with your mother, ask a grace from Jesus, for Jesus is the solution, he is peace. You may ask a special grace from Jesus.* (Rehearsal in Demonte, Valle Stura.)

In this task of building up the actor-communicant, the rehearsal is equally important in that it introduces the judgmental gaze of others. This judgment is formalized by the correction of posture, and by also the critical observations and reactions of the priests, catechists and sometimes a few parents. The adults make, for example, gentle fun of an “inelegant” gesture - an elbow too high when the host is consumed, a mouth open too wide or for too long – to underline what could be seen as clumsy. So the children cannot escape these judgments brought to bear on their conduct, and thus the rehearsal invites them to take into account the expectations of spectator-participants, and hence to develop their own self-evaluation, essential to becoming experienced communicants.

The role of the rehearsal in conveying the meaning of the Eucharist is clear from the *mise en scène* of the apprenticeship of the communion. Before beginning the rehearsal of the communion itself, the priests take care to say that the hosts which will be used are not consecrated, and they take good care to show it. Some of them go to find hosts in the sacristy at the time of the run-through and use a box of any kind, rather than a sacred vessel, to hold them; others handle them without any apparent respect. One priest, when he shows them to the children, will let several of them fall in a heap on the altar; another, when he is interrupted during the run-

through, may put the box of hosts negligently on a chair or wedge it under his arm so as to be more at ease.

Thus they point out the difference between the consecrated and non-consecrated host. By means of this performance, the handling of the consecrated host – which is, at the time of the rehearsal, the only experience the children will have had - is revealed in its uniqueness. What these procedures suggest, however, is not that there is an ordinary use of the host - obviously opposed to the ritual usage - but rather that the wafer in itself does not call for any vigilant or attentive use. The ceremonial handling of the host is not the appropriate handling of the wafer, but more the appropriate handling of the body of Christ.

Thus we can grasp that in the handling of “sacred” things, performance effects are not limited to the ceremonial frame as one usually imagines. The attention given to the host when it is ritually consecrated is certainly a regulated procedure, but it only takes its full meaning and effect when it is compared with another performance which seeks to enact the existence of a possible ordinary usage. The treatment of the host at the time of the rehearsal is not merely commonplace, but originates from an intention to make it commonplace. Confronting the children - at least once in their lives, on the eve of their First Communion - with this ordinary constructed usage is allowing them to experience the meaning of the host's ceremonial usage. The rehearsal underlines the properties of consecrated hosts to the extent that it fabricates the insignificance of the object - and thus the vacuity, inconsistency and inefficacy of the communion run-through, compared to the real thing.

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