
Peter McGrail’s scholarly study of the liturgy of first communion marks the first sustained attempt within a British context to examine the historical, theological and performed dimensions of this important Roman Catholic ritual, shrouded in mystery or nostalgic memory for most of his intended readership. McGrail provides a detailed survey of this annual parish-based event at which seven or eight year old children are admitted to the Eucharist for the first time. Within it he cogently explores ‘the various outcomes of the ritual expected by the different parties involved – the clergy, parish schools, active parishioners, and first communicants and their families’ (p. 2). His narrative is structured around the opposition between normative and theological understandings of the ritual within the pre- and post-conciliar (Vatican II) Catholic church, and the popular religiosity and culturally-conditioned expectations of parishioners and participants. In his account, this juxtaposition of ‘official’ religion and ‘folk’ spirituality is a tale of dissonance, tensions and misapprehensions which casts light on the parlous condition of the present-day Catholic community, the instability of local church structures and the general fragility of contemporary parish life.

The book divides neatly into two sections, with the first five chapters outlining the historical developments which preceded the 1910 liturgical reforms and then the theological changes across the twentieth century, particularly in the wake of the Second Vatican Council (1962-5). These opening chapters provide an ambitious background survey of the development of eucharistic theology across two millennia in an attempt to reconstruct from published catechetical texts the ‘true history of the ritual’ (p. 7). In this necessarily cursory but valuable review of the emergence of theological wrangles about the intellectual understandings and emotional maturity needed to receive the Eucharist, McGrail charts the emergence of the ‘age of discretion’ discourses. He identifies this as stemming from the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, which linked the sacrament of confession to annual communion requirements, and the ongoing, gradual developments up to the eve of the 1910 reforms, which definitively settled the issue. His textual examination of little-known educational and catechetical tracts, particularly from the nineteenth century, sheds welcome light on the prescriptive preparations and expectations of communicants which augment the emerging historical explorations of nineteenth-century ‘lived religion’ undertaken by scholars such as...
Mary Heimann, Ann Taves and Carol Engelhardt Herringer. McGrail’s attempt to track the incorporation of Continental first communion practices into English ritual life, such as forms of dress, the renewal of baptismal vows and the incorporation of Marian devotions, also provides a tantalising insight into the intellectual and cultural networks existing between theological elites and migrant communities on the eve of the twentieth century. With a burgeoning of interest in issues surrounding transnationalism and intellectual networks across the disciplines of history, sociology and theology, this is an area of inquiry that warrants further exploration.

From this contextual vantage, McGrail moves to a more substantial body of source material, namely English Catholic press and diocesan archival material, to evaluate the implementation of Pope Pius X’s Eucharistic decree, \textit{Quam Singulari}. Through these reforms, which earned Pius the epithet ‘Pope of the Blessed Sacrament’, the Vatican emphatically adjudicated on long standing theological debates about human development by determining that the onset of the ‘age of reason’ (around seven years of age) allowed for an initial, but adequate, understanding of the importance and consequences of eucharistic reception. In explaining the positive and optimistic assessments of these reforms by clergy and catechists in England, McGrail appropriately links his discussion to the wider social and religious context of the earlier twentieth century. The picture he sketches is of an institutional Roman Catholic Church battling modernism and its domestic incarnation in the work of George Tyrrell (1861-1909), and concerned to reinforce its doctrinal teaching through censorship, the anti-modernism oath and the codification of canon law. At a local Liverpudlian level, swelled by the influx of Irish immigrants but skirting sectarian strife, McGrail attributes clerical enthusiasm for these initiatives, and others such as a renewed emphasis on endogamy, as important mechanisms which inculcated a distinctive religious and cultural identity. Reinforced by the reforms of \textit{Quam Singulari}, the parochial celebration of first communion was another dimension bolstering the construction and celebration of a ‘fortress’ church. Through communion breakfasts, extra-liturgical devotions and the ritual uniform of white dresses and veils, suits and sashes, McGrail argues that generations of Catholic children were immersed into a distinct spiritual and cultural milieu. Moreover, he is concerned to stress that through this celebration of childhood, families and parishes witnessed the performance of this robust self-understanding and renewed their own connections to a vibrant Catholic sub-culture.

This extended historical backdrop is a necessary prelude to the argument that McGrail advances in the second half of his book, which is based on