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in Roman Catholicism

CHRISTOPHER M. O'BRIEN



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Author

Christopher M. O'Brien is Assistant Professor of Sacramental and Liturgical Theology at the Franciscan School of Theology in San Diego, CA. His research, writing, and teaching puts liturgical-sacramental history and theology into conversation with lived experience of Christian worship.

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 [0000-0002-9842-3612](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9842-3612)

Abstract

This article traces the ways that the Roman Catholic Church has negotiated the relationship between children and the Eucharist from the early Church to today. It focuses in particular on the practice of infant communion, which was prevalent in Western Christianity in the first twelve centuries. By the end of the twelfth century, the practice all but ceased in the West, as a combination of practical considerations led to the separation of the sacraments of initiation. In addition to outlining the history of infant communion in the West, the article treats the development of theological explanations for delayed communion that occurred from the twelfth century onwards. It also studies further developments that occurred in the age, practices, and theology around first communion. Finally, the article draws from the theology of Vatican II and several contemporary theological approaches to argue for a restoration of the practice of fully initiating infants in Roman Catholicism, including eucharistic communion.

Keywords

Children | Eucharist | Infant Communion | Sacraments of Initiation |
Age of Discretion | Roman Catholic Church

Children and the Eucharist in Roman Catholicism¹

CHRISTOPHER M. O'BRIEN

Over the course of its history, the Roman Catholic Church has negotiated the relationship between children and the sacraments, and particularly between children and the Eucharist, in a variety of ways.² In order to provide coherent theologically and historically-based recommendations for how best to continue negotiating this complicated relationship today, it is necessary to critically and comprehensively reexamine the history and theology that has up to this point guided this negotiation. This article gives particular attention to the practice of infant communion by situating the practice within its historical and theological contexts, and by drawing from liturgical, sacramental, and ecclesiological arguments to advocate for a return to infant communion in Roman Catholicism today.

¹ Thanks to Michael Witczak, Stefanos Alexopoulos, and especially Dominic Serra for their many suggestions and insights during the research process. Thanks also to the members of the North American Academy of Liturgy's Christian Initiation seminar who read and offered feedback on an earlier draft of this article.

² This article introduces and summarizes the trends and arguments of a forthcoming book that comprehensively studies the relationship between children and the Eucharist in Roman Catholicism from historical, theological, and ritual perspectives: Christopher M. O'BRIEN, *Infant Communion in Roman Catholicism. A Historical Liturgical Theology* [forthcoming from Liturgical Press Academic, Collegeville 2026].

Children and the Eucharist in Early Christianity

Infant Initiation and Sacramental Participation

In the first two centuries, there is no indisputable evidence on whether young children were baptized or communed. The classic debate on whether infants were baptized in the first two centuries took place between Joachim Jeremias and Kurt Aland, with Jeremias arguing that infants were indeed baptized, and Aland arguing the contrary.³ The first indisputable witness to the practice of infant baptism is Tertullian of Carthage, writing around the year 200, who discourages the practice due to practical reasons, but does not question its validity.⁴ Origen of Alexandria says that “the Church has received the tradition from the apostles to give baptism even to little children”⁵. Cyprian of Carthage, writing around the year 250, demonstrates that infant initiation, including both baptism and communion, has been widely adopted in North Africa, despite Tertullian’s advice against the practice.⁶ The *Apostolic Tradition*, even by its most critical interpreters, is considered to evidence third century initiation practices which include the baptism, chrismation, and communion of infants.⁷ In the fourth and fifth centuries, though a movement to delay bap-

³ See Joachim JEREMIAS, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries* [trans. by David CAIRNS] (The Library of History and Doctrine), Philadelphia 1962; Kurt ALAND, *Did the Early Church Baptize Infants?* [trans. by George R. BEASLEY-MURRAY] (The Library of History and Doctrine), Philadelphia 1963, and Joachim JEREMIAS, *The Origins of Infant Baptism. A Further Study in Reply to Kurt Aland* [trans. by Dorothea M. BARTON], London 1963.

⁴ See TERTULLIAN, *Bapt.* 18,4–6 (SChr 35, 92 f.; REFOULÉ – DROUZY). For an English translation, see Edward C. WHITAKER (ed.), *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy*, revised and expanded by Maxwell E. JOHNSON, Collegeville 2003, 8–11.

⁵ ORIGEN, *Rom.* 5,9 (VL 33, 440; HAMMOND Bammel). English in *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, Books 1–5* [trans. by Thomas P. SCHECK], Washington, DC 2001, 369.

⁶ See CYPRIAN OF CARTHAGE, *Lap.* 9. 25 (CCSL 3, 225. 234 f.; BÉVENOT). English in ST. CYPRIAN, *The Lapsed. The Unity of the Catholic Church* [trans. by Maurice BÉVENOT] (ACW 25), Westminster/MD 1957.

⁷ Cf. Paul F. BRADSHAW, *Apostolic Tradition. A New Commentary*, Collegeville 2023, 68 f.; Maxwell JOHNSON, *The Apostolic Tradition*, in: *The Oxford His-*

tism takes place, infant initiation is still practiced, and is even championed by Augustine, including explicit support of infant communion based on the words of John 6, which indicate that eating Christ's flesh and drinking his blood are necessary for salvation for all, including infants. In Augustine's words, "even for the life of *infants* was His flesh given, which He gave for the life of the world; and [...] even they will not have life if they eat not the flesh of the Son of man"⁸. In Rome, the letter of John the Deacon to Senarius and the letters of Innocent I give further explicit evidence for the full initiation of infants, including eucharistic communion, a practice which persists in the Roman Rite until well into the Middle Ages.⁹ After describing an initiatory process in which catechumens are scrutinized, exorcized, catechized, baptized, anointed with sacred chrism, and communed with the body and blood of the Lord, as well as with milk and honey, John writes: "Not to overlook anything, I must clearly state that all this is also done for the young who, due to their tender age, understand nothing of what is happening."¹⁰ Ubiquitous throughout the patristic evidence is the celebration of baptism, chrismation, and Eucharist in one integrated rite of sacramental initiation. As Robert Taft observes, "[t]he universal primitive tradition of both East and West viewed the liturgical completion of Christian Initiation as one integral rite comprising three moments of baptism, chrismation, and eucharist, and without all three the process is

tory of Christian Worship, ed. by Geoffrey WAINWRIGHT – Karen B. Westfield TUCKER, Oxford 2006, 81–161, here: 99, Paul F. BRADSHAW et al., *The Apostolic Tradition. A Commentary*, ed. by Harold W. ATTRIDGE (Hermeneia. A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible), Minneapolis 2002, 129–130, and Nathan P. CHASE – Maxwell E. JOHNSON, *The Apostolic Tradition. Its Origins, Development, and Liturgical Practices*, Collegeville 2025, 205.

⁸ AUGUSTINE, Pecc. 27 (CSEL 60, 26 f.; URBA – ZYCHA). English in NPNF 5, 25.

⁹ See JOHN THE DEACON, Sen. 12 (StT 59, 173–177; WILMART). English in Lawrence J. JOHNSON (ed.), *Worship in the Early Church*, vol. 4, Collegeville 2009, 40–43. See also INNOCENT I, Dec. 3, in: Martin F. CONNELL, *Church and Worship in Fifth-Century Rome. The Letter of Innocent I to Decentius of Gubbio* (JLS 52), Cambridge 2002, 28; and INNOCENT I, *Doctrinal Letter to the Fathers of the Synod of Milevis* (PL 29, 592).

¹⁰ JOHN THE DEACON, Sen. 12 (StT 59, 175; WILMART; JOHNSON 41).

incomplete”¹¹, and further: “History is unmistakably clear in this matter: every candidate, child or adult, was baptized, confirmed, and given communion as part of a single initiation rite. This is the universal Catholic tradition.”¹²

In addition to showing that young children received the sacraments of initiation, these patristic sources demonstrate that children were understood as being capable of liturgical participation on a sort of sliding scale. Gregory of Nazianzus speaks about children having some level of participation at age three,¹³ nowhere is lack of “reason” understood as negating the possibility of liturgical participation, and even infants are understood to have faith by authors such as Augustine.¹⁴

Infancy, Birth, and Motherhood Imagery in Early Initiation Rites

In addition to sacramental participation in the Eucharist by young children, imagery of infancy, birth, and motherhood was frequently used in early theological descriptions of Christian initiation for all initiands by authors such as Clement of Alexandria, Narsai, Zeno of Verona, and Augustine. To give one example, Zeno of Verona, in an invitation to the font, uses such imagery to describe baptism and Eucharist together in an integrated metaphor. He says,

Through your faith the life-giving water has conceived you, through the mysteries now it gives birth to you. [...] behold soon the sweet crying of infants is heard; behold from the single womb of their parent proceeds a dazzling throng [...]. Run freely to your mother who has no labour if she gives

¹¹ Robert TAFT, *On the Question of Infant Communion in the Byzantine Catholic Church of the USA*, in: *Diakonia* 17 (1982) 201–214, here: 206 f.

¹² *Ibid.*, 208.

¹³ GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS, Or. 40 *On Baptism* (SChr 358, 262–264; MORESCHINI). English translation in John BEHR (ed.), *St. Gregory of Nazianzus, Festal Orations* [trans. by Nonna Verna HARRISON] (SVPPS 36), Crestwood/NY 2008, 99–142, here: 123 f.

¹⁴ See AUGUSTINE, Ep. 98,9–10 (CSEL 34, 530–532; GOLDBACHER). English in SAINT AUGUSTINE, *Letters*, vol. 2 (83–130) [trans. by Wilfrid PARSONS] (*The Fathers of the Church* 18), ed. by Roy J. DEFERRARI, Washington, DC 1953 [reprint 2008], 138.

birth to more than she can number. Come in, then, come in, all of you happy ones, in a moment to be babes at the breast together.¹⁵

Such imagery does not contribute directly to the proof that infants were fully initiated, but it does demonstrate that infancy was seen as paradigmatic of the stance taken by all subjects of initiation. The sacraments of initiation, today described in the Roman Rite as the distinct sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist, were understood in the early Church to be integrated and complementary contributors to the making of a new Christian. This was true for infants as well as for adults.

Children and the Eucharist in the Medieval West

Infant Initiation

In the early Middle Ages, the sacraments of initiation continued to be celebrated as integrated parts of a cohesive initiatory ritual framework in the Roman Rite. Abundant evidence exists for the eucharistic participation of infants in Rome and elsewhere in Western Christianity through the twelfth century, and in some cases later. The rites of initiation in the *Gelasian Sacramentary* and in *Ordo Romanus XI* demonstrate that many of those being initiated in Rome in the sixth through eighth centuries – including catechumenal rites, baptism, chrismation, and communion – were infants. For instance, the first unmistakable sign that the Latin word *infantes* is used in these rites to refer to literal infants occurs when an acolyte is instructed to begin the delivery of the creed during the catechumenate by taking up the first infant boy and holding him in his left arm as he pronounces the creed.¹⁶ With regard to eucharistic communion, a rubric in *Ordo Romanus XI* states that “Care is to be taken lest after they have been

¹⁵ ZENO OF VERONA, Serm. 2, 28 (CCSL 22, 202; LÖFSTEDT). English in Gordon JEANES, *The Day Has Come! Easter and Baptism in Zeno of Verona* (ACC 73), Collegeville 1995, 97.

¹⁶ Cf. GeV 311: “Post haec accipiens acolytus unum ex ipsis infantibus masculum, tenens eum in sinistro brachio, ponens manum super caput eius” (RED.F 4, 48; MOHLBERG).

baptized they receive any food or suckling before they communicate.”¹⁷ Evidently, not even newly baptized infants were exempt from fasting before communion. By the twelfth century, a pontifical modifies this rubric to allow breastfeeding if necessity requires it: “For the little ones, care is to be taken lest after they have been baptized they receive any food or suckling before they communicate of the sacrament of the body of Christ, *unless it is absolutely necessary*.”¹⁸ While the practice of communing infants on the occasion of their baptism continued, the requirement that they fast between baptism and Eucharist had relaxed by the twelfth century. The same twelfth century pontifical makes it clear that the rites of Christian initiation maintained their basic shape through the twelfth century, at least officially, and that they continued to include young children. A rubric describes precisely how infants were to be communicated: “Children who do not yet know how to eat or drink are also communicated, either with a leaf or by a finger dipped in the blood of the Lord and placed in their mouth.”¹⁹ The euchology associated with baptism, chrismation, and first communion indicate that all three were considered to contribute to salvation in a complementary way.

An order for emergency baptism, found in both the *Gelasian Sacramentary* and the *Hadrianum*, indicates that in the absence of a bishop, infants were both baptized and communed, while confirmation was postponed until a bishop could be present.²⁰ The *Twelfth Century Pontifical* confirms that this practice continued into the twelfth century. A rubric states that if a bishop is present, the one baptized should be confirmed with chrism and communed, but that if no bishop is present, the newly baptized should still be communicated by a presbyter.²¹

¹⁷ OR 11, 103: “nam hoc praevidendum est ne, postquam baptizati fuerint, ullum cibum accipiant neque ablactentur antequam communicent” (SSL 23, 446; ANDRIEU). English in WHITAKER, Documents, 251.

¹⁸ PR XII 32, 37 (StT 86, 248; ANDRIEU).

¹⁹ Ibid., 32, 29 (StT 86, 246; ANDRIEU).

²⁰ See GeV 602–616 and GrH 981–984 (SpicFri 16, 335 f.; DESHUSSES).

²¹ PR XII 32, 29: “Tunc si episcopus adest, statim oportet eum confirmari chrismate et communicari secundum consuetudinem quarumdam ecclesiarum. Si vero abest, communicetur a presbitero” (StT 86, 246; ANDRIEU).

Infancy, Birth, and Motherhood Imagery in Medieval Initiation Rites

In addition to continuing to initiate infants into the Church through the sacraments of baptism, chrismation (episcopal chrismation is eventually called “confirmation”), and Eucharist, the medieval rites retained the patristic imagery of infancy and birth to describe theologically what occurred at initiation. For instance, an excerpt from the Gelasian consecration of the baptismal font reads,

Let your Holy Spirit by the secret admixture of his light give fruitfulness (*fecundet*) to this water prepared for human regeneration (*regenerandis hominibus*), so that, sanctification being conceived (*concepta*) therein, there may come forth from the unspotted womb of the divine font (*ab immaculato divini fontis utero*) a heavenly offspring (*progenies caelestis*), reborn (*renatum*) unto a new creature: that grace may be a mother (*mater*) to people of every age and sex, who are brought forth into a common infancy (*infantia*) [...]. May the fount be alive, the water regenerating (*regenerans*), the wave purifying, so that all who shall be washed in this saving laver by the operation of the Holy Spirit within them may be brought to the mercy of perfect cleansing.²²

The first of two Gelasian prefaces to the Eucharistic Prayer at the Easter Vigil Mass goes beyond using birth imagery to describe baptism, also applying it to the Eucharist:

Just as Mary has rejoiced in the birth of her most holy son, the Church rejoices at the sight of the generation of her sons and daughters. Thus that blessed font that poured out from the side of the Lord carried away the heavy burdens of our sins so at these sacred altars the eternal life of those re-born might convey life-giving food.²³

²² GeV 445–448 (RED.F 4, 72–74; MOHLBERG). English in WHITAKER, Documents, 233 f.

²³ Ibid., 457: “Exultavit Maria in sacratissimam puerperi, exultat ecclesia in filiorum suorum generationis speciem. Sic fons ille beatus qui dominico latere circumfulxit, molis exceptit uiciorum, ut his sacris altaribus uitales escas perpetua uita conferat renatorum” (RED.F 4, 75; MOHLBERG). English adapted from WHITAKER, Documents, 236 f.

Here in the Eucharistic Prayer itself, the imagery of baptism as new birth carries forward into the sacrament of the altar. In baptism, neophytes are regenerated in a new spiritual birth, and in the Eucharist, newly baptized Christians are nourished with the “living food” of Christ himself. Similar euchology continues to be present in the twelfth century pontifical.²⁴

Separation of the Sacraments of Initiation

Beginning in the twelfth century, the sacraments of initiation in Western Christianity experienced what John D. C. Fisher calls a “disintegration”²⁵. Fisher breaks this process of separation, or “disintegration”, into several steps, and particularly emphasizes, as do other scholars such as Maxwell Johnson, Robert Taft, and Dominic Serra, that the separation of the sacraments of initiation in the Western Church happened due to practical reasons, rather than theological ones; theological justification for the separation came only after the fact.²⁶ The first step occurred when confirmation gradually separated from baptism and first communion due to growing distances between the bishop and parishes in his dioceses and due to “emergency” baptisms becoming the far more common baptismal practice. In the East, priests chrismated all infants they baptized. In the Roman Rite, however, priests administered a first anointing with chrism, but a second anointing, which by this point was called “confirmation”, was reserved for the bishop. The *Pontifical of the Roman Curia of the Thirteenth Century* and the thirteenth century *Pontifical of William Durandus* give evidence of the separation of confirmation from baptism from the episcopal perspective. *PRC XIII* includes a standalone “Ordo ad consignandos pueros sive infantes” (Order for consigning, or confirming, children or infants), which describes the episcopal confirmation of infants and young children who

²⁴ See, for instance, PR XII 32, 22 (StT 86, 243 f.; ANDRIEU).

²⁵ See John D. C. FISHER, *Christian Initiation. Baptism in the Medieval West* (ACC 47), London 1965 [Reprint: Chicago 2004].

²⁶ Cf. Maxwell E. JOHNSON, *The Rites of Christian Initiation. Their Evolution and Interpretation*, Collegeville 2007, 244-259; TAFT, *On the Question of Infant Communion*, 208-210; and Dominic SERRA, *Baptism and Confirmation. Distinct Sacraments, One Liturgy*, in: *Liturgical Ministry* 9 (2000) 63–71.

had been baptized on a previous occasion by a presbyter.²⁷ The *Pontifical of William Durandus* includes a more fully developed standalone confirmation rite which includes a rationale for why confirmation is reserved for bishops.²⁸

The second step of separation occurred as communion became separated from baptism. A growing emphasis on Christ's presence in the Eucharistic species led to increased fear of desecrating Christ's sacramental body and blood by dropping or spilling it on the ground. Compounded by a loss of the patristic concept of Eucharistic ecclesiology and increasingly earlier baptisms due to fear of infant mortality, this increased scrupulosity led to communion being administered to infants under the species of wine only. This practice is attested to by a number of twelfth century sources. These sources often reference Christ's statement in John 6 that eating Christ's body and drinking his blood are necessary for eternal life, as well as the developing doctrine of concomitance, that Christ is fully present in either one of the Eucharistic species. In 1118, Pope Paschal II wrote in a letter to Cluny, "We know that bread by itself and wine by itself were given by the Lord. That this custom should thus always be maintained in the holy Church we teach and enjoin, except in the case of infants and sick persons who cannot swallow bread."²⁹ In 1121, the scholastic theologian William of Champeaux wrote,

For Christ is not received in parts or little by little, but as a whole, whether in both species or in one of them... To little children just baptized only the chalice is given, because they cannot assimilate bread, and in the chalice they receive Christ entire. But the chalice must be given to them, because, as it is impossible for anybody to enter into life without baptism, so it is impossible without this life-giving *viaticum*.³⁰

²⁷ Cf. PRC 34 (StT 87, 452; ANDRIEU).

²⁸ Cf. PGD 1, 1 (StT 88, 333–335; ANDRIEU).

²⁹ PASCHAL II, Ep. 85 ad Pontium: "Novimus enim per se panem, per se vinum ab ipso Domino traditum. Quem morem sic semper in sancta Ecclesia conservandum docemus atque praecipimus, praeter in parvulis ac omnino infirmis, qui panem absorbere non possunt" (PL 163, 442). English in FISHER, *Baptism in the Medieval West*, 115.

³⁰ WILLIAM OF CHAMPEAUX, *De Sacramento Altaris*: "Non enim accipitur Christus membratim vel paulatim, sed totus vel in utraque specie, vel in altera [...]"

Radulphus Ardens, the School of Anselm of Laon, Robert Pulleyn, and Bernarde, bishop of Saintes, give similar testimony.³¹ Soon, however, the fear of desecrating the eucharistic elements led to the withholding of the chalice from everyone except the celebrating priest, which left infants with no remaining opportunities to communicate.³² Evidence for infant communion can be found up until the early seventeenth century in Eastern Europe, but in Western Europe, the practice all but died out by the thirteenth century.

Age of Discretion

As the practice of delaying first communion and confirmation became the norm due to the practical reasons described above, scholastic theologians defended the delay theologically by developing the rationale of the “age of discretion”, which became tied to communion and confession, and later, confirmation. Numerous authoritative documents in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries suggested that the appropriate age at which to commune children was the “age of discretion”, but these sources ranged from age seven to age fourteen in their definition of this age.³³ Lateran IV, in 1215, without defining the “age of discretion”, mandated that those who

Unde et infantulis mox baptizatis solus calix datur, quia pane uti non possunt, et in calice totum Christum accipiunt. Dandus autem est calix eis, quia, sicut non potest ad vitam quis ingredi sine baptismo, ita nec sine hoc vitali viatico” (PL 163, 1039). My translation added to the translation in FISHER, *Baptism in the Medieval West*, 115.

³¹ Cf. RADULPHUS ARDENS, *Hom. 51 in die sancto Paschae* (PL 155, 1850D); Odon LOTTIN, *Nouveaux fragments théologiques de l'école d'Anselme de Laon*, in: *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale* 11 (1939) 305–323, here: 319; ROBERTO PAULULO, *De off. ecc. 1, 20* (PL 177, 392); Jean-Charles DIDIER, *Le baptême des enfants. Dans la tradition de l'Église* (MCS 7), Tournai 1959, 155, and FISHER, *Baptism in the Medieval West*, 115 f.

³² For a historical and theological treatment of the chalice, see Christopher M. O'BRIEN, *Chalice of Salvation. Historical, Symbolic, and Phenomenological Reflections on Communion with the Blood of Christ*, in: *Religions* 17 (2026) 1–29 (n. 471), special issue: *The Eucharist as the Bread of Life. Phenomenological and Existential Explorations*, ed. by James SWINDAL.

³³ See, for instance, *STATUTA SYNODALIA* 5,44 (MANSI 24, 899); *COUNCIL OF BAYEUX*, c. 16 (MANSI 25, 63); *COUNCIL OF COLOGNE*, c. 5 (MANSI 24,349);

had reached this age go to confession at least once per year and receive communion at least once during the Easter season, barring a serious reason not to.³⁴ Though it did not deny that children younger than the age of discretion could receive communion, it did not mandate that they receive.

Thomas Aquinas

Thomas Aquinas's treatment of the sacraments reflects the sacramental practices of his historical context, including both infant confirmation and delayed Eucharistic communion. In his view, confirmation "should be given to all" who are baptized, including infants.³⁵ In reply to an objection that children ought not to receive the sacrament of confirmation, he replies by saying, "the vicissitudes of bodily age do not affect the soul. Thus a man even in the years of childhood can attain spiritual maturity"³⁶. In his discussion of the Eucharist, it is notable that Thomas treats the Eucharist after confirmation. It is clear that Thomas understands the Eucharist to be the culmination of initiation. He writes, "the thing signified is the unity of the mystical body of Christ which is an absolute requisite for salvation"³⁷. For Thomas, the *res tantum* of the Eucharist is the unity of the Church. With regard to children, Thomas does not say that young children should not receive the Eucharist, nor that it is necessary to reach a particular age to receive the Eucharist. He only says that children must have some use of reason (*aliqualem usum rationis*) - enough to manifest some level of devotion (*devotionem*). Thomas is writing in a period in which children already do not typically receive the Eucharist until the age of discretion and is attempting to provide theological rationale for the practice he is familiar with. Rather than reversing the thought of previous theologians

COUNCIL OF CONSTANCE, c. 7 (MANSI 25,31); and FISHER, *Baptism in the Medieval West*, 118.

³⁴ FOURTH LATERAN COUNCIL, can. 21, in: Norman TANNER (ed.), *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 1, Washington, D.C. 1990, 245.

³⁵ THOMAS AQUINAS, STh III, q. 72, a. 8.

³⁶ STh III, q. 72, a. 10: "ideo ille qui ad hoc sacramentum accedit sustentatur, quasi adhuc spiritualiter imbecillis et puer".

³⁷ STh III, q. 73, a. 3: "res sacramenti est unitas corporis mystici; sine qua non potest ess salus".

by saying the Eucharist is not necessary for salvation, he continues to hold that it is necessary, but adds the caveat that all who are baptized participate in and receive the reality (*res*) of the Eucharist by participating in and sharing the Eucharistic desire of the Church, which they are incorporated into through baptism. Thomas quotes Augustine as saying, “When one is made a member of Christ’s body in baptism, it is then that each one of the faithful becomes a partaker of the body and blood of the Lord”, but Thomas adds the words, “that is, spiritually”³⁸. Interestingly, Thomas attributes the Eastern practice of infant communion to be a misinterpretation of Dionysius, and demonstrates no awareness of the long history of infant communion in Western Christianity.³⁹

Children and the Eucharist in the Reformation Era

Reformation Practices and Critiques

In the Reformation era, Anabaptists abrogated infant baptism, the Utraquists restored infant communion, and a variety of other perspectives developed regarding the appropriate ages for the sacraments of initiation, including first communion. Though reformers such as Martin Luther and John Calvin did not restore the practice of infant communion, they criticized Roman Catholic Eucharistic theology and practice for its overemphasis on Christ’s presence in the consecrated elements of bread and wine and its lack of emphasis on the communal-ecclesial nature of the sacrament. Luther for instance, writes: “At present, we see with sorrow that many Masses are held and yet the Christian fellowship that should be preached, practiced and kept before us by Christ’s example has virtually perished. So much that we hardly know any more what purpose this sacra-

³⁸ STh III, q. 80, a. 9: “Sicut Augustinus scribit Bonifacio, tunc unusquisque fidelium corporis et sanguinis Domini particeps fit, *scilicet spiritualiter*, quando in baptisate membrum corporis Christi efficitur.” The words in Roman typeface are Augustine’s, while the words in italics are Thomas’s additions.

³⁹ Cf. STh III, q. 80, a. 9. Cf. PS.-DIONYSIUS AREOPAGITE, *On the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*. The Thirteenth-Century Paris Textbook Edition (Dallas Medieval Texts and Translations 12). Introduction, translation, and notes by L. Michael HARRINGTON, Paris 2011, 266 f.

ment serves or how it should be used."⁴⁰ He adds, "they pay more attention in this sacrament to Christ's natural body than to the fellowship, the spiritual body"⁴¹.

Utraquism and Infant Communion

The Utraquists in the Czech lands, spiritual descendants of John Hus named for their practice of administering the Eucharist under both species (*sub utraque specie*), were also known to commune small children. Jakoubek of Stribro succeeded Hus in advocating for the restoration of the chalice to the laity, and also advocated strongly for the communion of infants, especially in his works *De communione spirituali et sacramentali integra sub duplici forma panis et vina* (1416) and *De Communionem parvulorum* (1419).⁴² The Utraquist Synod of 1418 affirmed the practice of infant communion in its first of twenty one articles, and described how it was to occur: "The priest is instructed first to place a crumb of bread into the mouth of the infant then to hold the child's mouth shut (so that the bread would be swallowed). Then the priest was to take a drop of wine from the chalice on his finger and place it in the infant's mouth."⁴³ David HOLETON

⁴⁰ Martin LUTHER, Ein Sermon von dem Hochwirdigen Sacrament des Heyligen Waren Leychnams Christi Und von den Bruderschafften, 12, in: WA 2, 742–758, here: 747. English translation from: *The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ, and the Brotherhoods* [1519], transl. and introd. by Dirk G. LANGE, in: *The Roots of Reform*, ed. by Timothy J. WENGERT (*The Annotated Luther 1*), Minneapolis 2015, 225–255, here: 239.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 20 (WA 2, 752/*The Annotated Luther 1*, 246; LANGE).

⁴² Cf. JAKOUBEK OF STRIBRO, *De comunione spirituali et sacramentali integra sub duplici forma panis et vini* (1416) and *De communione parvulorum* (1419), in: Bohumil RYBA (ed.), *Betlemské texty*, Prague 1951, 106–139, 141–183.

⁴³ Quoted in David R. HOLETON, *The Communion of Infants and Hussitism*, in: *Communio Viatorum* 27/4 (1984) 207–225, here: 222, n. 39. See *Articuli XXIII a magistris cleroque Pragensi contra pullulantia Taboritarum sectae dogmata publicati*, Prague 1418, c. 28, in Franciscus PALACKY (ed.), *Documenta Mag. Joannis Hus, Osnabrück 1869* [reprint: 1966], 678: "Primo quod parvuli post baptismum sunt corpore et sanguine domini discrete communicandi: primum considerato, si parvulus sit dispositus ad capiendam, scil. si potest et si jam non vomit, alias secum communicatio est expectanda.

describes the Jena Codex, a late fifteenth century Utraquist manuscript that includes polemical illuminations depicting celebration of the sacraments and the Roman crusades against the Utraquists:

In the illumination of the eucharist, which portrays the moment of communion, it is two infants held in their mothers' arms who are depicted in the act of communicating, with one receiving the host and the other the chalice. In the battle, it is the infants who constitute three of the four visible victims. One is being trodden underfoot by the horse of a Catholic crusader while another infant is shown impaled on the lance of a Catholic soldier, while on the lance of a third soldier is the head of another infant... Infants in the early Church (and, by imputation, the Utraquist church whose eucharistic practices were based on what they knew to be the primitive pattern) are welcomed and fed with the bread of heaven and the cup of salvation. In the 'modern' (i.e., contemporary Roman) Church, however, infants are the first victims of a war waged to suppress the practice of communion under both kinds (*sub utraque specie* – hence Utraquist) and the communion of all the baptized.⁴⁴

In the Utraquist community, the fallout from the removal of the chalice from the laity had been reversed. The cessation of lay communion from the chalice had led to an end of the practice of infant communion, and in the Utraquist context, these practices were restored together. These dual Utraquist concerns would eventually be addressed at the Council of Trent.

The Council of Trent on Infant Communion

Because of the joint Utraquist concerns, the Council of Trent's treatment of the question of infant communion occurred alongside treatment of the question of communion under both species. These two questions were first addressed at Trent in Session XIII, held in October of 1551, where they

Quodsi est habilis, tunc minima petia primi sacramenti est ei in os ponenda, et concluso ore ejus ad modicum, post hoc una stilla sanguinis Christi, capta super digito de patena det delata super patenam, est ori ejus semel vel bis immittenda.”

⁴⁴ David R. HOLETON, *Welcome Children, Welcome Me*, in: *ATHR* 82/1 (2000) 93–111, here: 93 f. For the Jena codex, see *Prague, MS KNM IV, B 24*. [↗](#)

were discussed in depth by the theologians present.⁴⁵ Decrees were not published on these questions, however, until Session XXI, in July of 1562. The Council, following Lateran IV, avoided explicitly forbidding infant communion, but affirmed that receiving communion and the sacrament of penance at least once per year was required for the salvation of those who had reached the “age of discretion”, which continued to be interpreted as somewhere between age seven and age twelve. Canon IV of Session XXI anathematizes anyone who states “that Eucharistic communion is necessary for children before they reach the age of discretion”⁴⁶. The pronouncement that Eucharistic communion is not necessary for salvation for those below the age of discretion went a step beyond Lateran IV and Thomas Aquinas. Theologians from Augustine through the twelfth century had argued, based on John 6, that eating Christ’s flesh and drinking his blood were necessary for salvation for all Christians, including infants. Thomas, writing in the thirteenth century, had held onto this idea theologically, but had argued that the reality (the *res*) of Eucharistic communion was attained in baptism through participation in the faith of the Church and that, therefore, actual sacramental reception was not necessary for infants. Trent went a step further by simply stating that Eucharistic communion was not necessary for salvation for those below the age of discretion. Even so, Trent does not suggest that children below this age cannot, or should not, receive the Eucharist, despite suggestions by some present at the council that it do so. Chapter IV of Session XXI goes into slightly more detail regarding the rationale behind canon 4, stating:

Children without the use of reason are not bound by any obligation to sacramental holy communion, seeing that after rebirth by the water of baptism and incorporation in Christ they are not at that age able to lose the grace they have received of being children of God. Nor are times past to be condemned if they sometimes observed that custom in some places. For

⁴⁵ For an in-depth treatment of the discussions at Trent on this question, see Christopher M. O'BRIEN, *Children and the Eucharist at the Council of Trent*, in: TS 83/3 (2022) 379–399.

⁴⁶ COUNCIL OF TRENT, Session 21, Teaching on communion under both kinds and of children (16 July 1562), can. 4. English translation adapted from TANNER, *Decrees II*, 727: “Si quis dixerit, parvulis, antequam ad annos discretionis pervenerint, necessariam esse eucharistiae communionem, a.s.”

those holy fathers had good reason for their practice in the situation of their time, and we must certainly believe without dispute that they did not do this for any necessity of salvation.⁴⁷

The Council's approach to this question, like its approach to all the sacraments, came primarily from a lens of what, at minimum, is necessary for salvation. Attention to the ecclesiological aspects of the sacraments, as well as their role in spiritual growth, was lacking.

Children and the Eucharist in Modern and Contemporary Catholicism

First Communion Ritual

In sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe, beginning in France, a transition occurred from a "personal" model of first communion, in which discernment about when a child was ready to receive was conducted on an individual basis, to a communal model, in which a group of children received first communion together at the same ceremony. This ceremony developed additional ritual aspects, including an extended catechetical period, a public or private request of forgiveness from one's parents, a reception of the parents' blessing, the first communion Mass, a procession with lit candles, a renewal of baptismal vows, a consecration to Mary at a Vespers service, and white communion dresses and veils worn by girls.⁴⁸ Peter McGrail notes that positively, first communion was "no longer simply an intensely personal and essentially private moment, linked to an in-

⁴⁷ COUNCIL OF TRENT, Session 21, Teaching on communion under both kinds and of children, chap. 4: "Parvulos usu rationis carentes nulla obligari necessitate ad sacramentalem eucharistiae communionem, si quidem per baptismi lavacrum regenerati et Christo incorporati adeptam iam filiorum Dei gratiam in illa aetate amittere non possunt. Neque ideo tamen damnanda est antiquitas, si eum morem in quibusdam locis aliquando servavit. Ut enim sanctissimi illi patres sui facti probabilem causam pro illius temporis ratione habuerunt, ita certe, eos nulla salutis necessitate id fecisse, sine controversia credendum est." English translation adapted from TANNER, Decrees 2, 727.


⁴⁸ See Peter MCGRAIL, *First Communion. Ritual, Church and Popular Religious Identity*, Burlington/VT 2007, 13. 31–34.

dividual child's human development; instead, it could become a highly visible spectacle of faith and devotion for the parish community as a whole"⁴⁹. Negatively, however, the ritual consolidation of first communion into a communal ceremony cemented the practice of delayed communion, a practice that would have been considered theologically problematic in the first twelve centuries, into Roman Catholic culture and practice. First communion typically occurred after confirmation, and was delayed in some locations until age 12, 14, or even later.

Quam Singulari

In 1910, Pius X issued *Quam singulari*, in which he defined the "age of discretion" as approximately seven, and stipulated that the obligations to go to confession once per year and to receive eucharistic communion at least once per year during the Easter season begin at this age: "The age of discretion, both for Confession and for Holy Communion, is the time when a child begins to reason, that is about the seventh year, more or less. From that time on begins the obligation of fulfilling the precept of both Confession and Communion."⁵⁰ Pius X decried the practice, which he saw as a grave abuse, of delaying communion until age twelve or fourteen. *Quam singulari* includes a remarkable, and largely accurate, summary of infant communion in Roman Catholicism, including interpreting the Council of Trent, correctly, as "in no way condemning the ancient practice of administering the Eucharist to children before they had attained the use of reason"⁵¹. Importantly, like Lateran IV, *Quam singulari*'s primary goal was to *increase*, rather than limit, access to and participation in the sacraments. It harshly condemns practices that deprive access to the Eucharist due to an excessive rigorism. In addition to defining, in an intentionally imprecise way, the "age of reason", *Quam singulari* states that "A full and per-

⁴⁹ Ibid., 12.

⁵⁰ SACRA CONGREGATIO DE SACRAMENTIS, Decretum de Aetate Admittendorum ad Primam Communionem Eucharisticam *Quam singulari*, in: AAS 2 (1910) 577–583, here: 582. English translations from papalencyclicals.net  unless stated otherwise.

⁵¹ Ibid. (AAS 2, 578).

fect knowledge of Christian doctrine is not necessary either for First Confession or for First Communion”, and further, that

The knowledge of religion which is required in a child in order to be properly prepared to receive First Communion is such that he or she will understand according to his or her capacity those Mysteries of faith which are necessary as a means of salvation and that he or she can distinguish between the Bread of the Eucharist and ordinary, material bread, and thus he or she may receive Holy Communion with a devotion becoming his or her years.⁵²

The phrases “according to his or her capacity” and “becoming his or her years” are important, and make it clear that *Quam singulari* acknowledges the gradual nature by which children grow in their ability to reason and understand, and admits that a child (or any person for that matter) who receives first communion will not yet fully understand intellectually what he or she is doing. The baseline requirement given for first communion, in descriptive terms, is that children can distinguish Eucharistic bread from ordinary bread. Unsurprisingly, no mention is made of the chalice, as the prevalent practice in 1910 was lay communion under the species of bread only. In addition, due to the medieval and Tridentine sources it draws from, *Quam singulari* discusses the Eucharist primarily in relation to the ability to reason and thus sin. Had it drawn more liberally from sources in the first twelve centuries, it might have reflected more clearly the ecclesial nature of the Eucharist and its nature as the culminating sacrament of Christian initiation. Much of *Quam singulari*’s argumentation could be interpreted towards reinstating infant communion, but it does not go that far. While it lowers the age of reason limitation, it does not abolish such a limit altogether. The decree does not mention confirmation at all, and thus its mandate of earlier first communion practically results in an apparently unintended reordering of the sacraments of initiation, with confirmation now coming after first communion in many cases.

Catechesis of the Good Shepherd

In the wake of *Quam singulari*, Maria Montessori developed a method of education that was based on scientific observation of the developmental

⁵² Ibid. (AAS 2, 582 f.), translation adapted from papalencyclicals.net. [↗](#)

stages of childhood, along with a recognition of the deep spiritual life children are capable of as creatures endowed with dignity and made in the image of God.⁵³ Montessori was inspired by the liturgical renewal called for by Pope Pius X and applied her pedagogy to religious education, such as in her book, *The Mass Explained to Children*.⁵⁴ Sofia Cavalletti, a biblical scholar, and Gianna Gobbi, a catechist trained in the Montessori tradition, later built on Montessori's work to develop the *Catechesis of the Good Shepherd*, applying Montessori's educational model to catechesis, including a significant focus on liturgical catechesis. From a posture of careful observation and deep respect for the child's dignity, Gobbi and Cavalletti designed the CGS "atrium," which includes a prayer table, a station focused on baptism, an altar, and the Good Shepherd "work," which for 3–6-year-olds occupies a central space. Gobbi calls the atrium "Mass-centered", and writes, "the work of the atrium focuses on the relationship with Jesus, the Good Shepherd, which 'finds its most concrete and intense moment of life in the Eucharist'"⁵⁵.

Vatican II's Sacramental Theology

The liturgical reforms of Vatican II flowed out of the work of the preceding liturgical movement, including the decrees of Pius X. The important theological ideas of "Eucharistic ecclesiology" and "priesthood of the faithful" come through clearly in the council's documents, especially the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium* (LG), and the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum concilium* (SC).⁵⁶ *Lumen gentium* uses a

⁵³ See, for instance, Maria MONTESSORI, *The Absorbent Mind*, Adyar/India 31961.

⁵⁴ Cf. Maria MONTESSORI, *The Mass Explained to Children*, New York 1933.

⁵⁵ Gianna GOBBI, *Listening to God with Children. The Montessori Method Applied to the Catechesis of Children* [trans. by Rebekah ROJCEWICS], Loveland/OH 1998, 8. See also Christopher M. O'BRIEN, *Initiating into the Celebration of the Mystery. Evaluating the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd in Light of the 2020 Directory for Catechesis*, in: *Antiphon 27/3* (2023) 349–368.

⁵⁶ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy Sacrosanctum Concilium*, in: TANNER, *Decrees 2*, 820–843, and ID., *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church Lumen gentium* (ibid., 849–900).

variety of images to describe the Church, but, mostly strikingly and definitively, describes the Church as the “Body of Christ”: “By communicating His Spirit, Christ made His brothers and sisters, called together from all nations, mystically the components of His own Body.”⁵⁷ It continues, “Really partaking of the body of the Lord in the breaking of the Eucharistic bread, we are taken up into communion with Him and with one another [...]. In this way all of us are made members of His Body, ‘but severally members one of another.’”⁵⁸ It is the celebration of the sacraments of initiation, culminating in the Eucharist, that make Christians members of this body. It is in the Eucharistic liturgy that the Church is most fully expressed and manifested. *Lumen gentium* also proposes the “Universal Call to Holiness,” stating that not only clergy and religious, but all Christians are called by their baptism to lives of holiness. Those who make up the Church are not only the “People of God,” but the *priestly* People of God. This baptismal priesthood is especially exercised in participation at the Church’s Eucharist. All of the faithful, “by virtue of their royal priesthood, join in the offering of the Eucharist, and they exercise their priesthood in receiving the sacraments, in prayer and thanksgiving, through the witness of a holy life, by self-denial and by active charity”⁵⁹. Nowhere does the council indicate that the baptismal priesthood is limited by age, and *Lumen gentium* acknowledges that different members of the body will participate differently, yet still fully: “Thus both by reason of the offering and through Holy Communion all take part in this liturgical service, not indeed, all in the same way, but *each in that way which is proper to him- or herself*.”⁶⁰ Like the rest of the laity, children are called by their baptism to participate in the priestly work of Jesus Christ by offering their lives to the Father and through participation in the ecclesial liturgical action, to the extent they are able.

⁵⁷ LG 7, translation adapted from TANNER, Decrees 2, 852.

⁵⁸ Ibid. (TANNER 2, 853).

⁵⁹ LG 10 (TANNER 2, 857).

⁶⁰ LG 11, translation adapted from TANNER 2, 857; my emphasis.

Postconciliar Liturgical Reform

The liturgical reforms following the council included a return of the ancient catechumenate, updated for modern use, in the 1972 *Ordo Initiationis Christianae Adultorum* (Order of Christian Initiation of Adults), which restored the order and unity of the sacraments of initiation for adult converts to Roman Catholicism, as well as for children who have reached the age of discretion.⁶¹ In the OICA, as well as in the *Order of Baptism for Children* and the *Order of Confirmation*, it is clear that theologically, Eucharist functions as the culminating sacrament of initiation.⁶² The general introduction to Christian Initiation perhaps makes this most clear:

For, having been incorporated (*incorporati*) into Christ through Baptism, they are formed (*constituuntur*) into the People of God, and, having received the remission of all their sins and been rescued (*erepti*) from the power of darkness, they are brought (*transferuntur*) to the status of adopted sons and daughters, being made (*effecti*) a new creation by water and the Holy Spirit. Hence they are called (*nominantur*), and indeed are (*sunt*), children of God. Sealed (*signati*) with the gift of the same Spirit in Confirmation, they are more perfectly configured (*configurantur*) to the Lord and filled (*implentur*) with the Holy Spirit, so that bearing witness to Christ before the world, they bring (*adducant*) the Body of Christ to its full stature without delay. Finally, participating (*participantes*) in the Eucharistic assembly (*synaxis*), they eat (*manducant*) the Flesh and drink (*bibunt*) the Blood of the Son of Man, so that they may receive (*accipiant*) eternal life and show forth (*exprimant*) the unity of God's people. Offering (*offerentes*) themselves with Christ, they take part (*habent partem*) in the universal sacrifice, which is the entire city of the redeemed offered to God through the great High Priest; they also pray (*impetrant*) that, through a fuller outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the whole human race come into the unity of God's family.⁶³

The revised order of initiation operated under the theological principle that anyone who had attained the use of reason must never be baptized with-

⁶¹ RRom: OICA 1972.

⁶² De initiatione christiana, Praenotanda generalia, in: RRom: OBP ²1973, 7–14, here: 2. The Latin text of the praenotanda can also be found in EDIL 1, 1777–1811, here: 1778. English translation in OCIA 2024, 1–11, here: 1 f.

⁶³ Ibid., n. 2 (RRom: OBP ²1973, 7/EDIL 1, 1778. English translation in OCIA 2024, 1 f.

out being confirmed and given communion immediately, barring exceptional circumstances. In stark contrast, however, for infants, a seven-year gap remained between baptism and the other two sacraments of initiation. In addition, poor implementation of the reform by local bishops often left confirmation later than first communion, despite clear indication in the rites that the preferred order was baptism, then confirmation, then first communion. The *Order of Baptism for Children* emphasizes the Eucharistic culmination of baptism by encouraging baptisms during Sunday Mass, by the inclusion of a procession to the altar during the baptismal rite after the baptism occurs, and by euchological references to the priesthood of the faithful and a Eucharistic vision of the Church. The *Order of Confirmation* sees confirmation as a continuation of baptism that leads to the Eucharistic culmination of initiation: “Those who have been baptized continue on the path of Christian Initiation through the Sacrament of Confirmation.”⁶⁴ Further,

As a rule, Confirmation takes place within Mass so that the fundamental connection of this Sacrament with all of Christian Initiation, which reaches its culmination in the Communion of the Body and Blood of Christ, may stand out in a clearer light. The newly confirmed therefore participate in the Eucharist, which completes their Christian Initiation.⁶⁵

While the rite allows conferences of bishops to set an age other than the age of discretion, it designates the age of discretion (approximately seven) as the usual age for confirmation, and it is clear that, as in the other liturgical books, confirmation is envisioned as being celebrated prior to first communion. In danger of death, even infants ought to be confirmed.⁶⁶ While the reformed rites of initiation following Vatican II do not restore full

⁶⁴ PRom: OConf 1973, 1. Praenotanda also in EDIL 1, 2602–2621, here: 2603. English translations from The Roman Pontifical renewed by decree of the Most Holy Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican and promulgated by authority of Pope Paul VI: The Order of Confirmation, English translation according to the typical edition, Washington, DC 2016.

⁶⁵ PRom: OConf 1973, 13 (EDIL 1, 2615).

⁶⁶ Cf. c. 889. 891 CIC/1983, in Code of Canon Law. Latin-English Edition, New English Translation, Washington, DC 2020, 264 f.

sacramental initiation for infants, they theologically describe the sacraments as integrated events that together contribute to Christian initiation.

Children and Liturgy After Vatican II

Aside from the reformed rites of initiation, in the years leading up to and immediately following Vatican II, a number of attempts were made, with varying levels of success, to enhance the authentic and active participation of young children in the Church's liturgy. The 1973 *Directory for Masses with Children* (DMC) opened the door for the 1974 approval of three Eucharistic Prayers for Masses with Children (EPC), as well as the option of having a separate children's liturgy of the Word during Mass and other means of adapting the liturgy with the goal of deepening participation by children.⁶⁷ These adaptations recognize and seek to foster the ability of children to participate fully and actively in the Church's liturgy. Despite this goal, however, lack of Eucharistic communion for children below the age of reason continued to prevent them from participating fully in the Eucharistic liturgy. The EPC laudably attempt to increase the participation of children in the Church's Eucharistic celebration by exercising their baptismal priesthood, but as the DMC acknowledges, without reception of communion, young children cannot be truly considered full liturgical participants. In the DMC's words, "The children should not be allowed to forget that all the forms of participation reach their high point in eucharistic communion, when the body and blood of Christ are received as spiritual nourishment."⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Cf. SACRA CONGREGATIO PRO CULTU DIVINO, *Directorium de Missis cum pueris*, in: EDIL 1, 3115–3169. English in DOL 276 (2134–2188). See also UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS, *Eucharistic Prayers for Masses with Children. For Use with Roman Missal*, Washington, DC 32021. For a more thorough treatment of the EPC, see Christopher M. O'BRIEN, *Eucharistic Prayers for Masses with Children, Another Look. Context, Text, Reception, and Evaluation*, in: EO 40 (2023) 279–305.

⁶⁸ DMC 22 (EDIL 1, 3136/DOL 2155).

Infant Communion and Ecumenism

Outside of Roman Catholicism, several mainline Protestant traditions, as well as Eastern Catholic Churches that had abandoned infant communion, have returned to the practice of communing infants in recent years. Protestant authors such as Ruth Meyers, David HOLETON, Kenneth Stevenson, Leonel Mitchell, Eugene Brand, Louis Weil, and Maxwell Johnson have contributed to the move towards communing all the baptized, regardless of age, in the Anglican and Lutheran traditions.⁶⁹ Some churches in the reformed tradition have also taken up this practice. The Eastern Catholic return to infant communion has been aided by scholars such as Mark Morozowich, who demonstrates clearly that Catholic Canon law does not prohibit Eastern Catholic infant communion, but in fact encourages it, and Robert Taft, who argues correctly that infant communion is not only a traditional practice of the East, but also of Western Christianity.⁷⁰ In Taft's words, "The conclusion is ineluctable: both universal early tradition and the present teaching of even the Latin Church show Eastern practice to be not a strange exception that should be abandoned, but a traditional idea that should be preserved or restored."⁷¹ Infant communion is unique in that a Roman Catholic return to infant communion would constitute ecumenical progress both towards Orthodox Christians and towards many Protestant Christians.

⁶⁹ See, for instance, Ruth A. MEYERS (ed.), *Children at the Table. The Communion of all the Baptized in Anglicanism Today*, New York 1995; David HOLETON, *The Communion of Young Children and Infants. A Sacrament of Community*, in: *And Do Not Hinder Them. An Ecumenical Plea for the Admission of Children to the Eucharist* (Faith and Order Paper 109), Geneva 1982, 59–69; Eugene BRAND, *Baptism and Communion of Infants. A Lutheran View*, in: *Worship* 50 (1976) 29–42, reprinted in Maxwell E. JOHNSON (ed.), *Living Water, Sealing Spirit. Readings on Christian Initiation*, Collegeville 1995, 350–364, and JOHNSON, *Rites of Christian Initiation*, 92 f. 263 f. 303. 361. 364 f. 369. 412–414.

⁷⁰ See Mark M. MOROZOWICH, *Eastern Catholic Infant Communion. Has Catholic Dogmatic Teaching Prohibited It?*, in: *Logos. A Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 49 (2008) 71–90, and TAFT, *On the Question of Infant Communion*, 208–211.

⁷¹ TAFT, *On the Question of Infant Communion*, 211.

Children and the Eucharist: Contemporary Theological Approaches

This section outlines contemporary theological approaches to the question of Eucharistic communion for young children, drawing from several theological lenses and offering suggestions for future study.

Infant Communion – An Open Question?

First, it is important to establish that the question, “Can infants receive communion?” in Roman Catholicism is an open question, and that the Roman Catholic Church’s current liturgical practice, based primarily on practical rather than theological concerns, could certainly change. No ecumenical council or infallible Church teaching has ever decreed that children younger than the age of reason cannot receive the Eucharist. The Eastern Catholic practice of infant communion, paired with the Western practice in the first twelve centuries, indicates that no theological rationale can be legitimately advanced in support of denying young children from communion. In Robert Taft’s words,

To advance *doctrinal* arguments against infant communion is to assert that the sacramental teaching and practice of the Roman Church was in error for 1200 years. Since for Catholics, at least, this is an unacceptable conclusion, then it is clear that the ‘age of reason’ requirement for communion is a medieval western *pastoral* innovation, not a *doctrinal* argument.⁷²

Not only is the question of infant communion an open one, but one that the Church seems to be converging on from all directions.

Unity of the Sacraments of Initiation

One relevant theological lens to consider is the relationship of the sacraments of initiation to one another. A unified theological approach to the sacraments of initiation suggests that baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist belong together not only theologically, but in liturgical practice. As Dominic Serra writes,

⁷² Ibid., 210.

Communion in the body of Christ also could be thought of as the pneumatic culmination of the entire initiatory process. That process begins in the bath of regeneration of the Holy Spirit with its christic/messianic anointing by the presbyter followed by the episcopal handlaying and sealing with a Trinitarian formula and brought to completion in the Lord's Supper made effective by the epiclesis of the Holy Spirit.⁷³

Serra further adds that, "Baptism effects the forgiveness of sins by incorporating the initiate into the eucharistic communion of the Church. Baptism has this power because of its relationship to the Eucharist, the sacramental expression of the Church's very life."⁷⁴ Reuniting baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist in one liturgy, aside from being historically "traditional" in both Eastern and Western Christianity, would best communicate the theological reality of immersion into the paschal and trinitarian mysteries that takes place in Christian initiation. Liturgically united rites of Christian initiation also make clearer the close connection between personal salvation and ecclesiology. Liturgical separation of the rites of initiation creates a deficiency of sign, and, as Serra points out, "Since Sacraments are signs, a deficiency in signing is very serious indeed."⁷⁵ The theological and liturgical connections between these initiatory sacraments ought not to be separated; they are best understood theologically when they are considered, and celebrated, together.⁷⁶ The liturgical reforms of Vatican II moved towards a return to this unity, and ecumenical scholarship and dialogue, both in the West and between East and West, is moving towards it as well.

⁷³ Dominic SERRA, *Baptism and Confirmation*, 67 f.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁷⁶ Pope Benedict XVI makes a similar point in *Sacramentum Caritatis* when he says: "If the Eucharist is truly the source and summit of the Church's life and mission, it follows that the process of Christian initiation must constantly be directed to the reception of this sacrament", and again: "The Holy Eucharist, then, brings Christian initiation to completion and represents the centre and goal of all sacramental life." BENEDICT XVI, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis* (February 22, 2007), 17. [↗](#)

Eucharistic Ecclesiology

A second relevant theological lens to consider is that of “Eucharistic ecclesiology”, championed by theologians such as Nicolas Afanasiev, Henri de Lubac, Jean Zizioulas, and Paul McPartlan.⁷⁷ If “The Eucharist makes the Church”, as is argued convincingly by de Lubac and affirmed by Vatican II, what is to be said about the ecclesial status of those, such as young children, who are baptized but not welcomed to the Eucharistic table? Applying “Eucharistic ecclesiology” to the question of infant communion suggests that a natural consequence of Vatican II’s ecclesiology is the communion of all the baptized, including infants. In de Lubac’s words,

The Church, like the Eucharist, is a mystery of unity – the same mystery, and one with inexhaustible riches. Both are the body of Christ – the same body. If we are to be faithful to the teaching of Scripture, as Tradition interprets it, and if not to lose anything of its essential riches, we must be careful not to make the smallest break between the Mystical Body and the Eucharist.⁷⁸

Initiation that does not culminate in Eucharist has lost the sense that “the Eucharist makes the Church” and has lost the close connection between Christ’s Eucharistic and ecclesial bodies. Eucharistic ecclesiology and the unity of the sacraments of initiation go hand-in-hand. In the Roman Catholic Church – a church that holds the practice of baptizing infants to be indisputably traditional, and that embraced both eucharistic ecclesiol-

⁷⁷ See, for instance, Nicolas AFANASIEV, *Una Sancta*, in: Michael PLEKON, *Tradition Alive. On the Church and the Christian Life in Our Time. Readings from the Eastern Church*, Lanham 2003, 3–30; Henri DE LUBAC, *The Splendour of the Church* [trans. by Michael MASON], London 1956; Jean ZIZIOULAS, *The Ecclesiological Presuppositions of the Holy Eucharist*, in: *Nicolaus 10* (1982) 333–349; ID., *Being as Communion. Studies in Personhood and the Church*, Crestwood/NY 1985; Paul MCPARTLAN, *The Eucharist Makes the Church. Henri de Lubac and Jean Zizioulas in Dialogue*, Fairfax/VA 1993 [reprint: 2006]; ID., *Eucharistic Ecclesiology*, in: *One in Christ 22* (1986) 314–331; ID., *Sacrament of Salvation. An Introduction to Eucharistic Ecclesiology*, Edinburgh 1995 [reprint: 2005], and ID., *The Eucharist as the Basis for Ecclesiology*, in: *Antiphon 6* (2001) 12–19.

⁷⁸ DE LUBAC, *Splendour of the Church*, 110.

ogy and a movement towards restoring the integrity of the sacraments of initiation at Vatican II – communing infants is a logical next step.

The Capacity of Children to Participate in Christian Sacramental Life

A third lens to consider comes from a child's perspective: how, and to what extent, is a child capable of participating in Christian sacramental life? The work of theologians such as Clare V. Johnson, Mark Searle, and Kimberly H. Belcher suggests that even children below the "age of reason" are fit to participate in the Church's sacramental life, including by reception of communion. In her 2004 dissertation, Johnson puts systematic theology, liturgical theology, sociology, spirituality, canon law, and moral theology into conversation with one another as she proposes "a new theological consideration of the pre-rational child that embraces him/her as a fully human subject in relation to God at all times, who is capable of 'worshipping' God in a way that is appropriate to his/her developmental stage and level of capability"⁷⁹. She observes incongruities between the Church's moral theology and its ritual treatment of the pre-rational child, including what she calls the "excommunication" of baptized pre-rational children in the Roman Catholic Church. She concludes that

Truly embracing the pre-rational child, as a subject of sacramental action, would ensure that the perfect praise of God issuing forth from out of the mouths of infants and sucklings is a regular and welcome element of the ritual performance of the Body of Christ.⁸⁰

In Mark Searle's words:

The event of baptism needs to be reflected upon from the child's point of view, once it is admitted that there is such thing as a child's point of view. This would mean exploring how it can be said that the child as *child* can be

⁷⁹ Clare V. JOHNSON, "Ex Ore Infantium". The Pre-Rational Child as Subject of Sacramental Action. Theological, Liturgical and Canonical Implications [unpubl. dissertation University of Notre Dame, South Bend/IN], 2004, 1.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 360.

said to be delivered from sin, adopted by God, incorporated into Christ, and made a dwelling place of the Holy Spirit.⁸¹

The framework of “efficacious engagement”, proposed by Kimberly H. Belcher, makes just such an attempt to reflect on baptism from the point of view of a child. In her book *Efficacious Engagement: Sacramental Participation in the Trinitarian Mystery*, Belcher explores from a concrete and ritual standpoint how a pre-cognitive child can be understood to be a participant in the Church’s sacramental prayer and in the trinitarian life of God.⁸² In dialogue with Louis-Marie Chauvet’s sacramental model of “symbolic exchange”, Belcher proposes the model of “efficacious engagement”, which is rooted in sensory perception and response rather than language. Because efficacious engagement is more anthropologically fundamental to human identity formation than symbolic exchange, which develops secondarily and in fact depends on sensory engagement, it is a more apt model for infant initiation. Despite their limited symbolic capacity, infants can certainly sense and respond to stimuli. In “efficacious engagement,” infants are not passive recipients, but active participants, acting in cooperation with another, such as an adult. Belcher uses examples such as breastfeeding, making eye-contact, and other means of physical touch to show that infants can participate in human relationships in a sensorial, pre-symbolic way. Breastfeeding, for instance, is an action that requires cooperation and participation by both mother and child – if either is taken away, the engagement is not possible and cannot be efficacious. To speak of the liturgical participation of infants, then, it is necessary to consider the concrete ways in which infants can engage with others to participate in the formation of their identity. Since infants are capable of sensory perception and response, their liturgical and sacramental participation are most helpfully considered in ritual terms through the lens of efficacious engagement. After her anthropological description, Belcher applies the model of efficacious engagement to the contemporary rite of infant bap-

⁸¹ Mark SEARLE, *Infant Baptism Reconsidered*, in: ID. et al. (eds.), *Alternative Futures for Worship*, vol. 2. *Baptism and Confirmation*, Collegeville 1987, 15–54, here: 32.

⁸² Kimberly H. BELCHER, *Efficacious Engagement. Sacramental Participation in the Trinitarian Mystery*, Collegeville 2011.

tism. The sacraments, as an extension of the incarnation, allow humans to participate in God's life through corporeal ritual action. It is the Holy Spirit who "bridges the gap between Christian ritual processes as anthropogenic, historically conditioned cultural constructions and sacraments as acts of God in the world"⁸³. Infant baptism engages the infant being baptized with sensory stimuli mostly by way of touch, including signing and anointing the infant's forehead and either immersing the infant in water or pouring water over his or her head. Belcher's analysis of the actions of physical touch in the rite also flows into an ecclesiological account of the way infant baptism incorporates the infant, through sacramental and bodily engagement, into the ecclesial body of Christ. The work of the Spirit is central to this incorporation: "The Spirit renews the Body of Christ in the church, not in the abstract, but through the rituals of the church's communal life."⁸⁴ Belcher's model of efficacious of engagement is a helpful complement to the primarily historical-theological approach taken in this article. To Belcher's account could be added that communion at baptism, and continued communion thereafter, would further ingrain the new identity of the child as one who eats the Church's food – Christ's eucharistic body – and drinks the Church's drink – Christ's eucharistic blood.

Conclusion: Practical, Catechetical, and Pastoral Perspectives

What would a shift towards infant communion in Roman Catholicism tangibly look like from practical, catechetical, and pastoral perspectives? While proposals to change the age of celebration of the sacraments of initiation are often rejected due to diocesan and parish catechetical structures, the field of catechetics itself is moving towards a mystagogical model of catechesis in which catechesis does not necessarily have to be a prerequisite for sacramental reception.⁸⁵ Several suggestions for practi-

⁸³ Ibid., 128.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 131.

⁸⁵ See, for instance, Mary M. Fox, *Following God's Pedagogy. Principles for Children's Catechesis*, Chicago 2023; James C. PAULEY, *Liturgical Catechesis in the 21st Century. A School of Discipleship*, Chicago 2022; PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR THE PROMOTION OF THE NEW EVANGELIZATION, *Directory for*

cal ritual emphases or changes that would accord with and highlight the authentic liturgical and theological tradition of Roman Catholicism are in order. First, a revival of the practice of lay reception from the chalice, which in some places has not returned since it disappeared during COVID-19, would not only result in a more sensorially and symbolically rich Eucharistic experience, but would make a return to the practice of infant communion more feasible.⁸⁶ Second, as is encouraged by the *Order of Baptism for Children*, baptisms should more frequently be held during the Sunday Eucharistic liturgy in parishes. Such a practice would accentuate the theological connection between baptism and Eucharist, as well as the ecclesial nature of baptism, which is often unfortunately viewed only in terms of personal salvation. Third, *Quam singulari's* directives regarding the "age of reason" requirements for first communion should be applied in a way that is more generous and more accurate. The requirements of having some use of reason, some level of devotion, and distinguishing between ordinary bread and Christ's Eucharistic body can be met by children as young as two or three, and arguably earlier. There is no reason, under current magisterial guidance, for pastors not to admit young children to the Eucharist should they meet these requirements, as is already being done in some places.⁸⁷ A final suggestion, based on the historical and theological data outlined in this article, is a return to the practice of fully initiating infants through baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist in one integrated sacramental liturgy. As Paul Turner has written,

Catechesis. New Edition, Washington, DC 2020; Petroc WILLEY – Joseph D. WHITE, *Companion to the Directory for Catechesis*, Huntington/IN 2021; Joseph D. WHITE, *The Way God Teaches. Catechesis and the Divine Pedagogy*, Huntington/IN 2014; Gerard O'SHEA, *Educating in Christ. A Practical Handbook for Developing the Catholic Faith from Childhood to Adolescence*, Brooklyn/NY 2018; and O'BRIEN, *Initiating into the Celebration of the Mystery*.

⁸⁶ On the need to attend to the senses in liturgical scholarship and practice, see Nathan P. CHASE, *Worshipping with Our Senses. A Methodological State of the Question and an Invitation*, in: *Worship* 99 (2025) 176–187.

⁸⁷ For instance, the Diocese of Fort Worth, Texas, uses a "readiness" model for the sacraments of first communion and confirmation, and at times admits children as young as four to Eucharistic communion.

The most comprehensive resolution to the issues surrounding initiation is for the West to restore full initiation at one ceremony to all candidates, regardless of age, including infants. The East has followed this practice since the days of the early Church. The West advanced a reform of adult initiation through the work of Vatican II, but the council did not adequately address the needs surrounding the initiation of children [...]. The Communion of infants has a long pedigree in the Church, both East and West. The restoration of Communion to the youngest members would affirm the implications of their baptism, remain faithful to the original requirements for participation in the Eucharist, respond to the gospel invitation, and emphasize that Communion is an expression of the community – its faith in the presence of Christ under the form of bread and wine, and its self-identity as the body of Christ.⁸⁸

Mark Searle has similarly suggested that,

Far from barring children from the font, the chrism, and the altar, the Church should welcome their participation in these sacraments as a reminder both of the catholicity of the Church and of the fact that, no matter how informed or committed we might be as adults, when we take part in the sacramental liturgies of the Church we are taking part in more than we know.⁸⁹

Rome encourages Eastern Catholic churches to restore the practice of infant communion because it is their authentic tradition.⁹⁰ *It is also indisputably the authentic tradition of Rome and Western Christianity*, at least through the first twelve centuries, and in some cases later. In combination with an appeal to the authentic liturgical tradition of the Church in both East and West, perhaps the simple, yet profound testimony of an Orthodox woman is more powerful than any technical theological argument could ever be: “We feed our small children regular food without expecting them to know yet about vitamins and nutrition. So also we Orthodox feed

⁸⁸ Paul TURNER, *Ages of Initiation. The First Two Christian Millennia*, Collegeville 2000, 63 f.

⁸⁹ SEARLE, *Infant Baptism Reconsidered*, 50.

⁹⁰ See, for instance, CONGREGATION FOR THE EASTERN CHURCHES, *Instruction for Applying the Liturgical Prescriptions of the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches*, a reproduction of the official English Translation, Fairfax/VA 1996, 51.

them the spiritual food of the Eucharist without expecting them to know yet the meaning of this Gift. Both foods are necessary for life."⁹¹ And perhaps even more simple and convicting are the plain words of Jesus Christ to his disciples, "Let the children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs."⁹²

⁹¹ JOHNSON, *Rites of Christian Initiation*, 443. These are the words of an Orthodox woman to a visiting youth group led by Maxwell Johnson.

⁹² Matthew 19:14, New Revised Standard Version translation.

Abbreviations

AAS	Acta Apostolicae Sedis
ACC	Alcuin Club Collections
ACW	Ancient Christian Writers
AThR	Anglican Theological Review
CCSL	Corpus christianorum. Series latina
CSEL	Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum
EDIL	Enchiridion documentorum instaurationis liturgicae
EO	Ecclesia Orans
DOL	Documents of the Liturgy
JLS	Joint Liturgical Studies
MCS	Monumenta Christiana Selecta
NPNF	A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church
PG	Patrologia Graeca
RED.F	Rerum Ecclesiasticum Documenta. Series Maior: Fontes
SChr	Sources chrétiennes
SpicFri	Spicilegium Friburgense
SSL	Spicilegium Sacrum Lovaniense
STh	Thomas Aquinas, Summa theologica
StT	Studi e Testi
SVPPS	St Vladimir's "Popular Patristics" Series
TS	Theological Studies
VL	Vetus Latina. Die Reste der altlateinischen Bibel
WA	D. Martin Luther Werke, 120 vols., Weimar 1883–2009

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