

## Article

# Fashion and Faith: Girls and First Holy Communion in Twentieth-Century Ireland (c. 1920–1970)

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**Abstract:** With a focus on clothing, bodies, and emotions, this article examines girls' First Holy Communion in twentieth-century Ireland (c. 1920–1970), demonstrating that Irish girls, even at an early age, embraced opportunities to become both the center of attention and central faith actors in their religious communities through the ritual of Communion. A careful study of First Holy Communion, including clothing, reveals the importance of the ritual. The occasion was indicative of much related to Catholic devotional life from independence through Vatican II, including the intersections of popular religion and consumerism, the feminization of devotion, the centrality of the body in Catholicism, and the role that religion played in forming and maintaining family ties, including cross-generational links. First Communion, and especially the material items that accompanied it, initiated Irish girls into a feminized devotional world managed by women and especially mothers. It taught them that purchasing, hospitality, and gift-giving were central responsibilities of adult Catholic women even as it affirmed the bonds between women family members who helped girls prepare for the occasion.

**Keywords:** girls; women; gender; First Communion; clothing; feminization; family



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## 1. Introduction

The Catholic First Holy Communion dress is recognized as an Irish cultural icon. In late 2012, the *Irish Times* and National Museum of Ireland declared it to be one of the 'ten icons of contemporary Ireland' ([Ten Icons of Contemporary Ireland 2012](#)). Just a few years later, Ireland's TV3 premiered 'Thelma's Big Irish Communion', featuring a dressmaker making extravagant Communion frocks for Irish girls ([Ring 2017](#)). At the same time, however, critics have pointed to the extravagant and sometimes garish excesses of Communion dresses prominent since Ireland's economic revival—the 'Celtic Tiger'—of the 1990s and 2000s. Television shows featuring Traveller communities have played into these criticisms by suggesting that flashy consumerism, rather than being mainstream to Irish society, is associated with the traditional 'other' ([Bramhill 2017](#); [Delay 2017](#)).

Urging that 'budgeting is best', reproaches to excessive consumerism have bemoaned the loss of a so-called simple, 'traditional', and more pious Communion and Catholicism ([First Communion or Confirmation First? 1999](#)). In 2019, the Irish bishops spoke publicly on the matter, reminding parents that an 'authentic' religious occasion such as First Holy Communion required 'modest' celebrations and, fundamentally, 'simplicity' ([Bishops Speak Out as Lavish First Communion Costs Soar 2019](#)). Yet, the links between Catholicism and gendered consumerism are not new, and the history of First Holy Communion reveals that the ritual has never been 'simple', divorced from secular concerns, or free from tension. Moreover, the importance of clothing, especially for girls, was already well established by the early twentieth century. As Irish Catholicism became an adjunct of the state, purchasing devotional items and clothing proved integral to a thriving popular religion grounded in material culture ([Godson 2003](#); [Delay 2018](#); [Lawless 2010](#)). Women, the main consumers in twentieth-century Ireland, maintained a particular relationship to Catholic purchasing, one that not only underscored the importance of devotional items for the home but also special-occasion clothing such as First Communion dresses.

With a focus on clothing, bodies, and emotions, this article examines girls' First Holy Communion in twentieth-century Ireland (c. 1920–1970), demonstrating that Irish girls, even at an early age, embraced opportunities to become both the center of attention and central faith actors in their religious communities through the ritual of Communion. First Communion garments were central to this; they visually displayed inclusion, signifying girls' membership in a religious community. Each girl's body, and what adorned it, was on display during First Communion, representing a family's economic status as well as its commitment to devotion. First Communion dresses also, however, provided opportunities for individuality and expression.

A careful study of First Holy Communion, including clothing, reveals the importance of the ritual. The occasion was indicative of much related to Catholic devotional life from independence through Vatican II, including the intersections of popular religion and consumerism, the feminization of devotion, the centrality of the body in Catholicism, and the role that religion played in forming and maintaining family ties, including cross-generational links. First Communion, and especially the material items that accompanied it, initiated Irish girls into a feminized devotional world managed by women and especially mothers. It taught them that purchasing, hospitality, and gift-giving were central responsibilities of adult Catholic women even as it affirmed the bonds between women family members who helped girls prepare for the occasion.

## 2. Girls, Catholicism, and First Communion

Scholars working in Irish history have emphasized the importance of popular Catholicism to twentieth-century daily life (Delay 2019; De Cléir 2017). Following the so-called 'devotional revolution' of the late nineteenth century (Larkin 1972), local religious practice formed the foundation of family and community through at least the 1980s in many places (Fuller 2012; Barr and Ó Corráin 2017). The rise of popular Catholicism was also linked with the increasing influence of the Irish middle classes (O'Neill 2014). Members of the middle class enthusiastically adopted popular devotions alongside education and literacy, technology, and consumerism. Their commitment to religious duties was stalwart; many not only attended Mass and the required sacraments but also joined confraternities and sodalities, participated in popular events such as pilgrimages and processions, welcomed a new popular Marianism, and purchased devotional objects and Catholic reading items for their homes (Lennon 2012; Delay 2019). This embracing of religion during and after the age of the 'devotional revolution' was, as Mary Peckham Magray writes, nothing short of a 'cultural revolution' (Magray 1998, p. 6). By 1900, the Archbishops and Bishops of Ireland could confidently proclaim: 'There is scarcely any form of public or private devotion which has not received a notable development in recent years' (Archbishops and Bishops of Ireland 1900, pp. 6–7).

Although the topic has not received much scholarly attention, the roles played by women and girls in Ireland's popular Catholic revival have recently begun to be illuminated. While the traditional narrative of women's status in a stalwartly Catholic modern Ireland centers on patriarchy and loss—Eugene Hynes, for example, writes that the 'devotional revolution' emerged as 'authoritarian and puritanical', proving devastating for women's status (Hynes 1988, p. 166)—newer investigations suggest something more complicated. Indeed, the Catholicism of the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries was a feminized faith, putting on display women's commitment to domestic religion and household devotions and featuring women's agency in public space as well: at Masses, lifecycle rituals, and other religious occasions (Delay 2018). Girls, too, were active in Catholic life. 'Catholicism served as the major influence in girls' identity formation within the community and the family', I have written elsewhere, with girls 'becoming key actors in Catholic devotional spaces and in their interactions with Catholic artefacts' (Delay 2013, pp. 10–11).

In a 1900 pastoral letter, the Irish hierarchy wrote: 'often where the fervour of the people would seem to outstrip the zeal of the clergy, communion on the first Friday of the month has become an almost universal practice' (Archbishops and Bishops of Ireland

1900, pp. 6–7). Communion and the Eucharist were at the heart of devotional life at the beginning of the century, and they would stay there for decades. In twentieth-century Ireland, First Holy Communion, which marked the occasion when a child received their first Eucharist, usually occurred around seven or eight years of age.<sup>1</sup> As Laurence Hérault reminds us, ‘the ceremony [of First Holy Communion] 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’ (Hérault 1999, p. 4). That young children essentially debuted publicly as religious actors during First Communion required significant preparation and, often, brought significant anxiety for children. The instruction of children in the catechism and preparing them for confession, Communion, and, later, confirmation were essential responsibilities laid at the hands of parish clergy, teachers, and family members.

When adult Catholics remembered their childhood preparations for such special religious occasions, fear and anticipation blended. ‘All through the months of preparation for my first communion’, wrote Dublin’s Elaine Crowley of the 1930s, ‘... sin weighed heavily on my mind’ (Crowley 1996, p. 59). The related rite of first confession produced particular apprehensions for children. In the 1920s, Margaret Duffy’s younger brother was so ‘nervous about going into the confession box’ that she helped him write down his sins so that he could just show that to the priest instead of talking to him (Recollections of Margaret Duffy, born 1920, Dublin. Ryan et al. 1995, p. 42). Michael McDonnell made his First Communion in 1914; decades later, he recalled that ‘Making your Communion was a very nervous thing to do as in my day while you were in the church you were asked questions on the ten commandments and the six precepts of the church. You had to be well versed in them or you would shame your family and friends and be in trouble with the church’ (Recollections of Michael McDonnell, born 1908. Ryan et al. 1995, p. 79). Preparations were key to a successful day; as Moira Gallagher remembered:

Along with the shiny new English and Irish readers came a small attractive little book with cream coloured pages printed in red ink: The First Communion Catechism. For our homework each night we were told by our teacher to memorise the answers to two questions from the catechism. My father would listen and coach me until I was word perfect. Prayers had to be memorised too, the Confiteor and the Act of Contrition for confession, plus some prayers to say before and after Holy Communion (Gallagher n.d.).

These remembrances underscore the prominence that preparing for First Communion and confession held in children’s minds and lives.<sup>2</sup> The thrill of receiving new things—‘shiny’, ‘attractive’, and colorful books—could be offset by the trepidation of facing shame through catechism questioning. Preparations for First Holy Communion, involving study and introspection, were grueling and stress inducing. They also, however, may have instilled in children a sense of family unity (Schultz 2004, p. 47): parents, such as Gallagher’s father, although more commonly mothers, helped children study for Communion and learn their catechism. Dublin’s Phil O’Keefe, meanwhile, had her sisters assist her studies in anticipation of her first confession and Communion (O’Keefe 1995, pp. 51–52; Delay 2019, p. 84).

First Communion celebrations, which usually occurred only once a year in each parish, were public and communal occasions. Before the actual event, the parish’s children assembled, with girls and boys lining up separately. Depending on the parish’s location, the children often walked to the chapel; this was, in many areas, a significant element of the day, allowing bystanders to observe and even cheer on the children. In 1930s Ireland, Father Jack Delaney filmed children walking through the streets of inner-city Dublin on their way to their First Holy Communion. Friends, family, and community members waved at the girls, on display in their white dresses and head coverings. The color of girls’ clothing mattered: not only did white signify purity but also cleanliness. The older boys were soberly dressed in dark suits, with combed, greased hair; younger boys wore white tunics and pants and walked along with younger girls. The older girls carried a statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary along with them, and the boys held religious posters, including

one featuring the Immaculate Conception ([Vintage Footage of First Holy Communion in Ireland 2020](#)).

First Holy Communion mirrored Catholic occasions at the time, including Corpus Christi processions, Marian devotions, and The Eucharistic Congress in Dublin in 1932, in that it focused on public devotions and processions, but it made children central actors, giving them an opportunity to stand as the focus of the religious community's attention. Talking of her First Communion in the 1970s, one woman remembered:

The school I went to made a great fuss of the communicants. It was a magical day. The sun shone, my grandparents were there, it was a very happy day. And as a seven-year-old girl I was happy because it was all about me. ([Wallace 2014](#))

Margaret Duffy, born in 1920, had similar recollections of her own First Holy Communion: 'It was a very happy day for me as all the children were invited back to the school and we had a party. We received Communion in the convent chapel and afterwards walked around the convent gardens singing hymns' (Recollections of Margaret Duffy, born 1920, [Ryan et al. 1995](#), p. 41). Happiness, feeling 'magical', and being the center of attention are popular themes in childhood memories of First Communions across decades. First Holy Communion, then, may have marked an important rite of passage within Catholicism, but it also allowed girls to be the center of focus, to 'be made a great fuss of'—something that may not happen again until their wedding day, if ever. Before the 1960s in particular, First Communion may have been one of the only occasions during which pictures were taken of children; when reminiscing on their girlhoods, then, adult women may have featured their Communion day because they had photographs of it and themselves in their dresses ([Mairead's First Communion 2014](#)).

Jennifer Stith's analysis of the First Communion dress and ceremony posits that, for Catholic girls, the occasion marks an initiation into, or even a marriage to, patriarchy and is essentially analogous to becoming a child bride. Through the ritual, she argues, the religious community affirms girls' disempowerment within the Church, who now will be indoctrinated, 'taught to treasure their "holy" subordination' ([Stith 2015](#), p. 90). Stith also argues that, during First Holy Communion, girls definitively learn to put their individual interests aside and instead embrace patriarchal community values, even committing to doing the religious community's bidding. As such, they are deprived of their individual identities and instead subsumed by a patriarchal culture that will demand that they be not only selfless but also self-sacrificing ([Stith 2015](#), p. 96). While Stith's comparison of First Communion to marriage is of course valid, her contention that the occasion was one-dimensionally oppressive for girls should be qualified. Although some Irish girls examined here expressed anxiety and fear about Communion preparations and rituals, most did not associate the occasion with feelings of oppression. Instead, they focused on celebration, their relationships with their families and communities, and the sensual and emotional experiences related with the ritual, its clothing, and its material culture. They therefore saw themselves as, and even made themselves into, agents in the ritual and the occasion.

Girls' sense of being important and, indeed, being on display persisted once the First Holy Communion ceremony entered the chapel, although here, too, fear, trauma, and excitement mingled. Gender segregation, endemic in many Irish Catholic spaces, also pervaded the chapel on such occasions, with boys and girls sitting separately. In Elaine Crowley's memories, 'small girls dressed like miniature brides sat on one side of the chapel; on the other, small boys in short-trousered suits, serges and tweeds ...' ([Crowley 1996](#), p. 62). When the children proceeded to the altar to receive the host for the very first time, they were required to carefully and deliberately move their bodies, displaying 'the rhythm of walking in procession' ([Hérault 1999](#), p. 5). Rehearsals for these bodily practices were thorough; indeed, such preparations not only prepared children for the special day but also for a lifetime of controlling their bodies, and moving them in certain ways, during Catholic sacraments and rituals ([Morgan 2010](#), p. 59). For Irish children, First Holy Communion was an occasion during which the importance of their bodies as part of how they 'did belief'



became evident. Of course, a significant moment in the day was the actual consumption of the host; here, too, children were instructed about proper behavior. One woman who made her First Communion in the 1970s later remembered her grandmother warning her not to let the host touch her teeth. The girl was careful to obey this instruction but became dismayed when the host instead stuck to the roof of her mouth (Mairead's First Communion 2014). Maura Murphy, who grew up in County Offaly in the 1930s, also expressed anxiety over chewing the host. '[A] rumour went round the school', she wrote later, 'that the Eucharist was so big we were liable to choke on it. I was particularly anxious because of my small swallow: I've always had to chop up food into tiny morsels ...' (Murphy 2004, p. 29).

### 3. Bodies and Clothing

Intertwined in girls' Communion memories were bodies and things, and the material culture associated with First Communion sometimes helped girls think of their bodies in positive ways. A woman named Elaine, remembering her First Communion in the early twentieth century, told an interviewer of her experience decades later. According to the interviewer, 'Although this event had taken place close to seventy years before our interview, she was able to describe in startling detail the "candle and nice flower" that she held during the procession' (McKenna 2006, p. 51). Having nice things to wear and hold during First Holy Communion was not inconsequential to Irish Catholic girls. The importance of material culture to women and girls, particularly in a religious context, has been explored by scholars who have pointed out how purchasing such items and interacting with them provided an opportunity for displaying devotion as well as claiming influence.

Objects and clothing facilitated girls' connections with the materiality of their faith and often brought meaningful sensory experiences as well (Delay 2018; Godson 2003; Godson 2015; Turpin 2006). This was an age in which, beyond special occasions such as First Holy Communion, rosary beads were carried in pockets, string scapulars were worn, and other small devotional items were carried on one's person. These objects reminded wearers of the relationship between faith and bodies. Adorning oneself in a 'lacy white dress and veil, white patent-leather shoes and matching handbag' during First Communion was a particularly memorable childhood experience. These moments 'endorsed the connections between popular Catholicism, the body, and the senses'—girls later would describe the feel of the silk on their skin and the smell of the candles in the Church as some of their most vibrant memories (Delay 2019, pp. 87–88). During the leadup to her First Communion in the 1930s, Elaine Crowley 'kept thinking of myself dressed in the gorgeous clothes. Every stitch brand new. I had already handled them and smelled their newness' (Crowley 1996, pp. 60–61).

First Holy Communion could be a deeply personal occasion, one in which a child pondered their connection to Christ and considered the meaning of bodies—not just their own but also the body of Christ, and especially consuming the body of Christ. Fasting therefore loomed particularly large in children's First Communion memories and in Church guidebooks on Communion. All Catholics, not merely children receiving First Communion, were expected to fast before receiving the host. Donleavy's nineteenth-century catechism asserted that, to prepare for Communion, all parishioners must 'take neither meat nor drink, nor medicine, from midnight; to be silent and discreet, and gravely and orderly clothed' (Donleavy 1848, p. 231). 'One of the most important things to be drilled into our heads, and one of the greatest causes of anxiety', wrote Mary Gordon of her childhood in *The Furrow*, 'was the pre-Communion fast' (Gordon 2007, p. 335).

Denying and purifying the body for First Holy Communion via fasting was a custom that pervaded Ireland in the twentieth century. Indeed, fasting before receiving Communion at any time remained a requirement, although throughout the century the guidelines on this changed, becoming flexible according to some Church documents (De Cléir 2017, p. 102). The *Companion to the Catechism*, 1906 version, advised: 'It is also required before

communion that we be fasting from midnight—and we should appear very modest and humble, and clean in dress—showing in our exterior the greatest devotion and reverence to so holy a sacrament’ ([The Christian Brothers 1906](#), p. 278). In the 1958 Catechism for Children, the rule was given as follows: ‘You must not take anything to eat for three hours before receiving Holy Communion, nor anything to drink for one hour’ ([De Cléir 2017](#), p. 102).

Fasting for Catholicism certainly was not unique to twentieth-century Ireland; indeed, further exploration into the practice may reveal the transnational commonalities of Catholic children’s experiences. Denying the body of food, however, may have held unique meaning for Irish Catholics, particularly in the early decades of the twentieth century, when memories of hunger during the Great Famine persisted. Indeed, early twentieth-century commentaries on fasting in Ireland projected the importance of denying the body not only to faith but also to Irishness, endorsing a uniquely national martyrdom. In 1911, the *Catholic Bulletin* published a story glamorizing the self-denying bodily practices of a girl:

A peasant girl walks seven or eight miles to early Mass. She is fasting and barefooted, as she trudges through bog-paths and mireland, carrying her shoes in her hand until she reaches the house of a friend near the chapel, where she dons them clean and shining in order to enter the home of God becomingly. After receiving Holy Communion she returns the same dreary journey without breaking her fast, her heart elated with gladness, because the way for her is a walk to Emmaus. What an example she sets to the lady of fashion who rolls to church in her carriage, or stays away because of a shower of rain! ([Guinan 1911](#), p. 64)

This account displays not only self-denial but also self-harm as exemplary forms of devotion. That its writers contrasted this pious girl with ‘the lady of fashion who rolls to church in her carriage’ was no accident.

By the early twentieth century, and particularly during and after the Irish Revolution, print culture prescribed strict guidelines to Irish women on appropriately Irish fashion. Conduct literature, Church publications, and newspapers glorified women’s domestic roles and duties while preaching the dangers of ‘public’ women: those who worked for wages, appeared on the streets without chaperones, or even emigrated. Underlying these concerns, of course, were fears of single women’s sexuality. In the 1920s and 1930s, ‘concerns were raised’, writes Maria Luddy, ‘about illegitimacy, unmarried mothers, the apparent spread of venereal diseases, prostitution, levels of sexual crime, deviancy, and the dangers of sociability’ ([Luddy 2007](#), p. 79). Single women’s corporeal actions, including drinking, dancing, fashionable dress, and, of course, sex, were particularly threatening to a postcolonial nation that was attempting to create itself anew. Part and parcel of this endeavor was a rejection of the modern ‘New Woman’ so popular in Britain, the former colonizer. In Ireland, and particularly Catholic Ireland, women and girls were to be pious and modest, setting their sights on their faith and their families and rejecting foreign influences. What Irish women and girls wore, then, was not only indicative of religious devotion but also national allegiance. In 1924, Bishop of Kilmore, Most Rev. Dr. Finegan, wrote in a pastoral that women’s modern fashions were ‘a crying scandal’. He denounced the clothing he saw women wearing ‘in daily life’ as well as in advertisements. Particularly horrifying, however, according to Finegan, was that some girls ‘presented themselves for Holy Communion in these [modern] dresses’. Finegan wrote that he was tempted to ‘pass over’ those girls who were dressed inappropriately and reminded readers that the Pope recently forbade priests from giving communion to those who ‘present themselves in an unbecoming dress’ (*Freeman’s Journal*, 3 March 1924).

The importance of clothing in transnational Catholic culture has been elucidated by Sally Dwyer-McNulty, who posits, ‘when it comes to clothing, Catholics take it seriously ... Catholicism is rooted in a sacramental worldview. In other words, symbols matter ... they matter a lot’ ([Dwyer-McNulty 2014](#), p. 1). Irish women, indeed, reflected in autobiographies, memoirs, and oral histories on the impression that clothing made on them

as Catholic girls. Moving away from the negative and cautionary tone that commentators such as Finegan expressed, however, most girls viewed clothing in a positive or even empowering way, and clothing became an avenue into feminized faith worlds. Many girls, for instance, looked up to nuns as examples. Women religious, with their strange habits, appeared as otherworldly and, certainly, separate from the other women—mostly wives and mothers—that girls knew. A nun named Kate told historian Yvonne McKenna what attracted her to her future vocation when she was a child. According to Kate, ‘The nuns came [to visit our school]. A postulant and a sister . . . I liked the postulant’s dress. I liked these white cuffs, you see? And the veil and the bit of white around it . . . that just attracted me’ (McKenna 2006, p. 58). Nuns’ habits represented mystery but also power, and some Irish girls very much wanted to be like, and dress like, women religious. Another woman recalled her fervent desire to join the Children of Mary for a particular reason: ‘Being only seven years of age then I was too young to join [the Children of Mary], though I did look forward to the future when I could sport the blue cape and look grand. At that stage, I had a yearning for uniforms’ (Reminiscences of Patricia Kelly, born 1916, Ryan et al. 1995, p. 35).

Clothing, then, was consciously remembered by Irish women as constitutive of their Catholic girlhoods and as something that could bring them deeper into both their faith and communities of women. In 1932, the Eucharistic Congress in Dublin served as a very public and very visible testament to the new Irish state’s commitment to the faith of the majority of its citizens. Lay Catholics in Dublin anticipated the day, looking forward to the visible spectacle. For one girl, Elaine Crowley, the actual day began in disappointment after she contracted measles and had to sit out the celebrations. ‘. . . I never saw our church floodlit or went into O’Connell street to see the decorations’, she later lamented, ‘nor to the Phoenix Park where thousands of children, dressed in white and wearing veils, went to mass’ (Crowley 2003, p. 46; Delay 2013, p. 18). For Crowley, what was lost was not only an opportunity to take part in the excitement but also to wear a white dress and veil and parade down the street with the other girls. It was also the communal experience—shared with other girls—that she missed.

Of course, boys, too, wore special clothing for their First Holy Communion, but clothing played a lesser role in the occasion for boys. In 1936, Dominican Sister M. Imelda Joseph wrote to May Duggan (wife of revolutionary and politician Éamonn Duggan) with a reminder that her son, who would soon make his First Communion, would need a new outfit. The nun enclosed a list of clothing that Mrs. Duggan would need to buy ‘as soon as possible’ for the boy (Joseph 1936). May Duggan clearly complied; soon after his First Holy Communion, the Duggan boy wrote to his mother, ‘I am very glad I made my First Holy Communion. I said a lot of prayers for Daddy and you’. The boy, Gerard, also told his mother he was ‘very glad I have new shoes’ (Duggan 1936a). Unlike women memoirists and girl writers, Gerard Duggan referenced his ‘new shoes’ as an afterthought; they were hardly a significant part of the day for him. In fact, in another letter, this time written to his father, Duggan mentioned his First Communion, which he would make in a few days hence, but spent far more time discussing not his shoes but a more meaningful object: a pen that his father appears to have given him. The pen, he wrote, was ‘ahright’ (sic), even though Gerard’s teacher took it to hold on to so the boy would not lose it (Duggan 1936b). In these examples, Duggan formulaically thanked his mother for his new shoes but revealed his particular attachment to the object bought by his father. In doing so, he also may have expressed that his relationship with his father was more valuable than that of his mother.

Indeed, for some boys, new Communion clothes could be a nuisance forced upon them by their mothers, indicative of their mother’s often annoying strict religious influence. Born in 1908, Michael McDonnell later told interviewers of his First Holy Communion outfit:

It was in 1914 I made my first Holy Communion. I was only seven at the time. I remember my mother not letting me eat the night before . . . Every piece of clothing was brand new. Everyone was dressed up but of course not to the same extent as now. My mother was very proud of me dressed up as I was like a sailor

in my shorts and top. (Recollections of Michael McDonnell, born 1908. [Ryan et al. 1995](#), p. 79)

Both fasting and clothing feature in McDonnell's description, and both center on the figure of his mother, whom he clearly remembered as dictating his actions on that important day. Unlike some of his women peers, then, McDonnell's interpretation of First Communion clothing focused not on his personal enjoyment, senses, or pride but on his mother's emotions and actions. In contrast, Limerick's Áine R. would later remember of her Communion: 'It was a lovely day. And of course, the veil was borrowed. The dress was bought and 'twas lovely. White shoes, buckskin, aww! (Laughter)' ([De Cléir 2017](#), p. 160). Roise Rua, who grew up on a small remote island off the Donegal coast, also recalled with joy the 'clothes she got for the big day' of her first Communion: 'the skirt was blue, the coat was plaid and belted, and I had a bright ribbon' ([Ua Cnáimhsí 2009](#), p. 26).

For girls, in fact, occasions such as First Holy Communion and the clothing they wore for them linked them clearly with their mothers and other women, fostering closeness. 'Women,' I have written elsewhere, '—nuns, grandmothers, mothers, and even the Blessed Virgin Mary, appear as girls' principal religious influences' in twentieth-century Ireland, with the mother-daughter bond particularly stalwart ([Delay 2013](#), pp. 23–24). While Irish girls could have conflicting feelings about their mothers' religious influence, including resentment at mothers' embracing of martyrdom, the main theme in girls' life narratives is affection. Bonds were cemented by Catholic material items given from mothers to daughters; in the recollections of several memoirists, gifts including rosary beads, prayer books, and, of course, First Communion clothing became cherished possessions ([Delay 2013](#), p. 24).

#### 4. Family Connections

In her exploration of Catholic clothing in modern America, Sally Dwyer-McNulty interrogates the meaning of clothing for Catholics both religious and lay, arguing that clothing helped to 'negotiate relations between religious authority and laity, men and women, and adults and youth' ([Dwyer-McNulty 2014](#), p. 1). First Communion dresses certainly allowed Irish girls and the adults in their lives to negotiate relationships. Mostly, these garments helped to create and enforce family bonds for Irish women. While many girls' families bought their dresses, others developed practices of handing down dresses between siblings and across generations. One woman's memories of her First Communion dress underscored relationships with women family members. 'My sister wore it', she recalled, 'with the bodice altered; after that my mother wrapped it up in tissue paper along with the crocheted shawl she had made. She still keeps it in the brown box that we bought it in. I remember as a child getting the box, thinking it was huge. However, of course it's tiny' ([Wallace 2014](#)). According to Attracta O'Malley, who made her First Communion in Mayo in 1960,

I remember my First Holy Communion Day as if it was yesterday. My brother Val (RIP) and I made ours together. It was just a regular Sunday Mass at St. James Church Charlestown but it was very special for all of us. My Aunt Mary Ellen had sent me a beautiful frilly dress and I couldn't wait to wear it. ([O'Malley 2019](#))

O'Malley's memories center on family: her brother and also her aunt. While she does not reveal where her aunt was living, the fact that Mary Ellen sent her a dress suggests that the two lived far apart. It is possible, indeed, that the aunt in this story had emigrated. In this case, then, a dress helped an aunt connect with her niece but also may have helped her retain her place in the family and religious community after she was no longer physically there. Irish women emigrants in the late nineteenth and twentieth century frequently sent home clothing, other items, and even cash remittances; the latter, indeed, helped fuel the Irish economy for decades, but these exchanges also helped women emigrants retain links to their kin ([Lynch-Brennan 2014](#), pp. 52–53). Communion dresses also sometimes left Ireland for other parts of the Diaspora as they made their way to female relatives. For one woman, sending her own First Communion dress to her cousin in Malawi was a thrill.



The dress eventually was returned to the woman, and she kept it because it had become meaningful to the larger family. Indeed, that this woman's hopes that her own daughters would wear the dress were dashed—they were too big to fit in it—did not prevent her from keeping and treasuring the dress even still (Wallace 2014).

Dublin's Maureen McLoughlin later remembered of her 1940s Communion, 'As the only grandchild in the family my grandparents had bought my dress and corded silk coat in Walpoles and the bonnet with silk frills' (Maureen McLoughlin, born 1930s, Ryan et al. 1995, p. 83). The details recounted by McLoughlin—the material of her outfit, the 'frills' attached to it, and where it was purchased—are similarly specific to most other accounts, but in this case, her outfit linked her to her grandparents and thus her lineage. Similarly, one woman, contributing to an RTÉ radio documentary, recounted: 'We were certainly frightened of the confession part of it, but the Communion part of it was very exciting . . . I was very proud to be wearing the family First Communion dress and veil' (Mairead's First Communion 2014).<sup>3</sup> Inheriting a dress was a practice that most women described as particularly meaningful to them, both as girls and adults. Tilly Blanchfield wrote of her 1920s First Communion: 'I had lots of older sisters. We had to share the same Holy Communion dress. The Dress was originally my grandmother's dress and it was cut down to size for us . . . I felt very proud wearing the dress' (Tilly Blanchfield, born 1917, Athy, County Kildare. Ryan et al. 1995, p. 81).

Beliefs that First Holy Communion dresses were something to be purchased new thus coexisted with other traditions making such garments treasured family possessions passed down across generations. First Communion, then, could serve as an initiation for girls into the social, religious, and cultural group comprised by the women in their families. Similar practices persisted well into the late twentieth century; for one girl's First Holy Communion in 1972, the 'beautiful broderie anglaise dress with a scalloped detail on the waist and hem', which she was so proud to wear, had also been worn by her two older sisters for their First Communions (Wallace 2014). First Holy Communion, and the clothing associated with it, then, not only reinforced mother-daughter relationships but also encouraged, especially in Catholic girls, an awareness of a familial and transgenerational devotion, one exemplified through the exchange of Communion dresses between siblings, parents and children, and even grandparents and children.

Peter McGrail's work demonstrates the importance of what he calls 'generational continuity' in First Communion ceremonies. Such occasions, he argues, have deep meaning for families; they represent a transmission of religious, communal, and family traditions. They allow parents and children to impress other family members such as grandparents. They also provide an occasion for parents to try to give their children a similar experience to the one they may have had—or even a better one (McGrail 2013, pp. 108–9). For Irish parents even recently, nostalgia over their own First Holy Communion remains powerful. One woman remembered in 2014: 'I also remember the build-up—my dad borrowing my uncle's car because he had a better car than we did; and then going to visit everyone. We're not practising Catholics, my husband and I, and we're not going to bring our daughter up Catholic, so she's going to miss the First Communion—which is a shame as it was such a big day for me and for most little girls' (Wallace 2014). That this woman, in 2014, specifically linked the specialness of First Communion with her daughter and 'most little girls' reminds us how meaningful and persistent the relationship between girls and Communion was and is.

According to Magray, Irish nuns created the fanfare, including food and entertaining relatives and neighbors, associated with modern Communion celebrations (Mairead's First Communion 2014). In doing so, these women religious built on gendered historical traditions of hospitality and generosity. Preparing food and hosting neighbors for post-Communion celebrations were, of course, the responsibility of wives and mothers. These celebrations revealed women's domestic prowess and talents in upholding hospitality customs.<sup>4</sup> When women loaned or gave their own Communion dresses to female relatives, they also affirmed traditions of hospitality and gift-giving. Gifts, and especially money,

were commonly associated with First Communions by the early twentieth century. Here, again, it was in the nineteenth century, at the hands of women religious, that gift-giving became associated with First Holy Communion. Nuns often would give their pupils small gifts: ‘a holy card, a little relic’ to help them celebrate and remember the occasion (*‘Mairead’s First Communion’* 2014).

By the early twentieth century, gift-giving had become a central element of Communion celebrations. Remembering her Communion in the 1920s, Tilly Blanchford of County Kildare remarked: ‘After the mass we walked home and some of the neighbors gave me a penny each. In those days a penny was worth a lot. My mother made a special dinner for us all. All my aunts and uncles came to our house to visit me on my Communion day. They all gave me a small present. I was thrilled with everything’ (Tilly Blanchfield, born 1917, Athy, County Kildare. [Ryan et al. 1995](#), pp. 81–82). Neighbors, food, mothers, gifts, relatives: alongside clothing, these are the themes that dominate Communion recollections. In 1940s Dublin, Maureen McLoughlin was thrilled with a particular Communion gift: ‘My aunt Bella gave me a present of a beautiful china doll for my Holy Communion and it was my pride and joy and dearly loved by me’ (Maureen McLoughlin, born 1930s, Dublin. [Ryan et al. 1995](#), pp. 83–84). Like *Attracta O’Malley’s* aunt, who sent *Attracta* her Communion dress, this Aunt Bella affirmed the bond with her niece through gift-giving. We thus can view gift-giving, along with purchasing or consumerism or preparing food and celebrations, as central elements of a feminized popular Catholicism that girls were initiated into during First Holy Communion. At seven or eight years old, Irish Catholic girls watched and learned what their responsibilities as Irish Catholic women would be. For the Catholic Church hierarchy, Communion may have signified an initiation into a parish community, but for Irish girls the occasion was much more: for girls, the occasion, and especially the clothing and things associated with it, signified a rite of passage into a feminized devotional world, a community of Catholic women made up mostly of family members, and an introduction to expectations of consumerism, money management, hospitality, and gift-giving.

In *Uniform: Clothing and Discipline in the Modern World*, Tynan and Godson explore how and why, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the increasingly popular uniform, not only in militaries, workplaces, or monasteries but also beyond, became ‘one of modernity’s material practices; it represented resistance to tradition and the embrace of rationality’ ([Tynan and Godson 2019](#), pp. 1–2). For the Catholic Church, however, uniforms, including religious habits, could be a force against modernity and secularism. While the twentieth century, and particularly Vatican II, brought a loosening of uniform constraints for certain Catholic religious orders ([Keenan 2019](#)), it also brought a movement to enforce conformity in girls’ Communion attire. Ongoing debates in the Irish Church about the potential dangers of capitalistic individualism and bodily freedom or expression alongside mounting fears of secularization found expression in what girls wore to their First Communion.

## 5. Consumerism and Advertising

Even as early as the 1930s and 1940s, representatives of the Church instructed parents to ensure that their children were ‘suitably attired’ for communion. These entreaties were not new; in *Donleavy’s* catechism, first published in the nineteenth century, parents were reminded that for First Communion, their children must be ‘gravely and orderly clothed’ ([Donleavy 1848](#), p. 231). As the twentieth century progressed, however, and fears of modernization and secularization only increased, girls’ clothing drew more attention. For the Church, the goals included conformity and religious respectability, which, many hoped, would ward off modern individualism and secularism and prevent girls from developing a taste for elaborate fashions. Mothers took such guidelines seriously, sparing no cost or effort to adorn their daughters appropriately. First Holy Communion was an occasion that offered Irish families an opportunity to demonstrate their religious and national commitment, not least through the clothing that they put their children in. However, mothers often went far beyond what Church leaders may have wished when they adorned their children for

Communion. Rejecting notions of simplicity and conformity, they diligently attended to their daughters' wishes and their own, even if it meant courting censure. One Limerick woman remembered of her First Communion, for example:

I remember being down there and of course the nuns had told us not to have flowers or a purse. Like, they were after telling us before that now, "That's immoral" or not immoral—or "disrespectful" or something, and I was ashamed of my life because some of the nuns appeared at the church, St Mary's and here was I, well somebody was minding my flowers, and the purse, but afterwards when they were at the door, and we coming out, I was saying "Oh Jesus they'll kill me now when I get to the school on Monday!". (De Cléir 2017, p. 160)

Mothers' motivations in providing elaborate dress, flowers, and purses for their daughters included keeping up with their neighbors and avoiding shame (McGrail 2013, p. 163). Even poverty sometimes was no obstacle to elaborate girls' Communion outfits. Maura Doyle's mother 'made sure that I had the same as the rest of the class' by washing and ironing a neighbor's clothing for extra money before her daughter's special day (Murphy 2004, p. 29). By observing her mother, Maura learned not only the importance of appearance, especially when one was on display in the neighborhood, but also women's responsibilities in terms of hard work and money management.

The process of purchasing First Communion clothing sheds light on financial transactions, advertising, shopping, and garment-making practices in Ireland. Throughout the twentieth century, Irish newspapers and magazines advertised a plethora of religious items to their readers. Barry Sheppard argues that Catholic consumerism began to peak in 1920s Ireland, which was becoming a 'visual' society centered on newspaper advertisements and other visual items such as election posters. It was a religious occasion, according to Sheppard—the Eucharistic Congress in Dublin in 1932—that became Ireland's 'first advertising extravaganza, leading to an economic boom in the state' (Sheppard 2017). The Eucharistic Congress, writes Sheppard, also provided an opportunity for the new Irish state to display a distinctly national Catholicism—'its own brand of Catholic spirituality'. Decorating homes and streets for the occasions, as well as outfitting parishioners, including children, in suitable clothing, dominated preparations in parts of Dublin. Advertisements for flags and badges induced even the urban poor to spend, or even borrow, to display their national faith (Sheppard 2017).

It was at exactly the same time—the 1930s—that First Communion preparations became more elaborate in Dublin and beyond. Mary Peckham Magray argues that it was Irish nuns in the late nineteenth century who 'constructed the event of First Communion as we know it today' by encouraging families to make the event an elaborate celebration. Nuns' motivations, according to Magray, were to make the 'devotional revolution' attractive to, and popular with, the laity, especially the young. Children whose religious spirits were inspired by such occasions, ideally, would bring such fervor home to their parents, and the result would be an overall increasing commitment to religion (Magray 1998, pp. 89–90). Here, women religious were successful. By the 1930s, as Catholicism gained public prestige through its alliance with the new state and religious occasions, such as the Eucharistic Congress-endorsed spectacle, First Communion became increasingly important, and outfits more elaborate.

From the 1930s on, major Irish retailers used newspaper advertisements to impress upon mothers that they would provide the best Communion clothing at the best price. In 1947, Roches Stores ran an advertisement in the *Irish Examiner* reminding consumers: 'You Want Best'. Its ad highlighted a variety of 'frocks' for sale. Some were made of silk georgette featuring 'attractive frilling' or 'fancy edging'. Others were embroidered, included lace decorations, or featured 'a stiff net underskirt' for volume (*Irish Examiner*, 24 April 1947). In the 1930s, Gordon's on Mary Street, Dublin, advertised lace dresses and veils at a cost of 15/6 and 5/6, respectively (*Irish Examiner*, 17 November 1937). Similar advertisements with similar products, sometimes accompanied by images, persisted over the next few decades. In 1953, Gleeson's, a children's clothing shop, had for sale First Communion

dresses in ‘white silk with braiding’ accompanied by ‘nylon net veils’ adorned with ‘three satin crosses’ (*Irish Press*, 13 April 1953).

While it is impossible to know where all Irish families—rural and urban, well-off and poor—got their First Communion clothing, certainly those who identified as middle-class Catholics most commonly purchased dresses and veils from stores. A respondent to a folklore questionnaire in Rathgormack, Co. Waterford remarked: ‘All white is worn for Confirmation and Holy Communion. Sometimes we buy our clothes in town’ ([Rathgormack, Co. Waterford, The Schools’ Collection n.d.](#)). More well-off families may have purchased Communion dresses in cities or towns, but others relied on locally made garments. The National Folklore Collection’s Schools’ Questionnaire included as a category ‘Clothes Made Locally’, in which informants described local dress customs. Most affirmed the ‘special’ clothing worn by girls for First Communion: a white dress and veil. Some detailed more specifically the ‘Irish lace’ used in First Holy Communion dresses ([Saint Patricks, Aughnaclyffe, Co. Longford, The Schools’ Collection n.d.](#)). A County Clare informant told of a local tailor who made clothing in his own home but would travel to homes in the locale, completing work there as well. This tailor’s ‘busy seasons’ included ‘shrove time as people get new clothes for marriages also for first holy Communion and Confirmation’ ([Cloonlara, Co. Clare, The Schools’ Collection n.d.](#)).

The demand for Communion clothing, whether made locally or in places like Dublin, only increased throughout the decades. In 1963, a Dublin shop advertised in the *Irish Press* for a dressmaker specifically devoted to constructing ‘Confirmation and Communion frocks’ (*Irish Press*, 11 January 1963). By the 1960s, however, changes were afoot. In previous decades, especially from 1920 to 1960, First Communion dresses commonly were made from imported materials or materials with foreign-sounding names. Tilly Blanchfield of County Kildare emphasized what she wore in the 1920s and her pride in her ‘Spanish silk’ Communion dress’ (Recollections of Tilly Blanchfield, Athy, County Kildare, 1920s. [Ryan et al. 1995](#), p. 81). Una Darcy, whose First Communion occurred in the 1930s, remembered her dress made of ‘broderie anglaise’ with a blue ribbon ([Darcy n.d.](#)). The 1960s, however, produced a movement toward simplicity and Irish-made materials. A 1964 letter to the editor of the *Irish Press* stated: ‘At all our social functions we read of the ladies being dressed in French lace, peau-de-soie, Italian silk, etc; not one in Irish lace, linen, or poplin’ (*Irish Press*, 1 December 1964). The message of the letter was clear: echoing in part the antimodernization, antiglobalization rhetoric of the 1920s and 1930s, its writer stated that Irish women and girls should wear Irish clothing. A corresponding focus on home-spun and even practical clothing also subtly criticized First Communion excesses and their impracticality. In 1968, the *Irish Press* published a how-to article for women who wished their daughters to be warm on their First Holy Communion: a Mrs. Stokes shared her crochet pattern for the occasion (*Irish Press*, 12 March 1968). Such articles encouraged women to make their daughters’ dresses rather than buying them and to use Irish wool if possible. By 1967, Nuala McCullough wrote in the *Irish Farmers’ Journal* that the ‘long, elaborately decorated confection’ of the past was out of fashion. Instead, a ‘much greater simplicity’ and ‘more practical viewpoint’ was informing dress choices (*Irish Farmers Journal*, 6 May 1967).

These changes toward First Communion dresses corresponded with larger transformations in the Church. In the 1960s, the Second Vatican Council affirmed the Eucharist as ‘the source and the summit of the spiritual life’ ([Vere 2001](#)). At the same time, a movement within the Church to simplify and solemnize religious devotions to move away from visual splendor gained prominence. ‘The dispensing with “clutter” of all sorts’, writes Salvador Ryan, ‘including various statues and images, may have been intended to focus the worshipper’s mind more fully on the various movements within the liturgy itself, but it also succeeded in creating an atmosphere of sterility in what, for many, was as familiar a building as their own home’ ([Ryan 2005](#), p. 136). The movement toward simple, Irish-made Communion garments may have been part and parcel of this larger initiative to solemnize Catholic devotional life, but it was not always adhered to. Ryan argues that ‘[w]hat is



considered valuable at a popular level (and often regarded as peripheral at the level of Church hierarchy) always seems to find a way of seeping out and re-inventing itself in one way or another' (Ryan 2005, p. 139). First Holy Communion provides ample evidence for this theory. Full of visual spectacle, it only became more elaborate throughout the century. The needs and wants of the laity, and particularly lay women, found 'a way of seeping out' during Communion, and the occasion consistently reinvented itself.

## 6. Conclusions

By the 1990s, the economic revival known as the Celtic Tiger combined with new revelations about the horrors of clerical child abuse in the past and the Magdalen laundries resulted in a widespread abandonment of Catholic practice in many parts of Ireland (Fuller 2002; Smith 2007; O'Sullivan and O'Donnell 2012). Historians, in fact, have categorized the late twentieth century as a time when 'traditional Catholicism has collapsed so totally' that the Church experienced a remarkable and unprecedented 'fall from grace' (Fuller 2002, 2011, 2012; Kenny 1997). First Holy Communion, however, continued to be popular even with nonpracticing Catholics, so much so that it exposed 'fracture lines' in parishes, causing resentment amongst those who were more diligent in their religious commitments (McGrail 2013, pp. 1–2). By the late twentieth century, First Communion outfits in some places had become so elaborate—and so expensive—that they were denounced as vulgar. During the Celtic Tiger years, excessive purchasing evidenced Ireland's economic prowess, but even as recession would strike in later years, First Communion preparations—and clothing—only became more sumptuous. By 2011, Irish families were spending on average EUR 550 on their children's—mostly girls'—First Communion outfits (Those Splashing the Cash Days are Gone 2013). Some took on debt to pay for the occasion. Archbishop of Dublin Diarmuid Martin said at the time that 'there is something wrong with extravagance' and that the occasion 'has to be something simple' (Those Splashing the Cash Days are Gone 2013).

First Communion celebrations and outfits, therefore, continue to have complex and often contested meaning in Ireland. Despite this, scholarly investigations into the ritual and its material culture, past and present, remain rare, and therefore so do analyses of the importance of Catholicism to lay women and girls, and their influence in popular religion. We need to know more about how and why Irish Catholicism became a feminized faith. The First Communion dress is a good place to start. Studying it not only gives us access to the experiences and sometimes thoughts of girls in the past but tells us also how Irish girls and women, by focusing on fashion and faith, made Catholicism their own. The material culture of girls' lives—particularly what they wore, and what that meant—can reveal much about their surprising agency in the patriarchal past. First Communion dresses remind us not to dismiss as frivolous the material lives of girls and women even as they affirm that the relationship between girls, women, material culture, and religion—in Ireland and beyond—requires further study.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In 1910, in *Quam Singulari*, Pope Pius X changed the age at which Catholic children should first receive the Eucharist; whereas previously the custom was for children to wait until their early teens to receive First Holy Communion, now, children would do so around age seven (Schultz 2004, p. 45).
- <sup>2</sup> For more on the curriculum and focus of First Communion preparations, see (Schultz 2004).
- <sup>3</sup> The documentary, which chronicles an Irish girl's First Holy Communion in 2014, begins with the reminiscences of older Irish Catholics about their First Communions but does not give names or dates.
- <sup>4</sup> On 'feminist hospitality' in the Irish context, see (Quinn and Delay 2017).



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