

THE HOLY COMMUNION DRESS
IN IRELAND (c. 1900-2000)



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**The Holy Communion Dress in Ireland (c. 1900-
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This is a story about a Holy Communion Dress. In this story American writer Mary Lanigan Healy encapsulates the themes which lie at the heart of this subject, those of mother love, of childhood knowing, of sentiment and of tradition.

My First Communion Dress

For a while it seemed as though I wouldn't even have a new dress for my First Communion day. Mother thought that the one my elder sister had worn would have to do for me.

But I did want a new dress, one of my very own, for that day. I didn't mind always wearing my sisters' out-grown clothes to school, nor did I care very much that the sleeves of my coat only came up to the top of my wrists, and I had learned to walk so that the hole in my shoe did not touch the pavement. Those things were to be expected. I was not complaining even in my own heart about those everyday second bests - but my First Communion day. My one and only First Communion day.

I don't know where my mother went that day or what she did. She just put on her street coat and hat as soon as the breakfast dishes were done, and told my sister what to give us for lunch. Then she kissed us each one, and said to be very good children while she was away, and to play nicely in the yard.

It was hard to stay home as mother had said we should. But something kept us there; something in the tight dear way she looked at us when she asked us to be good. Anyway I was trying harder than ever to do all the things I should because my First Communion was just one week away.

I knew she was tired when I saw her coming along the sidewalk, because she wasn't swinging in the particular way she usually did. But when we went inside I knew that all the tiredness was sinking within her body so that it would not interfere with the nice happiness that climbed out of her arms when she took us in them for a hug.

She gave me an extra squeeze and said "Honey, I've got the cloth for your First Communion dress".

I looked down at her hand where it came around me and it had that white, wrinkled look that

her hands have the day she does her washing; and I remember I wondered if she'd had her hands in water a long time while she was gone from home. But I never knew if she had or not, because she never said where she had been. In fact all she ever said about that day was "Honey, I've got the cloth for your First Communion dress".

Mary Lanigan Healy (Ave Maria 51. 736, June 8, 1940)



Plate 1. First Holy Communion Dress of St. Therese of Lisieux, France, 1884.

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Introduction

This thesis investigates the role of the Holy Communion dress in Ireland since 1900. It aims to arrive at some understanding of the dress in terms of its religious, social and psychological significance. It also looks at the industry involved in its manufacture.

The ceremony of First Communion continues to be one of the most prodigious religious rites of passage in childhood in Ireland today, "so it is that the qualification to receive the Eucharist according to the rite of the Catholic Church which formalizes one's standing as a Communicant of the Catholic Church" (John Deedy, 1992, pg 132). In this ceremony, the Communion dress remains a constant phenomenon, though it changes in style and shape over time. Worn only once, by the vast majority of Irish girls, the Holy Communion dress is shown to play a significant and integral role in this sacred ritual.

Until now no comprehensive investigative study has been carried out in relation to the First Communion dress. Even the approximate time of when the dress was first worn in Ireland has been difficult to ascertain and yet, most Irish Catholic girls for more than a century have worn one or have yet to wear one. Information and citations concerning the dress have been scarce. In a study called "Ages of Initiation" (to be published by The Liturgical Press in 2000) Paul Turner carries out an extensive history of Confirmation and First Communion, detailing the age of recipients and the sequence of reception. However, in correspondence, he claims to make no reference to the origins of the dress.

The origins of the dress presumably relate to other white garments worn in the Catholic tradition. This thesis will therefore investigate the link between Baptism and First Communion, and trace the evolution of the white garment of Baptism to the present-day Communion Dress.

The social and cultural significance of the dress can be seen in terms of an Irish society steeped

in Catholic tradition. Church/state relations in Ireland, morality and rituals in Ireland, and Irish Catholic culture are issues which provide insight into the social significance of religion and its pervading powerful influence throughout Ireland. Within this Catholic context, the wearing of the dress has implications for community, for gender and for expressions of social diversity.

On a psychological level, this thesis will endeavour to show how information gleaned from theory and basic research has helped to understand the impact of First Holy Communion and the dress on the mind of the child. The issues discussed include the significance of Holy Communion and the dress for the occasion, the child as the center of attention, anticipation and excitement, the notion of 'good and bad' - all factors which are relevant to the emotional development of the child.

The photographic record since 1900 presented here forms an important part of the research, visually documenting more than a century of evolving dress styles and shapes. The interviews and correspondence help to expand the reality of individual experience, together with the idealism and belief system of religious ceremony and dogma.

Finally, the manufacture of Communion dresses in Ireland remains a specialist industry. It is confined to small factory and made-to-order business. In the research for this thesis, this section proved to be by far the most difficult. The manufacturers were reluctant to meet me, complete the questionnaire or to elaborate on any of the information given. However, it is from this limited information that changing trends in dress style, together with those of colour, fabric and surface decoration are documented.

The main sources concerning the origins of the white garment in religious ceremony come from Paul Turner (author of the forthcoming book 'Ages of Initiation') and Fr. John McGoldrick via the e-mail and fax.

Other relevant sources are The Catholic Central Library, Dublin, Mater Dei Library, Dublin, Louth County Library and The Redemptrist Library, Dundalk, the National Photographic Archive, Dublin. The social information comes from primary sources such as school and home interviews, phone calls, a questionnaire to manufacturers, letters placed in the main national newspapers and the actual dresses themselves. The psychological information is also derived from interviews and letters together with research from psychological texts. The main listings of manufacturing companies come from Enterprise Ireland, the Directory of Irish Clothing and the Yellow Pages.

The photographic information is from the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, Belfast, (the National Museum, Dublin were uncooperative) and finally from the many letters and interviews received from all over Ireland and England.

Overall, this thesis aims at an understanding, in its broadest context, of the white Holy Communion dress as worn in Ireland in the 20th century.

Chapter 1.

History and Origins of the First Holy Communion Dress

The origins of the First Holy Communion dress are best understood in terms of its relation to other religious rites. "My theory is that the dress appeared to be influenced by customs such as the Baptismal gown and the wedding garment" (Turner, 1999). Perrot and Martin-Fugier (1990, pg. 328) refer to "girls dressed as brides" (plates 3, 4) and to the comment from the comtesse de Gence (1910) "A girl's whole life unfolds between two veils - the communicant's and the bride's".

The first reference found with regard to the sacramental colour of white worn for First Communion and Baptism is made by Ambrose of Milan (391 AD) in his sermons on the Sacraments of Easter week:

"The angels looked down and saw you coming. They saw the natural human state, until recently soiled with the gloom and squalor of sin, suddenly shine out brilliantly. Then let them say: 'Who is this that is coming up from the wilderness in white? The angels, then, also stand and marvel.'" (Yarnold, 1994, pg.129).

This quote refers to the white garment as the newly baptised approaches to receive First Communion. The Catholic church ensured that "little ones be brought to Christ through Eucharist Communion" (*Quam Singulari*, 1910).

In ancient Ireland, it was the custom that children received First Communion at Baptism. The Communion, dipped in the consecrated chalice, was received from the finger of the priest. The infant was robed in white for Baptism. Concannon (1932, pg. 80), describes this "... as being washed clean from original sin in the sacred laver and clothed in the whiteness of the baptismal garment". Newly baptised infants received Communion until it died out as a universal practise in the West in the 13th Century. At this time the practice of receiving Holy Communion among the laity was in decline. People had begun to shy away from Communion because of "a growing realism with which people regarded the presence of Christ in the sacrament, making



Plate 3. Girls dressed as brides, France, c. 1900.



Plate 4. Jules Octave Triquet, Solemn Communion, France, c. 1900.

the giving of the sacrament to children too young to understand increasingly inappropriate" (Searle, 1980, pg. 153-154). In 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council ordered that every baptised person who had attained the age of discretion go to Confession and Communion once a year. This was under pain of excommunication and refusal of ecclesiastical burial! However, no mention was made of infants in this context, and it was not until the 16th century that the Council of Trent declared "that the sacrament of the Lord's body and blood could in no way be regarded as necessary for the salvation of children below the age of reason" (Searle, 1980 pg. 153-154). Thus, "it had gradually become customary to wait until they were twelve or even sixteen before being admitted to the sacrament" (Martos, 1991, pg. 254). The practice of infant Communion, however, did survive in some places, notably with royalty. In England in the 16th century, Elizabeth I received the Eucharist for the first time while still wearing the white robe of Baptism. This practice is still found in Greek and Oriental churches today. The common age for First Communion for older children between 1593 and 1910 was between ten and fourteen.

Pope Pius X (1903-1914) saw no reason why young children should be denied the Eucharist. His 1910 decree '*Quam Singulari*' called for the early reception of the sacrament by children aged seven and the frequent reception of the Eucharist. "At the baptismal font before God, they bow to the promises of baptism which without their consciousness their godparents spoke the first time, and with consciousness they now repeat" (Sailor, 1933, pg. 579). According to Perrot and Martin-Fugier (1990, pg. 328), Pope Pius hoped that early Communion would become a "bulwark against temptation and sin", that it would shift the focus from adolescence and virginity to an "age when they still retain their original innocence, exempt from the taint of vice" and make "the occasion less of a prefiguration to marriage", and that it would "diminish the ostentatious display".

In 1332, St. Imelda of Bologna, had ardently requested First Communion before her 12th birthday, which was refused. She had already entered the Dominican cloister of Valdipietera. On Ascension Day 1333, when she was 11 years old and denied the reception of First

Communion, the sacred host appeared above her head. The priest then gave her First Communion. This was also her last "for she died in the rapture of her thanksgiving". Thus, First Holy Communion is traditionally celebrated on her feast day of May 13th.

The white robe in Baptism finds its origin in the chrism cloth, a white robe put on the baby in earlier times, between immersion and anointing. In a letter written by a Roman deacon called John to Senarius, in response to some questions about the traditional practises surrounding christian initiation, he says that after Baptism the newly baptised are robed in white and their heads anointed with chrism (Searle, 1980, pg. 14). In the ceremony the child was 'confirmed', being anointed with 'chrism' directly after baptism. The Prayer Book's (Prayer Book of Edward VI, 1549) instruction tells that the minister is to put this cloth on the child with the words:

"Take this white vesture for a token of the innocencie, which by God's grace in this holy sacramente of Baptisme, is given to thee".

During the 17th century, "when swaddling began to be cautiously abandoned, the christening sets of small garments which were worn with the swaddling bands, were replaced by white satin robes, which were worn over a petticoat" (Davis, 1991, pg. 267). The chrism cloth, at first plain and white, later developed into a more ornate garment.

Thus, the connection between the sacrament of Baptism and First Holy Communion confirms the connection between the white worn at Baptism and the white Holy Communion dress.

The white colour of both the Communion dress and the Baptismal garment is symbolic of the traditional Catholic values of hope and resurrection. According to Theodore, Bishop Of Mopsuestia 392-428 AD: (3:26)

" As soon as you come up out of the font, you put on a dazzling garment of pure white. When you experience the resurrection in reality and put on immortality and incorruptibility, you will not need such garments any longer; but you need them now, because you have not yet received these gifts in reality, but only in symbols and signs...." (Yarnold, 1994, pg. 197-198).

White was also described by him as "a sign of the world of shining splendour and the way of life to which you have already passed in symbol" (Yarnold, 1994, pg.197-198). Here, white is associated with transcendence and redemption. Cyril of Jerusalem preaching to the newly baptised shortly before his death in 387 AD said,

"And let your garments be always white... your spiritual dress must be truly white and shining, so that you may say, in the words of the blessed Isaiah: 'Let my soul rejoice in the Lord: he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, and with the robe of gladness he has covered me.'" (Yarnold, 1994, pg. 88-89).

Chapter 2.

Religious Significance of the Sacrament

Holy Communion dresses give visual expression to the purity, innocence and sacredness of First Communion. But also behind the excitement and glamour of the Communion dress lies a symbolism fundamental to a Catholic religion which dominates Irish culture and society. Breifne Walker (1982, pg. 813) writes about the Irish having a 'strong personal devotion, fidelity to Mass and the sacraments and a loyalty to the Church as an institution'. These practices are strong elements of Irish Catholic tradition and social order since the mid 19th century.

History reveals how Ireland became a society formed by religious ritual. From 1169 to 1922 Ireland was under British rule which meant the religion of the majority, Catholicism was suppressed. It was after Catholic Emancipation in 1829 and the Great Famine in 1845 that a devotional revolution of Catholicism, with all its manifestations of sanctity, emerged in Ireland. M. Drumm (1996, pg. 88) describes the effect of Archbishop Paul Cullen (1852-1878) on the post-Famine Church as so enormous that some have termed it the 'Cullenisation' of Irish Catholicism. It was his key goal to turn Irish Catholics into a church going population. In order to do this, a plan of church building began. In 1865 there were 1,842 churches in Ireland, increasing to 2,417 in 1906. Through an insistence that Mass be offered only in churches, the practice became regularised, thus providing easy access to the sacraments. Another effect of the revolution was the introduction to Ireland of 'continental expressions of piety' (Terence Brown, 1981, pg. 27). These expressions took the form of the Rosary, Forty Hours, Perpetual adoration, Novenas, blessed altars, Benediction, Vespers, Jubilees, Triduum, pilgrimages, shrines, processions and retreats. People expressed their faith through holy beads, scapulars, religious medals and holy pictures. Irish people adopted these new

after Reformation

expressions in order to protect themselves against future horrors. The Great Famine had left a lasting imprint on the Irish psyche. These symbols and rituals of Catholicism helped to unify Irish national spirit. According to Terence Brown (1981, pg. 28) "these new practices offered to most Irish people a way to be Irish, distinguishing themselves from the rest of the inhabitants of the British Isles". Thus, a new religious consciousness had been forged. In 1904, Horace Plunkett commented that "In no other country probably is religion so dominant an element in the daily life of the people as in Ireland" (Brown, 1981, pg. 30).

Catholic rituals and symbols have been responsible for the shaping of Irish people in respect to habits, mode of life and behaviour as a whole. Jeremiah Newman (1983, pg. 26) writes about "a pattern of behaviour reflective of a set of moral values which society regards as important and conformity to which is essential for its continued well-being". Drumm (1996, pg. 90) has suggested that these moral values are; "personal scrupulosity, individual ambition and religious rigour".

Central to Catholicism, the celebration of Mass in church is an important expression of Irish faith. Central to the Mass is Transubstantiation and Holy Communion. The ceremony of First Holy Communion is therefore an important moment in the life of not only the individual but also the church and the community. According to Martos "First Communion became an important ceremonial occasion for Catholic children, sometimes even rivalling Confirmation" (1991, pg. 254).

In Holy Communion, the Eucharist is ~~symbolic~~ of the body and blood of Jesus Christ. When Mass is celebrated a community receives the bread of life symbolising a shared meal which implies the shared life of the Catholic community. "Their faith in Christ is thus made known openly before the whole community" (Sailor, 1933, pg. 579). The celebration of Mass is participated in by millions of Catholics all over the world every Sunday. People gather for prayer and what they believe to be their spiritual nourishment for the week. They go forth with

a renewed sense of their identity and understanding of what it is to be Catholic. Liam Ryan in 'The Furrow' (January, 1979) says the church acts as the "conscience of society". Enda McDonagh (1982, pg. 809) cites the basic role of the church as "to continue the preaching and work of Jesus Christ in announcing and promoting and in some measure to embody the kingdom of God".

Chapter 3.

Religious Education for First Holy Communion

The majority of Catholic Church attention is devoted to the key structures of the family and school. The primary and secondary schools have been, during the 20th century, resources through which Catholicism is taught. According to Healy and Reynolds (1985, pg. 74) the "school system is of major importance in creating, sharing and transmitting a nation's values and meaning", and that from 1920 to 1960 "the core meaning of Irish society - Nationalism and Catholicism - were disseminated by the schools". It is through the schools that Catholic children are prepared for First Confession, First Holy Communion, and Confirmation. Catholic schools close on holy days to enable pupils to attend Mass.

The Veritas "Children of God" book series 'Alive-O' religion programme is taught. This programme cites the aim of religious education as creating "a context wherein children have the opportunity to become aware of God's invitation, to hear God's word and to explore how best they can respond in their own lives" (Hyland, 1998).

Children learn that by receiving the Eucharist, they are receiving the Lord Jesus into their lives. In receiving him, they will grow in love and friendship with him and others. Mass for a child is a vehicle through which they learn worship, reverence, and sacrifice. These virtues are synonymous with leading a good Catholic life.

Today's teaching climate is very different from that of thirty years ago. Then it would have been taken for granted that every child in the class would attend Mass every week. Now religion is interdenominational with some children not participating in First Communion at all. Attitudes, traditions and beliefs systems have changed over the generations. Some children will not have heard of God or Jesus or may not have been inside a church until they attend school. The language of religious teaching has also changed. Previously the emphasis has been on

'showing love' and how they could show love to others. This is changed because of the danger of children "misinterpreting the term love as being that of a sexual kind of love" (Maloney, interview 1999).

The programme places emphasis on the goodness of the child. Negative terms such as the Devil, etc. are never referred to, with sin loosely defined as "straying from the path" (Maloney, interview, 1999). The guilt and repression of the past has transformed into open discussion and acceptance. So much so, that "long lists of big stories had to be shortened up to only one or two sins! (Maloney, interview, 1999). However, even this new child-friendly model continues to be a source of apprehension among children. In a County Louth school interview Emer Clarke (interview, 1999) recalls that her "knees were shaking walking up to Confession".

Rehearsals for First Communion involve the learning of the prayers and songs, the processions and of how to receive Communion. 'Tuc' biscuits are used for unconsecrated Communion.

The actual Communion is described as "tasting like paper".

In the church the children, dressed in their white splendour, sit together at the front while parents, friends and family are at back. Noisy children are purposely seated beside the quiet ones. There is a strict rule prohibiting bags, beads, parasols, gloves or prayer books at the front of the church. The emphasis is on the ceremony, without the distraction of accessories. Thus, the symbolic importance of the dress is further endorsed in both ritual and tradition, and remains perhaps the most conspicuous component of both modern day and historical First Communion.

Chapter 4.

The Social Significance of the Dress and the Ceremony

While the Catholic Church recognises and endorses the Holy Communion dress as purely a religious garment, there is also a significant social and psychological relevance associated with it. For example, it expresses an ideology of Irish Catholic culture. It reinforces gender roles in Catholic children at an early age. It is an expression of conspicuous consumption and it gives rise to the notion of good and evil.

Irish culture has it that girls wear a white dress on their Communion Day. In Ireland the wearing of the white dress is synonymous with First Communion. T. Larkin (1997, pg. 88) defines culture as "the way we do things round here". American sociologist George Gerber believes that "What people learn best is not what teachers think they teach, or what their preachers think they preach, but what their cultures in fact cultivate" (Larkin, 1997, pg. 87). Girls grow up seeing pictures of their grandmothers, mothers and older sisters all making their First Communion in white dresses. It is taken for granted that they too will be the princess for the day. T. Larkin describes this as being 'coached' in culture. Plates 5, 6 and 7 show the same dress first worn in 1931, 1939, then in 1970. By May 2000 this dress will have been worn by three generations of the Barton family.

The Irish Cultural revival of the late 19th and early 20th century directly influenced Communion dress styles in the late 1950s, (plates 8 and 9). These 'Irish' dresses, made of Irish wool cream 'bainin', were worn for First Holy Communion in Scoil Mhuire, Marlborough St, Dublin, an all Irish National school. They are similar in style to the Irish dancing costume of the time. Girls wore a 'brat' or shawl, fixed on the shoulders by a Tara brooch. Celtic embroidery and motifs decorated the shawl, the front panel of the dress, the belt



Plate 5. First Communion dress, Dublin, 1931.



Plate 6. First Communion dress, Dublin, 1939.



Plate 7. First Communion dress, Dublin, 1970.



Plate 8. First Communion in Scoil Mhuire, Marlborough St, Dublin, 1958.



Plate 9. 'Irish Holy Communion Dress' at Scoil Mhuire, Marlborough St., Dublin, 1958.



and the hat. Maire Ni Neachtain (letter, 1999) writes about her costume; "my one was made with big seams, and was let out and down for my Confirmation". The practice of wearing the costume for First Communion died out in the late 1960s when more mainstream white cotton styles were adopted. These dresses visually express how Nationalism and Catholicism go hand in hand in Ireland.

Communion dresses were frequently sent home to Ireland by relatives in America. Plate 10 shows a dress which came from America to Co. Donegal in 1932. Lace, parachute silk and threads sent from America to Co. Galway, were used to make the Communion dress in plate 11. After the First and Second World Wars, the surplus of parachute silk was used in the making of white ceremonial dresses.

The dress in plates 12-16 belongs to Rosemary O'Connell (letter, 1999) whose Aunt wore it in 1919 for her First Communion in Wyoming. Her Aunt's family had emigrated from Cork to the United States at the turn of the 20th century. The dress is short, made of Limerick lace (finely hand-embroidered net), with entirely hand-stitched seams and scalloped hems.

Rosemary believes that it is likely that it was made from her mother's wedding dress because there would have been no Limerick lace in Wyoming.

Anita Guiney (letter, 1999) daughters' Communion dress (1974) was worn by cousins in both Ireland and England and the veil was sent to Canada for a First Communion.

Gender Roles

The boy/girl schism is evident in the ceremony of First Communion. The ceremony reflects the established identification with mum/dad, male/female learning. Boys in the Friary National school (interview, 1999) portrayed an impression of nonchalance, of near indifference to what they would be wearing. Of course their behaviour could simply be a reflection of the generalised social disinterest in their dress compared to the excitement that the girls' dresses evoke. The girls love the extravagance. The excitement is predominantly on the female side,



Plate 10. Communion dress sent to Co. Donegal from America, 1932.



Plate 11. Communion dress made from fabric sent to Galway from America, 1939.



Plate 12. Front view of Limerick lace Communion dress worn in Wyoming, America, 1919.



Plate 13. Back view of Limerick lace dress.



Plate 14. Back fastening of hook and eye and lace detail of the dress.

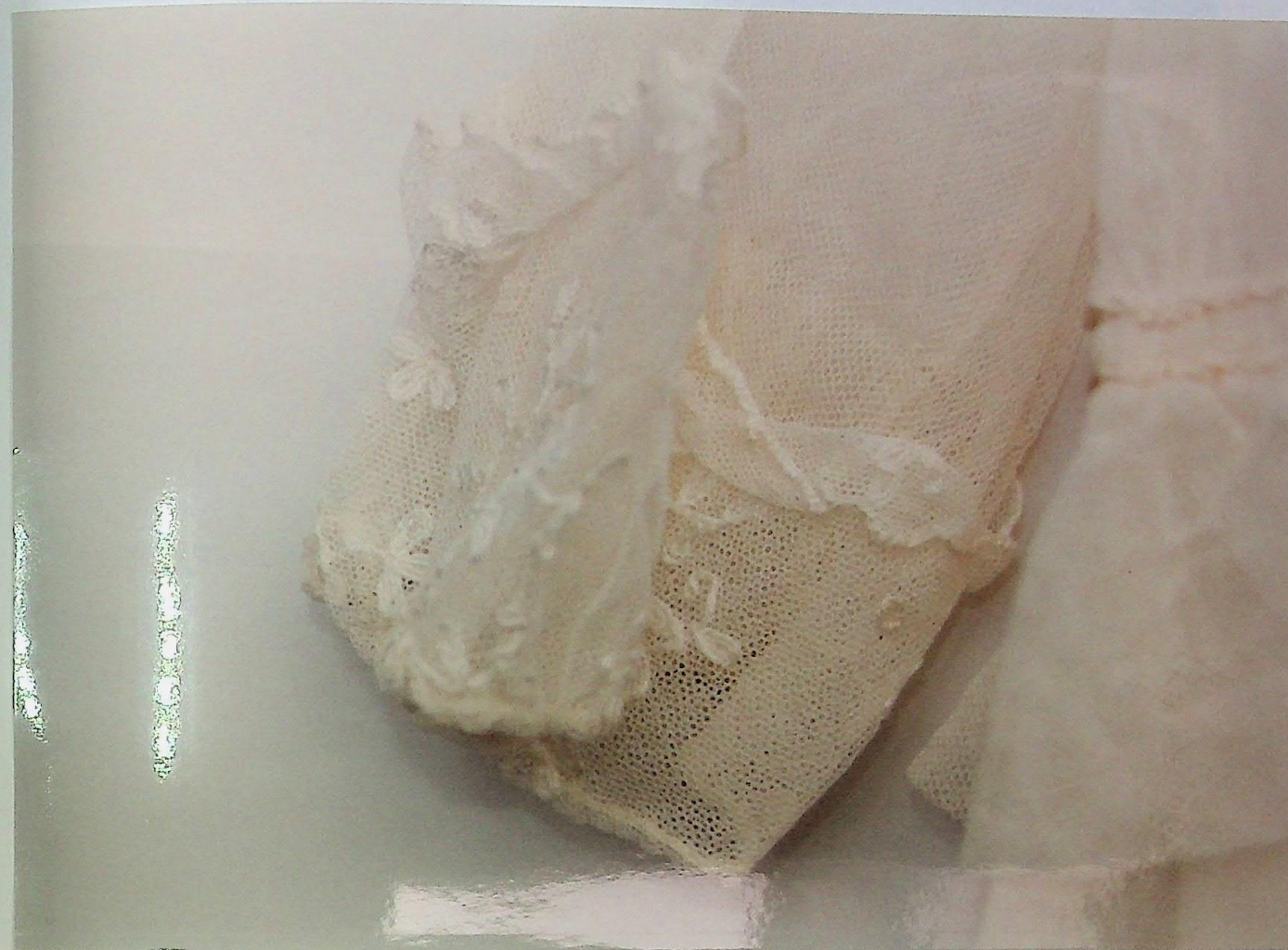
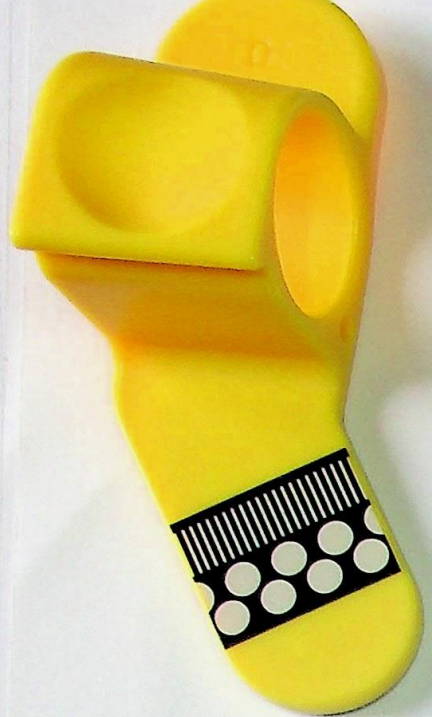



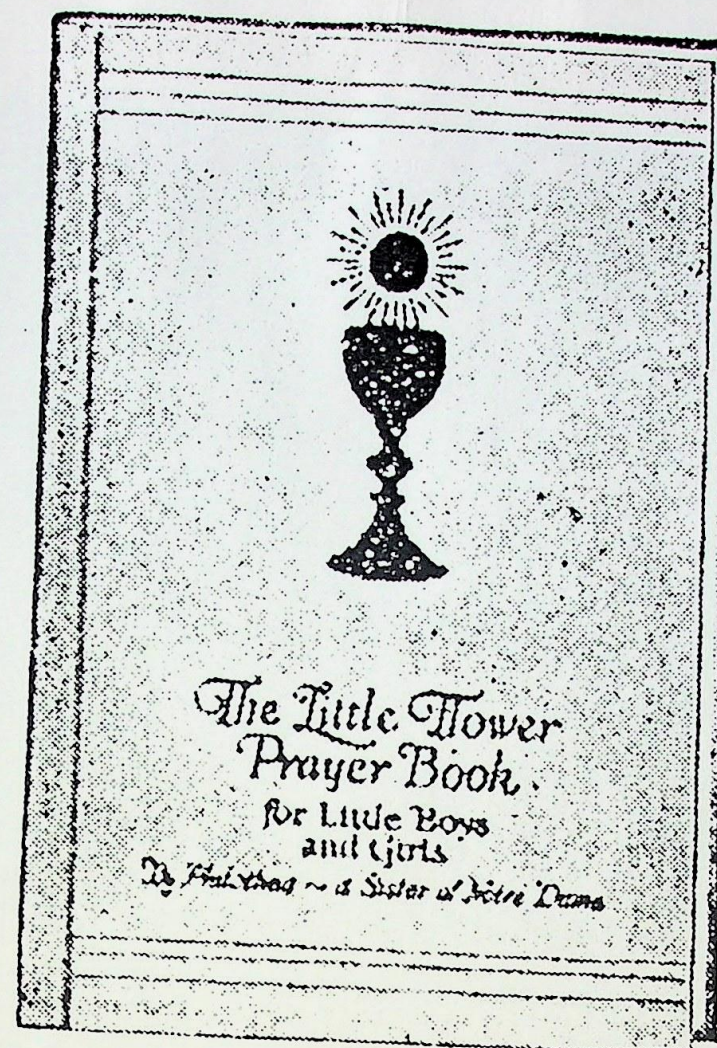
Plate 16. Detail of scalloped turned back, short cuffs of the dress.



shared by mothers, grannies, aunts, and friends. The dress is centre-stage. The paradox here however is that on the one hand the dress is a celebration of purity and femininity, and on the other hand, it is a subtle form of control. Mattelart (1986, pg. 40) writes that "the traditional is confirmed and eternalised in the modern". In this the old balance of roles, those of male/master and female/slave are endorsed. Within the Catholic church, the passive role of the female holds no powerful position and inequality is blatantly expressed. Dempsey (1998, pg. 46) writes about the alienation of women within the Church "To the question: "Where were the women at the Last Supper?" comes the wry female answer: "In the kitchen doing the washing up"! Socially, the Communion dress reinforces the idea of women as objects, proving her "submission to the eternal status of femininity" (Mattelart, 1986, pg. 40). Thus, dress styles are uniformly romantic and delicate. The emphasis is on the traditional. Where is this emphasis for boys? Is it not the case that it is the little girls, in their white splendour, who actually create the spectacle of the day? These structures can be seen to have the overall purpose of maintaining a particular order within Irish Catholic culture. As early as 1927 First Communion prayer books for girls were bound in white, while the boys' books were black (plate 17). As time goes by, the more extravagant the girls' dresses become, the opposite happens for boys. Twenty years ago it was the norm for boys to wear a suit and tie for First Communion. Now it is very common that the boys wear their school uniforms for the ceremony (plate 18, 19). Otherwise, it is a very casual affair, with them wearing a shirt and formal trousers.

Conspicuous Consumption

In 1646 St. Vincent De Paul wrote about First Holy Communion dress code "we shall make it as simple as possible, without show and without dressing up some of the children like angels, as is done in certain places" (Coste 1985). In 1725, the response to the question of: "how is it necessary for those going to the sacrament to be dressed?", the Synod of Rome replied: "some pastors and spiritual fathers customarily admit those receiving Communion for the first time in the dress of angels..... Ordinarily however, Communion must be approached in customary but clean dress, neither proud or vain, but with seriousness



The girls' First Communion
 "Little Flower Prayer Book," by
 Philothea. White Leatherette.
 Stamped with Chalice and Title
 in gold. The boys' First Com-
 munion Book is identical with
 this one except that the cover is
 Black. Price 75c. See coupon
 for discount.

Plate 17. Advertisement for Holy Communion prayer books in The Catholic Schools Journal, 1927.



Plate 18. First Communion Class, Ballingarry, 1991.



Plate 19. First Communion class, Ballingarry, 1997.

and modesty".

According to Sister M. Monica (1927), the white dress appeared in the court of Versailles: "On that great day, the First Communicants.. are to dress in white linen, with a coif of white taffeta, and a cincture of the same. They wear white veils....."

According J.M. Sailor (1933), "The boys and girls of the community who have come for First Communion, could also indeed wear white clothes, if the custom and poverty do not stand in the way". Thus, there has long been ambiguity between simplicity and extravagance concerning the First Communion dress.

While the wearing of the white dress promotes a sense of the sacred, it is equally an expression of conspicuous consumption with all its 'well-heeled' complexities.

What is the first image of First Holy Communion that comes to mind? Is it the ceremony, the Eucharist, First Confession or the bringing about of a new awareness of Jesus Christ?

Generally, it is none of these. It is the visual impact of little girls in snowy white dresses complete with all the associated paraphernalia of veils, headdresses, parasols, bags, beads and prayer books.

Today, mothers, grannies, aunts and daughters, get into the spirit of the 'Hello' style First Communions (plate 20). Jas Fagan of The Communion Shop in Christchurch, Dublin, reports that in May 1999 several girls were chauffeured to the church in limousines and horse drawn carriages. Plate 21 features a list of 'special indulgences' for First Communion. The rental of a limousine appears, at a cost of £100 for a day.

In fashion terms the church aisle acts like a catwalk beneath a girls satin enclosed feet. One Dundalk mother (Clarke, interview, 1999) described the day as being 'all about the clothes'. The white dress is undoubtedly the centre of attention. The Communicant in plate 22 exclaimed that "she felt like a princess for a day".

For most little girls this is one of the most glamorous days in their lives. Every year, on Saturdays in May, these little ones in elaborate white dresses are visible on family outings all around the country. Outfits for girls have been regularly accused of eclipsing the actual ceremony by their excesses. Plates 23 and 24 show an elaborate style of Communion dress

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All
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Now stocking a wide range of Communion Wear
for young boys by labels such as
KIDSUP, JUNIOR BLOGGS, BIG STAR,
BRUMMI & VALTI

For confirmation we also stock up to the minute
fashion labels including
MORGAN, DEXEL, FREE, VALTI, BIG STAR
& JOHN ZACK
to suit the most fashion conscious young lady

A wide range of complimentary accessories including bags, cosmetics and
sterling silver jewellery are also available to add an extra touch to that
special outfit!

DEPOSITS ARE NOW BEING TAKEN ON ALL ITEMS

FIRST COMMUNION and Confirmation are
possibly the most important Sacraments that
your child will receive from the Catholic
Church. It is their introduction to the first of
the sacraments (after Baptism) and is a very
impressible time for them and has to be a
special one.

It is up to you, the parent, to make this day
one of their young lives and therefore you
have to make sure that everything looks well,
runs smoothly and is a day to remember for
your children. To help make them feel good
about their big day they have to look well and
all the new season's styles and fashions are
available from many of the Dundalk shops
who specialise in First Communion and
Confirmation wear.

With the ever-changing styles and fashions in
clothing, every parent wants their child in the
traditional outfit of white dresses and veils
for the girls and a handsome, smart suit for
the boys. But in more recent years, it has been
the case that parents feel that a move from the
traditional outfits is more economic, with the
cost of children's clothes continually on the
increase, the trend is to more practical outfits.
Paying out a substantial amount of money for
an outfit that will only ever be worn once is a
thing of the past. People want their children to
be dressed in a formal outfit that they can get
the use of a number of times as they pass
through that period where they are constantly
growing.

Whether it be a fashionable suite or jacket and
slacks for the boys and a lovely dress or skirt
and jacket for the girls, you want to be sure
that your money is well spent and there are
quite a number of shops in Dundalk that will
be only too happy to help and advise you on
your choice of outfit for your child's big day.
Dundalk's shops have long been renowned
for their wide selection and value for money
and this year is no exception. There are a
huge range of dresses, veils, matching
handbags, gloves and rosettes to choose
from. The boys also have a wide range of
suits, jackets (both leather and normal),
trousers and shirts to set them out in an outfit
that both you and he will be proud of.
Footwear can also be a concern, not so when
you live in Dundalk. There is an abundance of
shoe shops that will be only too happy to
select the correct shoe (with the property
fitted size) for your child that will be
comfortable, long lasting and look well on the
big day.

But looking well on the big day is one aspect
of First Communion and Confirmation. It is a
day that will be remembered for some time to
come and ways of doing this to immortalise
the occasion on film.

Another aspect of First Communion and
Confirmation is the celebration meal. There
are a large number of restaurants and hotels

in and around Dundalk that provide a very
special service for the family on the big day.
A phone call beforehand can provide an
excellent meal for the family, to put the
finishing touches on their big day.

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* Jewellers *

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and Confirmation Gift

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9ct. Chain and Discs from£18.95
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Silver Chain and Medals from£10.95
Silver Bracelets from£6.95
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Prayer Books, Beads, Medals,
Rosettes and Cards
Holy Communion and Confirmation

MONTANA
Eimear Court, Long Walk,
Dundalk

Plate 20. First Communion Advertising, Argus Newspaper, January 28, 2000.

Special indulgences

1 Silk Dress	£200
2 Veil	£15.
3 Tiara	£35
4 Shoes	£50
5 Bag	£20
6 Gloves	£10
7 Frilly umbrella	£20
8 Silk satin cape	£25
9 Communion medal	£20
10 Prayer book/ beads	£20.
11 White nylons	£5
12 Video	£50
13 Photographer	£80
14 Limousine	£100
15 Lunch for 4	£100
16 Champagne	£50
17 Drinks for family	£50
Total for deluxe communion day = £850	

Plate 21. List of 'Special Indulgences' for First Communion in The Irish Independent, March 10, 1999.



Plate 22. First Communion dress, Dundalk, May 1999.



Plate 23. First Communion dress, Dundalk, May 1999.



Plate 24. Side view of First Communion dress, Dundalk, May 1999.

worn in May 1999. Designed by the girl's mother, the inspiration was drawn from Edwardian dress styles. The outfit consists of a raw silk ivory dress, full net lined skirts, with a large bustle at the back. Over this, a fitted jacket, fastening with small covered buttons is worn. Cuffs, hems, necklines and the surface of the skirts are all hand beaded with individual pearls. There is a co-ordinating top hat, bag and silk boots. The girl's mother explained, "I wanted something completely different to what everyone else would have" (Murnaghan, interview, 1999).

For many families, the glitz, glamour and excess make conspicuous waste fundamental to the phenomenon of social competition apparent in this ritual. According to Veblen in Lipovetsky (1994, pg. 43-44) conspicuous waste has the aim of attracting the admiration of others. He writes "the motive underlying consumption is rivalry between individuals generated by self-love; in order to compare favourably with others, to retain honour and prestige". He also refers to the "requirement of magnificence" and "a piling-on of superfluities without any functional goal". Veblen's theory emphasises ostentatious expense as a way to signify rank, arouse admiration, and display social status. Plate 25 depicts a First Communion scene from 1855. The girl is wearing a lace 'rotunde' over her gown. Moore (1971, pg. 84) describes this dress as a "useless garment that exemplifies the conspicuous waste theories of Veblen". Here, wasteful consumption was justified by the employment it generated.

Fr. Tom Hamill (interview, 2000) offers two theories on the subject. The first concerns the anthropological term 'pot-latch'. Here the extravagance of the Communion dress exemplifies the importance of the ritual. The second term is used in evolutionary biology. It is that of cost benefit. This means that the benefits that accrue from the extravagance are worth it. From this perspective, the Communion dress is putting 'daughters out there' to the best effect, thus heightening the self esteem and honour of the family.

An interview with a First Holy Communion class of 1999 (plate 26) reveals little jealousy among the girls about their dresses. Because of the time and preparations given to each of their




Journal des Demoiselles

Paris. Boulevard des Italiens. 1.

Plate 25. 'Le Journal des Demoiselles', Paris, 1855.



Plate 26. First Communion Class, The Friary National School, Dundalk, May 1999.



outfits, they all felt that they were beautiful. A number of girls had travelled to Dublin, 60 miles away to purchase their dresses. Veils had been replaced by tiaras, headdresses or flowers woven into the girls' hair. Hair styles were practiced and given test runs with the hairdressers. One girl in Dundalk (Gosling, interview, 1999) visited her hairdresser three weeks before the ceremony. She had her hair curled, then straightened, then finally curled into a chignon on top of her head. On the big day, some of the girls were hardly recognisable (Maloney, interview, 1999). The girls with straight hair had all opted for curly styles and the ones with curly hair had all had their hair straightened. This teacher had only once seen a girl make her First Communion in a dress other than white. The girl's mother had chosen a pink dress, so that the child could wear it again (plate 27).

In the week following First Holy Communion, the girls wear their outfits to school and parade around all the other classes to show off their dresses. The money and the toys received are openly discussed (plate 28). Dempsey (1998) describes this tradition of 'collecting' as "an opportunity for a bit of liturgical mugging". One girl remarked "I felt like a millionaire!". Another girl received a new bike, two dolls, a 'Cross' pen, a gold cross and chain, five pairs of earrings, holy medals, holy statue, two holy pictures, and 32 cards. The parents of the girl in plate 22, did not disclose the amount of money received by their daughter; so that she would not brag about how much she had received. Plate 29 shows a girl whose mother put money in a card for her brother so that he would not feel too left out on the day.



Plate 27. First Communicant in a pink Communion dress, Dundalk, May 1998.



Plate 28. First Communicant holding present, May 1999.



Plate 29. Communion dress, Dundalk, May 1999.

Chapter 5.

The Psychological Significance of the Dress and the Ceremony


On a psychological level, the Holy Communion ceremony and dress present the child with a significant step into conscious awareness. Accounts of both childrens' and womens' experience reveal that this ceremony etches a lifelong memory in their minds. In psychological terms, they recall how they felt and what it meant to them. For instance, they could recall the wearing of the white dress, that it was special, either loaned, homemade or bought, and the style of the dress. They recounted scenes at the church and about their friends but more importantly they recalled how they felt in those scenes. Geraldine Gallagher (plate 30), whose background was well-to-do, remembers being disgusted when she was seated beside a poor girl in the church on her First Communion day. The poor girl's dress had been sent to her from an aunt in America. The dress was elaborate and beautiful in style so that it eclipsed the relatively simple one which Geraldine wore.

Thus, it becomes clear that the feelings surrounding their day, stay with women well into their later lives. T. Larkin (1997, pg. 100), in his essay on religious education and children entitled 'Subjects or Architects of Culture', notes that "there has been no major attempt in Ireland to publish research into primary school children's comprehension of religious language, concepts and images". Where is the interest from parents and teachers with regard to understanding the religious education of the seven year old?

There is little doubt that children aged 7 are more acutely aware of what is going on than is acknowledged. For example, they appreciate the importance of the white dress, their gender roles, behaviour codes, of belonging and how all of this combines and converges towards a ceremony of major religious and social significance. All of this is in sharp contrast to the "by default" adult involvement. Rita Purcell (interview, 1999, plate 11) recalls that her Communion day was the first time in her life that she had the sense of being the focus of attention. Her



Plate 30. Communion dress, Mayo, 1942.



father, a local garda, brought her through the village to the station to show her off in her dress. Outside the church, the curate asked her to stand back for him so that he could admire the frills of her dress.

Bernstein, et al. (1991, pg. 61) gives insight into the mindset of a 7 year old when he explains the stages of social and emotional development during childhood. He states that children 4 - 10 years old are beginning to cooperate, compete, play games and form friendships with peers. They are learning the social rules of politeness, the roles of being male or female and to control their emotions.

The characteristics of seven years olds are defined by Hyland (1998) as being open and spontaneous, as having a desire to belong, feel accepted and loved. Children are described as continuing to imitate adult behaviour from the things they do and say and from the way in which they relate to others. For instance, during an interview one little girl excitedly recalled that her "reception was held in the Nuremore".

Seven year olds are developing their desire to belong and be accepted into their peer groups at school. Imitation involves conformity to one way of doing things. Every other way outside of that is seen as different and the wrong way. Girls do not want to stand out from their peer group by looking different on their big day. If the majority of the girls are wearing long dresses and veils, then it is this look that the girls will want to be part of. In a letter (Batt 1999) a sixty year old woman recounts having to wear a different blue dress, made by her mother for the Corpus Christi procession. (Illustrated in plates 31 and 32, this procession occurs in June to celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion, in which First Communicants traditionally walk). The blue dress excluded her from being one of lucky ones chosen to carry the picture of St. Micheal or to be one of the candle carriers on the feast of Micheal in September. Because her Communion dress was borrowed (Plate 33), she had to return it the next day. Thus, even though her mother had gone to great trouble to lessen her disappointment, she was nevertheless different from the other children and experienced this difference as humiliating. In plate 34 (Wallis, letter, 1999) remembers that her grandmother chose a champagne coloured dress with



Plate 31. Corpus Christi procession, Cushendall, Co. Antrim, 1906.



Plate 32. Communion girls and nun, Corpus Christi procession, Dublin, 1967.



Plate 33. Communion dress, Dublin, 1945.

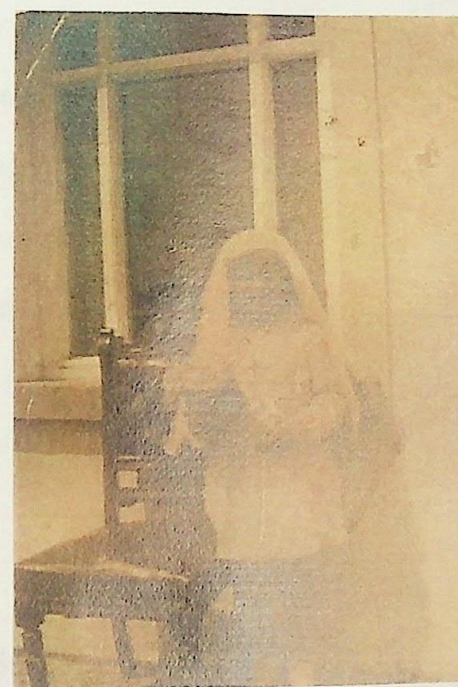


Plate 34. Communion dress, Cork, 1942

a bouquet of cream roses for her. Wartime had made it very difficult to find the dress. Unfortunately, the little girl did not like it. It was different from the other white dresses and white carnation bouquets. She did not like being different.

It is the comparisons that generate the competitive edge surrounding the First Communion day. The following questions are but a few that surround the days' proceedings; who wore the most expensive dress? who had the prettiest dress? who had the nicest hairstyle? who collected the largest amount of money? where was the 'reception' held? etc. etc. Children use their peers as objects of social comparison. A girl can use the other girls as a way by which to compare and judge the way she looks. This competition produces winners and losers. But, Jas Fagan (1999) says "every girl thinks that she is a princess, that she is lovely, because when your mother is telling you that you are gorgeous, and your granny is telling you that you are gorgeous, then you will believe it too". For most girls this is the case. However, for some there is the feeling of inadequacy. Anita Guiney (letter, 1999), writes that in the 1950s many families in her area were very poor. The local school teacher had a supply of accessories to lend to the poor girls. This was done very discreetly. Francis Arduff (letter, 1999), who attended a fee-paying junior school in Dublin in 1944 (plate 35) writes "I should have an inferiority complex ... with the second-hand dress, third-hand veil and brown shoes!". In plate 36 the shoes in the front row distinguish who is from what sort of economic background. The rich girls wear white pig skin leather shoes, while the poorer ones wear brown. There is only one girl wearing a long dress. The daughter of a building contractor, she is the wealthiest in the class (Arduff, letter, 1999).

Is competition compatible with sacred religious ritual? In religious circles it is accepted that the more lavish and opulent the ceremonial garb, the more prestigious and revered the ceremony. The Vatican is testimony to this pomp and grandeur. There are two points here to be considered. The first is the element of competition and the second is the element of celebration. How could the element of competition be reduced? Could the dress be formalised into a



Plate 35. First Holy Communion in The Holy Faith Convent Junior School, Dominick St.,
Dublin, 1944.



Plate 36. First Holy Communion in Belgrove National School, Clontarf, Dublin, 1936.

uniform white garb? Or would this take away from the excitement and esteem of the occasion? Fr. A. Byrne (interview, 2000) comments "any attempt on my part to getting rid of the white dress, would mean that I would end up on the Joe Duffy Show!". Perhaps this is simply an element of the "human dilemma" to which there is no solution. The research reveals an enormous input of love, sentiment and pleasure engendered and associated with the individuality of the dress. Angela Massey (interview, 1999), a Dublin mother of 5 girls, hand crocheted different Communion dresses for each one of her daughters. "I wanted each one to have their own Communion dress". Plates 37 -40 depict the individual dresses made over a period of 12 years. She designed and made all the patterns, each dress taking approximately 4 months to complete. Her 1986 dress (plate 41) is on display at The Ulster Folk and Transport Museum. The other dresses were later used as play dresses for the younger girls.

If sevens year olds are open and spontaneous, then they are easily motivated to learn new reactions to situations in their lives. In First Confession and Communion children are introduced to the concept of sin and of repentance. First Confession is the beginning of the concept of conscience for children. If conscience is being created then so too is fear. The girl who walks down the aisle on her First Communion day is aware of herself as both a good and bad person. Writer A.S Neill in De Mellos book 'Awareness' (1997, pg. 183) is quoted as saying that "the religion that makes people good, makes people bad". A.S. Neill spearheaded the revolutionary school 'Summerhill' in England. This school took in emotionally disturbed and unbalanced children in order to rehabilitate them. His first priority to them was to take away their conscience. He says "I am no genius, I am merely a man who refuses to guide the steps of children. Every child has God in him. Our attempts to mould the child will turn the child into a devil". Thus the Holy Communion child now has a new set of religious rules that are to be abided by. Mysterious and powerful, God, she is told, can see her every minute of the day. As she walks down the aisle on her big day, the outer purity of the white dress mirrors the inner expectation of purity bestowed upon her through this initiation of First Holy

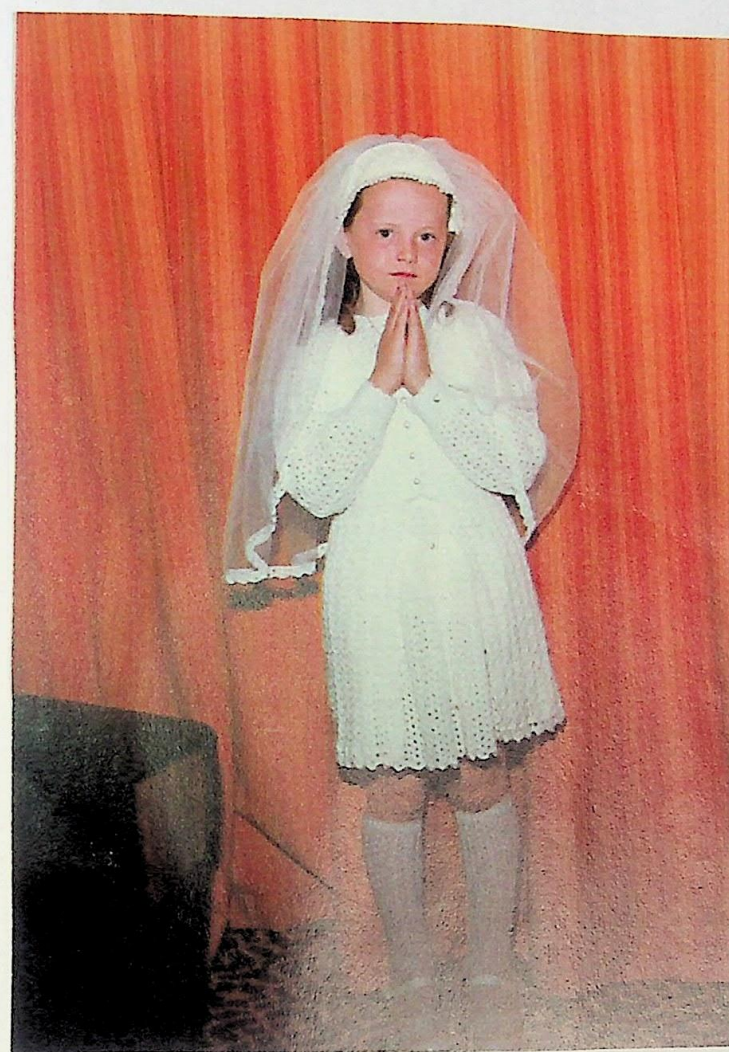


Plate 37. Hand crocheted Communion dress, Dublin, 1975.



Plate 38. Two identical hand crocheted Communion dresses, Dublin, 1977.



Platę 39. Hand crocheted dress, Dublin, 1978.



Plate 40. Hand crocheted dress, Dublin, 1986. (preserved in The Ulster Folk Museum).



Plate 41. Same hand crocheted dress, Dublin, 1986 (courtesy of The Ulster Folk Museum).

Communion. From now on, as never before she must try harder to be good.

Expectations are implied and very subtle. Baron et. al (1994, pg. 352) describes conforming to rules such as social norms. These norms are "spoken or unspoken rules indicating how we should or ought to behave". In the run up to First Communion the importance and sanctity of the ceremony is emphasised. There is the pressure of having to be quiet and controlled in church, of having to remember prayers, songs, the order and the way in which to walk up the aisle and the way to receive the Communion - right hand over left. There is speculation over what the Communion will taste like, the instruction that it must not be chewed but let to dissolve slowly on the tongue. All these expectations, coupled with the fact that the child must look her best are imposed. And the child responds, unquestioning and accepting. A girl who made her First Communion in May 1999 was so tired after the ceremony that she slept, wearing her dress, through her own party (McGinnity, interview, 1999). Plate 42 shows a girl who made her First Communion in Waterford 1914. She had been sent to the Ursuline Convent 50 miles from her home in Cahir, aged 9, for three months to prepare for First Communion. She had never been away from home before and remembers crying for weeks from homesickness. The only other detail she recollects is "the misery of getting the tangles out of her hair", (O' Connell, letter, 1999). Plate 43 (O'Donnell, 1993) shows a girl suffering from tuberculosis. Although very ill, she is still dressed in a white dress and made her First Communion at Cappagh Hospital in 1937. Plate 44 shows the ironic image of a First Communicant, passing a murder scene.

While there is little doubt that the purpose of First Holy Communion is to create a greater sense of religion in a child's life, there is nevertheless the possibility that the ideal of this initiation is different from the actual reality of it. Plate 45 conceals the fact that the little girl's shoes, having been bought months previously, are too small and are a source of discomfort to her.

These examples highlight firstly that children have little say in the mechanics of this process, and secondly that the child, aware now of the imposition of 'straying from the path', and of the



Plate 42. Communion dress, Waterford, 1914.



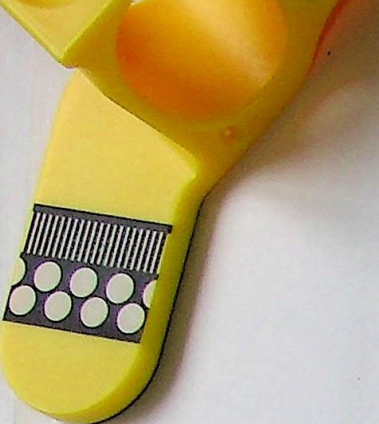
Plate 43. First Holy Communion in Cappagh Hospital, 1937.



Plate 44. First Communicant passing murder scene, The Irish Times, May 1999.



Plate 45. First Communion, Carrickmacross, Co. Monaghan, 1960.



beginnings of conflict, must have a certain degree of bemusement and bewilderment associated with the whole event.

Thus, the wearing of the white dress in psychological terms can be understood at different levels. On the one hand, there is the competition, comparison and "sin", with the child aware of all of this. On the other hand, there is the love of the family coming together in celebration for the child. The child feels special, but also in some way 'flawed'. Thus the context for First Communion creates paradox. However, the initiation of First Communion centres on transcendence in the form of the reception of Jesus, and perhaps the transcendence of this paradox. The dress is probably the most easily recognisable symbol of all of this, identifying a spiritual evolution of human beings. Carl Rogers (1942, pg. 7) writes of the innate tendency of the individual towards growth, no matter what the obstacles. In the Irish Times of May 25, 1999, First Communicant, Niamh Hogan (plate 46) tells of her lovely day, her Communion dinner, her trip to the Zoo, the cards and money she received "I think it was over a hundred pounds, but I don't know". However, "The best thing about the whole day was receiving Jesus into my heart ... I remember that the most" (Boland, 1999, pg. 10).



Plate 46. First Communicant, Niamh Hogan, photographed for the article 'Is God Cool?' in The Irish Times, May 1999.

The Manufacture of Holy Communion Dresses

The manufacture of Holy Communion dresses is a specialist industry. The season is from September to December with the dresses in the shops from the beginning of January. In early January of 2000, buying was already brisk in a number of retail outlets. Optimum choice, with regard to fit, price and taste are the motives for this early buying.

The main companies involved in the manufacture of Holy Communion dresses in Ireland are;
Peter Day Fashions, Dublin.

Childhood Originals, Dublin.

Birthrites, Dublin.

Princess Company Ltd, Dublin.

De Paor Designs, Dublin.

George Anthony Bridal Wear, Dublin.

Hamill Ltd, Donegal.

Bronte Designs, Dublin.

Colette Clemenger, Dublin.

Fiona Todhunter, Dublin.

Initial research into the manufacturing of Communion dresses was met with surprising resistance. From the outset, the response from the retailers was poor, citing exclusivity for their reticence. Thus, the acquisition of contacts was limited. Brown Thomas was the only outlet to supply a contact number. On the assurances from manufacturers, this chapter was to have involved interviews with employers and the acquisition of brochures, swatches of fabrics and samples of embroidery. However in September, Princess Company, the first company contacted, failed to keep their interview and were further found to be abusive and unhelpful.

Through the Yellow pages, Enterprise Ireland and the Directory of Irish Clothing in association with the Irish Trade Board, other companies were located. Three of these were no longer in business.

Due to the negative response from retailers and manufacturers, a typed questionnaire was faxed to the companies. Once again, the faxes were mostly received with suspicions of market research and business competition. It took a period of five weeks and numerous phone calls to have seven of nine faxed questionnaires completed.

The information compiled from the questionnaire is as follows:

From December to May retail buyers choose the designs from sketches and buy the styles for the next season.

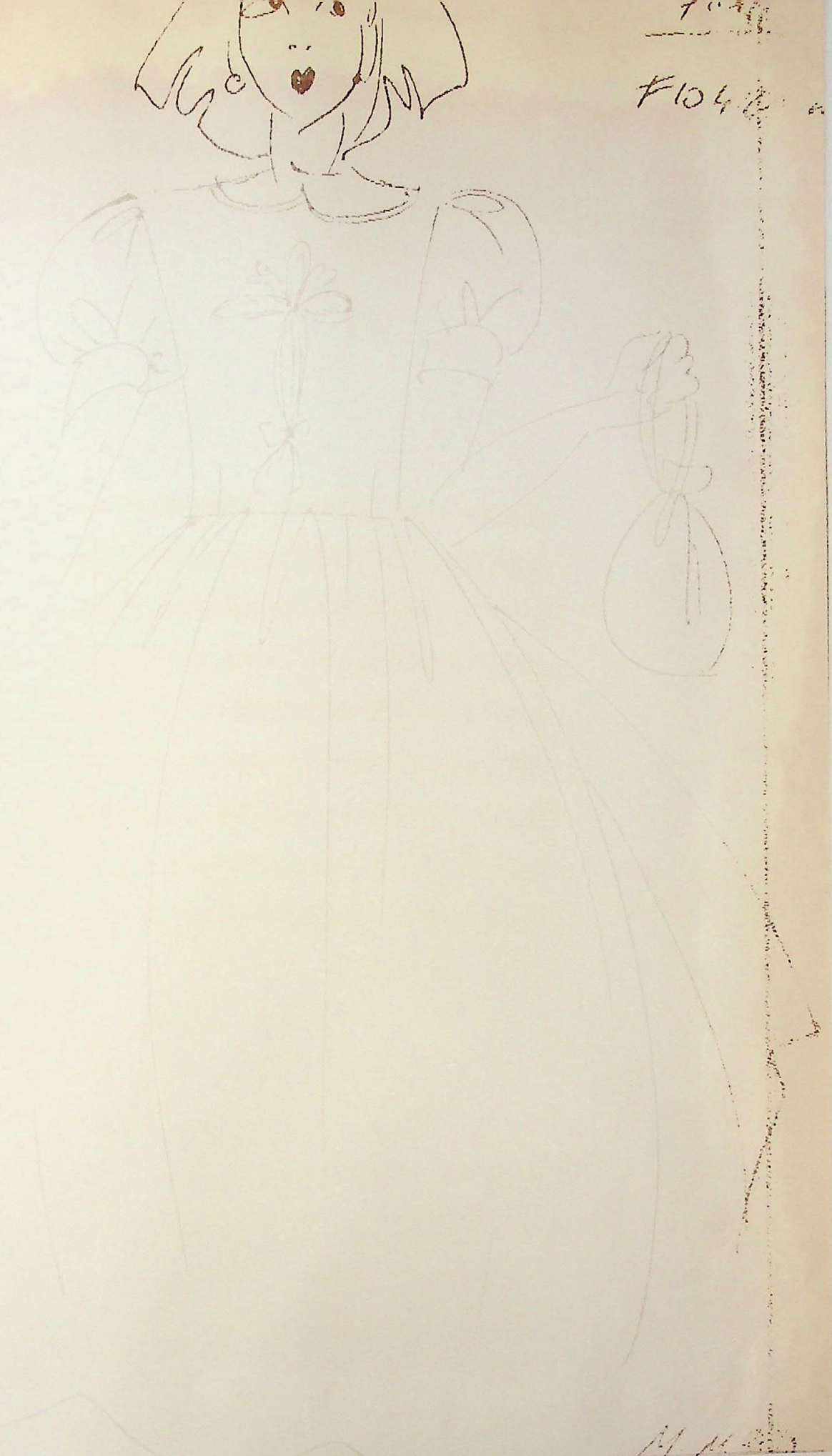
Companies know nothing of the history of the Holy Communion dress. These companies vary from the well established of 40 years old to the newly established of one year old. Design and pattern construction is done in-house with some patterns coming from shops such as Hickeys in Dublin. Also some student designs are used. Styles and shapes of the dresses vary according to the manufacturer. One company describes their dresses as being of "a traditional style in simple cottons with limited surface detail". This dress shape is fitted at the waist with a long gathered skirt. These styles are not effected by the trends of the day (plates 47, 48). In the different companies, styles seem to vary as much as possible but the overall shape does not change. Mark Blackburn of Peter Day Fashions commented that the upper class prefer plainer dress styles and that the working class prefer the fancier dresses. The more 'working class' the fancier the dress style. He says that 'it is one's class that dictates the style of the Communion dress'. The main fabrics used are cotton, silk shantung, polyester, taffeta, satin silks and lace. Gay Power of 'De Paor' designs in Dublin describes 'a move from cotton to silk as the most popular fabric'.

The colour of the dresses is predominantly white but manufacturers experimenting with ivory dresses have found the colour becoming increasingly popular. Stitchcraft, a Co. Louth shop, reports that one in ten of their dresses sold is ivory (January 2000).



Through the 7 other pages, Birthing Rites and the history of the...
assessment with the Irish Texts Board, other companies were...
larger in business...
Due to the negative response from within and...
back to the company. Once again, the firm was...
growth and business expansion. It took a period of...
have seen of how far they had come...
The information compiled from the questionnaire is as follows...
From December to May 1999, the design firm...
the next season...
Companies know nothing of the history of the Holy Communion dress. These companies...
from the well established of 40 years old to the newly established of one year old. Design...
pattern construction is done in-house with some patterns coming from shops such as...
in Dublin. Also some student designs are used. Styles and shapes of the dresses vary...
according to the manufacturer. One company describes their dress as being of a traditional...
style in simple cotton with buttoned bodice detail. This dress shape is fitted at the waist with a...
long gathered skirt. These styles are not affected by the trends of the day (plate 47, 48). In the...
different companies, styles seem to vary as much as possible but the overall shape does not...
change. While looking at other Day 7 dresses commented that the upper class prefer...
less light and that the working class prefer the darker dress. The more working class the...
lighter the dress style. It is said that it is more class that dictates the style of the Communion...
dress. The main fabric used are cotton and cheap polyester fabric. Some silk and lace...
the fabric of the Irish designs in Dublin describes a more than once used as the most...
popular fabric...
The color of the dresses is predominantly white but many women experimenting with...
other have found the color becoming increasingly popular. Darker colors like...
purple that are in line of their dress style is very trendy (1999).

Plate 47. Sketch of design for Communion dress, Birthrites, 1999.



#104



Plate 48. Sketch of design for Communion dress, Birthrites, 1999.

The surface decoration of the dresses varies. Some manufacturers use the pattern of the actual cloths to do the work. Hand-stitched pearls are applied, beadwork or motifs or a combination of machine and hand embroidery is used. Threads from Madeira in silver and gold polyester are used by one company. The scale of embroidery or beading has improved greatly in recent years in some companies. Embroidery can be drawn on the fabric and machine-stitched with hand beading finishing the look. Most of the companies refused to disclose the stitches or type of threads used in the embroidery, once again claiming exclusivity. And yet, embroidery threads are plainly evident in dresses at retail outlets.

Motifs for embroidery depend on availability from Hickeys wholesalers, private suppliers and some cloth manufacturers. Designs range from floral and leaf to Celtic motifs. Irish heritage is the inspiration for shamrocks, celtic knots or crosses which are popular on dress styles in the U.S. One company prefers the use of piping as decoration rather than using embroidery.

The relationship between the style and decoration of the dresses and their price is related to the quality, craftsmanship and style of the dress. Some manufacturers do not charge according to style, but to the amount of hand work done. According to one manufacturer, style, decoration and price are important but overall, it is the design which sells the dress. A cost price of £80 or under is preferable. The price of the dresses vary. Wholesale prices are from £39 to £210.

Retail outlets usually have a 100% mark-up.

In one company, until the late 1980's, three lengths were used; short - to the knee, midi - to the mid-calf and long - to the ankle. Now it is only midi length which is designed. Midi is also referred to as Ballet length.

The only note on wedding dress styles reflected in Communion dresses was made by Aida Lennon of Childhood Originals, "as ivory became popular as a colour of wedding dress styles, it also became popular for Communion dress styles". However, direct wedding-dress design influences on Communion dresses for January 2000 were detachable trains and white top hats.

"From time to time it has also been fashionable to team the 'traditional' white wedding gown with a hat" (Ballard, 1998, pg. 90)

Most companies manufacture accessories for example bags, headdresses, hairbands, wraps, motifs on shoes and co-ordinating jackets. Accessories are expensive to manufacture.

Some companies undertake commissions for children who are outside.

In 2000 it is also possible to buy the Holy Communion dress on the internet (plate 49).

The manufacture of Irish Holy Communion dresses is a specialist industry, with an emphasis on exclusivity of design. Consequently, information on the dresses is difficult to access. Much time and effort has yielded little return. However, from the faxes the following patterns emerge. The market caters for every style and price point. Manufacturers range from limited companies to sole traders. Over the years dress styles have become increasingly extravagant, with a direct design influence from wedding-dress styles. Surface decoration is wide and varied, depending entirely on the preference of the company designer.



1st Holy Communion



Communion Dresses, Veils, Head-dresses, Shoes, Parasols, Tights.

BACK

Page 1

NexT

Exquisite collection of 1st Holy Communion dresses
priced from £89 to £189

Click on an image for the 'big' picture



Dawn



Emma
available in other colours
for Bridesmaids



Jeanna



<http://www.mischiefkids.co.uk/Commun-1.htm>

18/10/99

Plate 49. First Communion dresses for sale over the Internet
@<http://www.mischiefkids.co.uk>.

Conclusion

Overall, the research into the Holy Communion dress reveals it as a multifaceted symbol with religious significance of a Catholic church teaching as well as being a symbol inseparable from Irish social tradition and culture. The historical account of the association of First Communion with the rite of Baptism points to the probable origins of the dress. As a white garment for First Communion, the dress has apparently existed since the Council of Trent's decree in the 13th century. This decree was representative of a growing awareness within the church of the necessity for recipients to have an understanding of the presence of Christ in the sacrament. Thus, older children became First Communicants and the white dress of Baptism was adopted for this ritual.

Visual records of the dress for this thesis date from 1900 to 2000.

The photographic record illustrates the changing styles and fabrics of the dresses, which in turn reflect the changing economic and fashionable order of the time. The fashion for handmade dresses, worn with long lace veils is seen in photographs from the 1900s through to the 40s (plates 50-54). These dresses illustrate considerable home dress-making skills, along with the use of good quality fabrics. During the Second World War parachute silk became a readily available fabric, often used for the dresses (plate 55). The styles of the 1950s and 1970s are evidence of the fashion for mini skirts and tight fitting clothing (plates 56-61). The elaborate styles of the 1980s reflect a growing secularization and the 1990s a booming economic climate, where extravagance is the norm with regard to both dresses and accessories (plates 62-65).

The Catholic religion, despite its decreasing influence, continues to hold a significant position in Irish culture. The structure of Irish society offers a support system which fosters an allegiance and faith in all that the Church represents. For example, the national school system is inseparable from Catholicism and the preparation of children for First Communion.



Plate 50. Carrickmacross lace Communion dress, Dublin, 1930.



Plate 51. Handmade Communion dress, Drogheda, 1932.



Plate 52. Handmade Communion dress, Dublin, 1934.



Plate 53. Handmade Communion dress, Dublin, 1936.



Plate 54. Handmade Communion dress, Dublin, 1949.



Plate 55. Communion dress in parachute silk, Carrickmore, 1943.



Plate 56. Communion dress, Dungannon, 1958.





Plate 57. Communion dress, Dublin, 1965.



Plate 58. Communion dress, Dublin, 1972.



Plate 59. Communion dress, Dundalk, 1973.

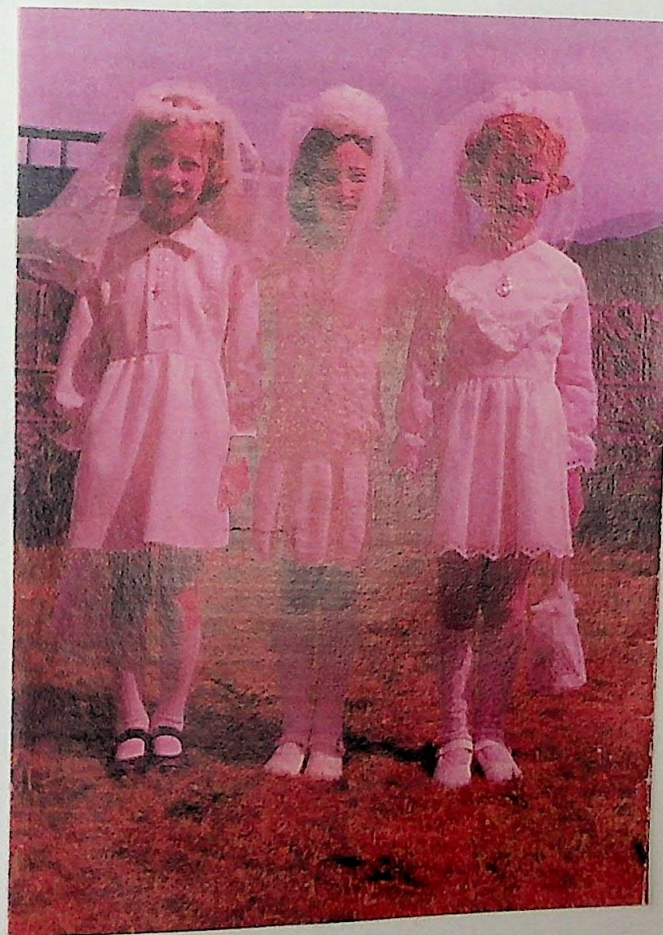


Plate 60. Communion dress, Limerick, 1975.

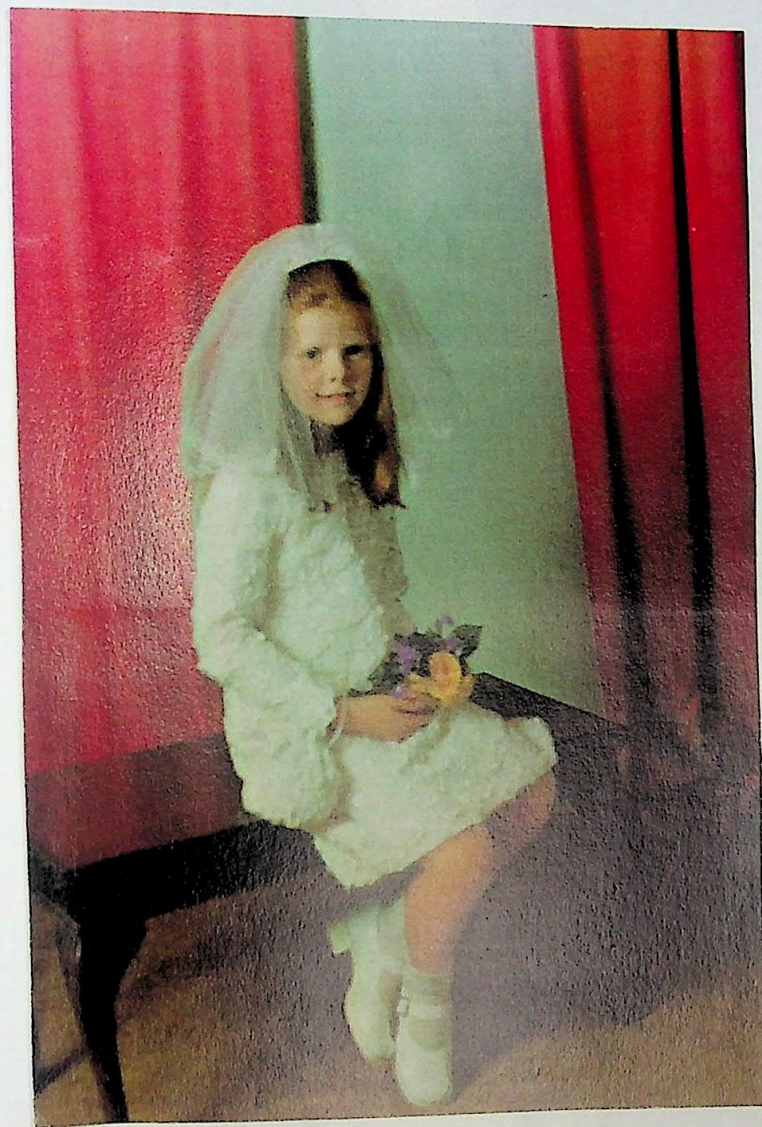


Plate 61. Communion dress, Thurles, 1975.



Plate 62. Communion dress, Dundalk, 1980.

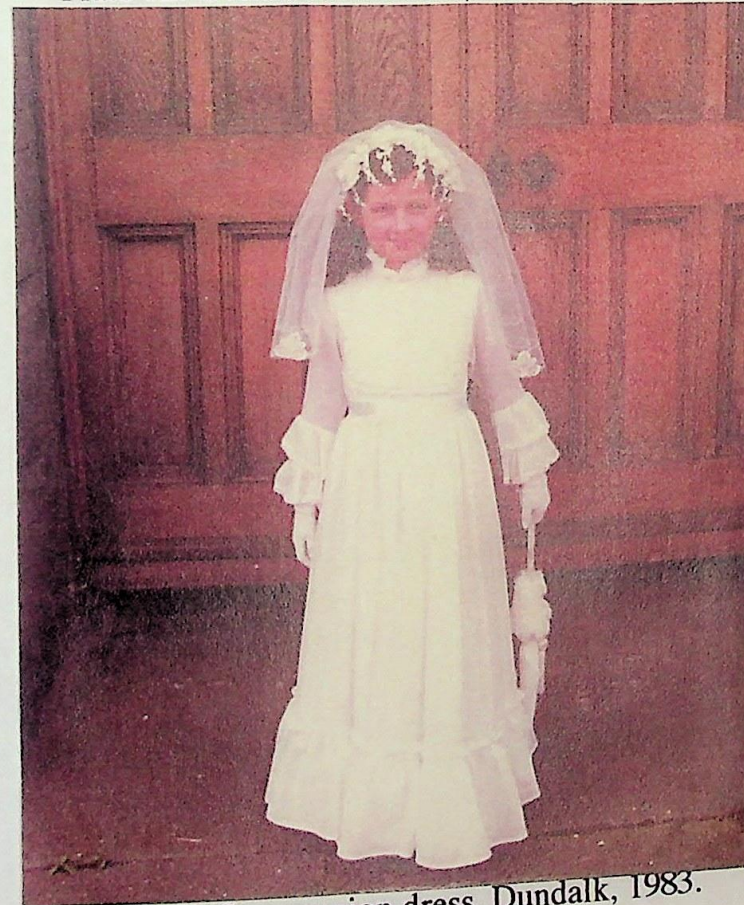


Plate 63. Communion dress, Dundalk, 1983.



Plate 64. Communion dress, Dublin, 1993.

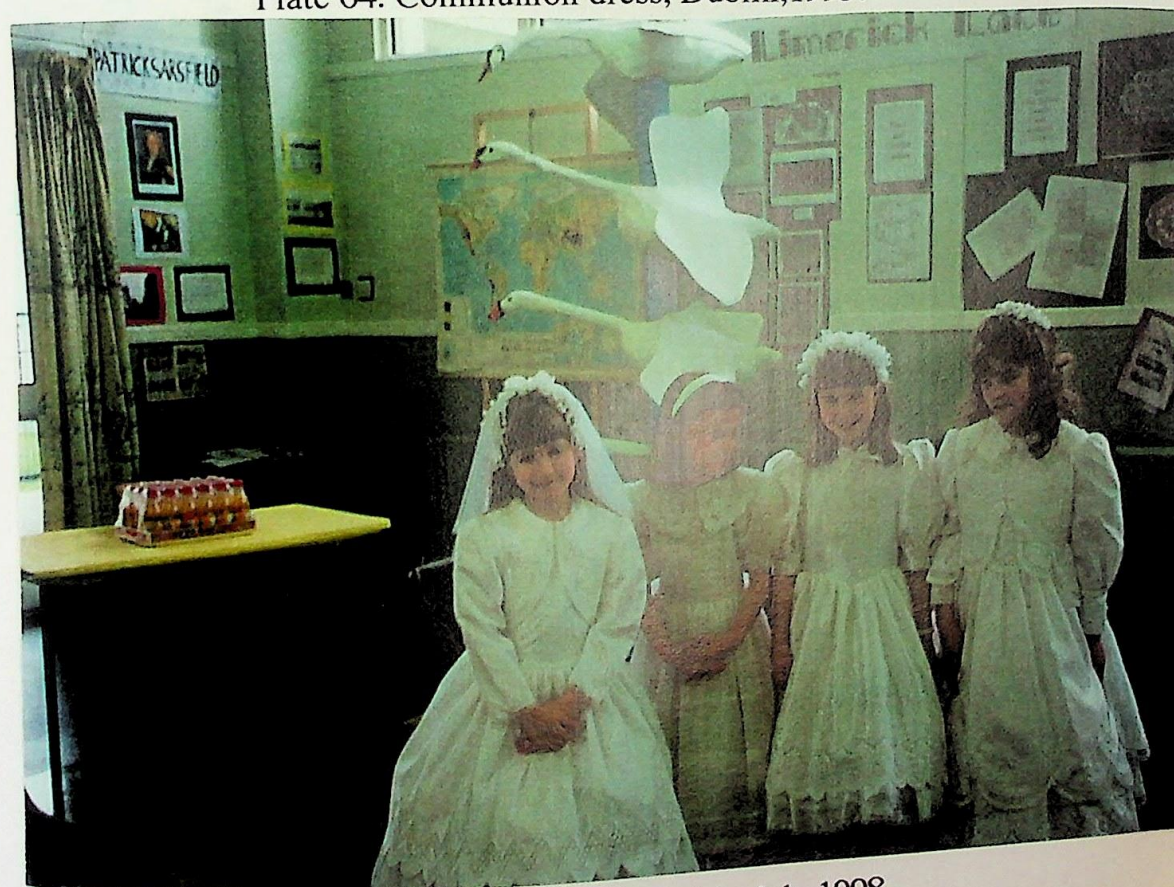


Plate 65. Communion dress, Limerick, 1998.

Since the Famine the deep roots of such allegiance have been a major influence in uniting and defining Irish national identity. Irish Catholics are, in the main, church-going, with sacraments or rites of passage being of primary importance. First Communion (immediately following First Confession) is the first occasion of young Catholics participating, independently, in Catholic Church ritual.

While there are many aspects to this participation, the dress has a particular overt and integral function in delineating gender roles within the Church. Females are stereotyped in a pretty pageant of extravagance and tradition, schooled for passivity within the Catholic religious hierarchy.

On a more social level the dress is yet another expression of conspicuous consumption. "The present day embellishments and over-elaboration are anathema to me" (Batt, letter, 1999). And yet, celebration is often about pomp and ceremony, the 'pot-latch' to honour the occasion.

Within the framework of a religious idealism central to Irish culture, the Holy Communion dress is reflective of the family values of self-esteem and extended family support. Dresses and photographs of dresses have been carefully preserved within families, with great sentimental value. They are tangible reminders of First Holy Communion days, lovingly handed down from generation to generation.

The ceremony of First Communion and the wearing of the white dress makes a significant impact on the mind of the child. The newspaper response to this research found that for older women, there is a lifetime memory of the circumstances surrounding the dress, imbued with a certain sadness, affection and sentiment. For almost everyone, there is the awareness of peer acceptance and comparisons. There are expectations around performance and perfection. Memories of First Communion, reveal a sensitivity "I was very nervous, but I kept it to myself" (Clarke, interview, 1999). The research shows that the First Communion child has an awareness that is mostly underestimated by adults.

Over the last century, Holy Communion dress manufacture has evolved from a largely home based enterprise to a competitive commercial industry.

In the tradition of First Communion the Holy Communion dress stands as a fundamental element of the ceremony. For decades, Irish femininity has embraced it with great enthusiasm and excitement. It is testimony to mother love, family commitment and tradition. As it becomes increasingly aligned with elaborate wedding-dress styles, it is as if the trend of conspicuous consumption is out of control, or is it possible that, within society, the extravagance of the dress is symptomatic of an increased longing for celebration, for beauty, for transcendence of the ordinary, of the banal of everyday life? "When you see them lining up, they look absolutely lovely. The church looked beautiful, I was in tears and I wasn't the only one" (Dempsey, 1998, pg. 44). "The parents, especially the mothers, look on....and feel within their hearts the reawakening of inexhaustible love" (Perrot and Martin-Fugier, 1990, pg. 326). Thus, the dynamic of the white dress and the rite of First Communion can be seen to aspire to, and to generate, a positive and splendid generosity of spirit. And perhaps then, there is the wider implication that even with all its paradox, insecurity and imperfection, the Holy Communion dress is symbolic of an even greater meaning, that of the love of human beings for each other, and that of the love of God.



First Communion

Salt Fridays Crystal caught in thornlight

No haste nor terror here

No adornment. The wafer taken

And the morning bright

No morning here. No cross

No spear. The spire straight.

The true delight of fire

Starting its might in a small grate.

John L. Sweeney (America, 1939)



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Appendix 1

Text of questionnaire circulated to Irish Holy Communion Dress Manufacturers including;

1. Peter Day Fashions, Dublin.
2. Childhood Originals, Dublin.
3. Birthrites, Dublin.
4. Princess Company Ltd, Dublin.
5. De Paor Designs, Dublin.
6. George Anthony Bridal Wear, Dublin.
7. Hamill Ltd, Donegal.
8. Bronte Designs, Dublin.
9. Colette Clemenger, Dublin.
10. Fiona Todhunter, Dublin.

Holy Communion Dresses Questionnaire

1. How long has your company been established?
2. Do you design dresses or obtain patterns from elsewhere and make up the dresses? If the latter is applicable from where do you obtain patterns?
3. Are there variations on the styles and shapes of the dresses which you design or make?
4. What fabrics are used for the dresses?
5. Are the colour of your dresses predominantly white or ivory?
6. How do you apply embroidery and bead work to the dresses? Is it hand done, machine done or a combination?
7. What sort of stitches are used in the embroidery?

8. What kind of thread is used?
9. What are the motifs embroidered on the dresses?
10. From where do you obtain these motifs? What is the significance of the motifs which you use?
11. What is the relationship between the style and decoration of the dresses and their price?
12. What is the range in price of Holy Communion dresses which you make / design?
13. Has the scale of embroidery or beading changed over the years?
14. What are the changes in wedding dress styles that are reflected in Communion dress styles?
15. Do you manufacture or design accessories to co-ordinate with your dress styles?
16. What do you know something about the history of Irish Holy Communion dresses?
17. When were they first worn?
18. What dictated their style?
19. Was embroidery always used to decorate the dresses?
20. In what way has the style and decoration of dresses changed, since you began manufacturing, with regard to fabrics used, stitches used, embroidery, thread, motifs, shape etc.?

Appendix 2

Letter published in the Irish Times of October 20th 1999, making a national request for information concerning Irish Holy Communion dresses. The same letter was published in the Irish Independent.

COMMUNION DRESSES

Sir, — I am a final year student at the National College of Art and Design researching the history and evolution of Holy Communion dresses. I am particularly keen to discover more about the changing styles and decoration of the dresses, taking into consideration the fabrics used as well as embroidery stitches applied. My interest also lies in discovering the religious and symbolic origins of the dresses.

I would be grateful to hear from anyone who might have any information on any aspect of the dresses, including accessories such as lace collars, shoes, bags and medals. I am interested in older dresses as well as contemporary ones. An opportunity to see either photographs of dresses or actual dresses would be greatly appreciated.
— Yours, etc.,

ABBI GILBOURNE,
Ardee Road,
Dundalk,
Co Louth.

Addressing history . . .

Sir — I am a final year student researching the history and evolution of Holy Communion dresses. I am particularly keen to discover more about the changing styles and decoration of the dresses, taking into consideration the fabrics used as well as embroidery stitches applied. My interest lies in discovering the religious and symbolic origins of the dresses.

I would be so grateful to hear from anyone who might have the smallest piece of information regarding any aspect of the dresses, including the dress and accessories worn, i.e. lace collars, shoes, bags, medals etc. I am also interested in information about older dresses as well as contemporary ones. The opportunity to see photographs of dresses or actual dresses would be extremely appreciated.

ABBI GILBOURNE,
Ardee Road, Dundalk.

Appendix 3

Correspondence

Helpful written and photographic information was recieved from the following individuals:

Arduff, Francis, Dublin 13, 5th November 1999.

Barton, Oonagh, Blackrock, Dublin, 29th October 1999.

Batt, Stephanie, Dublin, 23rd October 1999.

Beagan, Anne, Croom, Limerick, November 1999.

Butler, Ruth, Co. Wicklow, 22nd October 1999.

Collins, V, Blackrock, Dublin, 29th October 1999.

De Faoite, Mairead, Dublin, November 1999.

Guckian, Mary, Dublin 4, 14th November 1999.

Guiney, Anita, Co. Kerry, October 1999.

Ingoldsby, Cathrine, Dublin, 11th November 1999.

John, Sister Mary, Kylemore Abbey, Galway, 21st October 1999.

Massey, Angela, Dublin 5, 15th November 1999.

Maguire, Eileen, Dublin 14, 10th February 2000.

Mc Goldrick, John, information recieved via fax machine, 1st October 1999.

Mc Hugh, Cathrine, Co. Donegal, 18th October 1999.

Moore, Elizabeth, Dublin, 11th November 1999.

Moran, Una, Terenure, Dublin, 9th November 1999.

Ní Neachtain, Maire, Dublin 3, 21st October 1999.

O'Connell, Rosemary, Cork, 21st October 1999.

Purcell, Rita, Dublin 7, October 1999.

Turner, Paul: PaulTu@aol.com, 31st October 1999.

Wallis, Paricia, Cork, 16th November 1999.

Woods, Phyllis, Dundalk, 18th December 1999.

Other Photographic Sources

Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, Belfast, 23rd September 1999.

National Photographic Archive, Temple Bar, Dublin, June 1999.

Appendix 4

Interviews

Anthony, George, George Anthony Bridal Designs, Dublin, Telephone Interview, 18th October 1999.

Ballard, Linda, Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, Co. Down, Northern Ireland, Interview, 23rd September 1999.

Barton, Oonagh, First Communicant in 1939, Blackrock, Dublin, Interview, 16th November 1999.

Byrne, Fr Archer, The Friary Church, Dundalk, Co. Louth, Interview, 24th January 1999.

Clarke, Emer, First Communicant in 1999, Dundalk, Interview, 10th September 1999.

Connelly, Fr., The Redemderist Church, Dundalk, Interview, 15th June 1999.

Duffy, Anne Marie, First Communicant in 1999, Dundalk, Interview, 16th June 1999.

Fagan, Jas, Owner of 'The First Communion Shop', Christchurch, Dublin, Interview, 3rd December 1999.

Gallagher, Geraldine, First Communicant in 1942, Dundalk, Interview, November 1999.

Gosling, Niamh, First Communicant in 1999, Dundalk, Interview, 15th June 1999.

Griffin, Nycha, Fashion and Textile Department in The National Museum of Ireland, Dublin, Telephone interview, 12th October 1999.

Hamill, Fr. Tom, Telephone Interview, December 1999.

Maloney, Teresa, Teacher of First Communion in the Friary National School, Dundalk, Interview, 24th May 1999.

Massey, Angela, First Communicant in 1949 and an accomplished and skilled lace and crochet maker, Raheny, Dublin 5, Interview, 26th October 1999.

Mc Entaggert, Kathleen, First Communicant in 1961, Dundalk, Interview, 15th January 1999.

Mc Ginnity, Jennifer, First Communicant in 1999, Dundalk, Interview, 9th August 1999.

Murnaghan, Kelly, First Communicant in 1999, Dundalk, Interview, 17th September 1999.

Purcell, Rita, First Communicant in 1944, Dublin, Interview, 27th October 1999.

Tracey, Liam, Maynooth College, Dublin, Telephone Interview, 1st November 1999.

Whittington, Teresa, Librarian at The Central Catholic Library, Dublin, Interview, 29th June 1999.