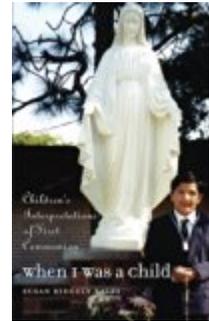


Susan Ridgely Bales. *When I Was a Child: Children's Interpretations of First Communion*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005. xiii + 257 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5633-8.

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## Catholic Children Share their Ritual Experiences—Voluntarily

This book, based upon Dr. Bales's dissertation at the University of North Carolina, presents a richly detailed ethnographic study of two contrasting cohorts of first communicants from two Roman Catholic parishes in North Carolina. One parish, Holy Cross, is historically and avowedly African American, and the other, Blessed Sacrament, is white with significant recent Mexican membership.

The very clearly described parishes and, especially their approaches to sacramental preparation and ritual practice, serve not only to explain the diversity of interpretations of First Communion among the recipients themselves, but provide an effective caution to concepts of universality. As Catholic pastors and religious educators surely will know from experience, while doctrine and sacramental texts may unify Roman Catholics, each parish possesses its own character which fine-tunes its understandings and expressions of these truths.

The research was completed very late in the twentieth century, so it still enjoys currency. While its two cases are appropriately tight in focus, *When I Was a Child* expands the methodology of the study of children's rituals in insisting that the children speak for themselves. In this regard Bales is so thorough as to have the children complete assent forms for participation in the study (p. 186). Furthermore, Bales refers to the children as "consultants" (p. 53) and titles her first chapter "Children Seen and Heard." In technique, Bales gives the children their voices first by being very present among them in their

religious education classes, and then variously by direct interview, seemingly casual conversation, and interpretation of their drawings. Here she draws upon the seminal works of psychologist Robert Coles (p. 65).

The organization of the book is quite clear. The introduction swiftly maps out the scholarly landscape to which this study contributes—Arnold van Gennep, Victor Turner, Ronald L. Grimes, and Catherine Bell.[1] Such prominent authorities in the field are, of course, indispensable.

Chapter 1 provides copious description, both of necessary background and of the telling instances. For example, during the Mass for the First Holy Communion of the cohort at Holy Cross, many of the children, aged seven to ten, were "biting or sucking on their fingers by the end of the first reading"—that is, about fifteen minutes into the service (p. 21).

Chapter 2 is the methodological justification. Bales distinguishes between the reality of the children's perceptions and interpretations of the rituals and their expressions of them. She concedes, with some regret, that, as an observer and also as an alien (Presbyterian, Ivy-League), she remained apart from both the adults (parents and Faith Formation teachers) and her "consultants." A commonplace among ethnographers is that participant-observation is very tricky, and such a study of children as this will help researchers keep this in mind, for the candor of the "consultants" often surprises Bales. This chapter alludes to several previous studies of chil-

dren's rituals, and lays out her rationale for making the children as completely as possible voluntary subjects.

Chapter 3 notably presents vignettes of the Faith Formation classes for first communicants. Because "many children did not like to spend each Sunday in class" (p. 76) and yet felt some pressure to learn much for this step in initiation into the church, their recalcitrance mushrooms. They show "great resistance ... to learning their lessons" (p. 77). For example, at Blessed Sacrament, catechists' lessons were often "thwarted" by random questions and by children who "wander through the classroom ... [and] taunt their neighbors"; children who also chatted constantly and "sought distraction in whatever ways were available to them" (p. 89). Similarly, Dean, a student at Holy Cross parish, persists in applying stickers to a get-well card for a shut-in, even though the teacher begs him to draw. Bales calls this passive-aggression typical of "all of those children who hated Faith Formation classes" and who manifest their displeasure "in a way that would not get [them] into trouble with [their] teachers" (p. 86). As is suitable for her own focus, Bales does not digress into speculations about other causes for this unruliness, such as pedagogical failure. Still, this chapter so well describes the difficulties of the Faith Formation classes that it certainly deters this reviewer from ever volunteering to teach in face of such "resistance." Similarly, I infer that a comprehensive grade school should be erected in every parish or cluster of parishes, because catechesis integrated into a holistic curriculum that left weekends free for the children would be both palatable and more effective. The children would not perceive religion classes as add-ons and so impingements upon their free time.

In the same section, Bales gives a resume both of Catholic doctrine about the Eucharist and its reception, and of sacramental preparation, contrasting these two parishes with a general sense of pre-Vatican II practices. She concludes that the children's mode of expressing the doctrine of transubstantiation consists of fretting about the sensory elements of the rituals, and that the main and actual fruit of the reception is fuller participation, in the manner of an adult, in the ritual life of the parish.

The next chapter details long-range preparations and celebrations which are centered in the family. Bales seems to fault explanations of Holy Communion that cast the sacrament as improving one's relationship with Jesus and God, especially insofar as they downplay the historical and scriptural Jesus. "Communion, many adults hoped, would bring the children intellectually and phys-

ically closer to Jesus as it taught them about his unending love and allowed them to partake of his body and blood" (p. 125). This emphasis "almost ... excludes any study of the events in his [Jesus'] life or his historical place in the Bible and the Catholic Church" (p. 126). This is Jesus, not as "judge," but as "friend and mentor" (p. 127). As first communicants much later reflect, by means of drawings, upon their deeper initiation into the Church, they have moved from outsiders to insiders. Similarly, the children become more anchored even in their families by sharing in this very traditional series of events. The chapter also includes an interesting hermeneutic of First Communion clothing. The "adult" clothing functions to endow the children both with a sense of their own importance and of their place within the familial and Catholic tradition. It also serves as a physical anticipation and reminder of the momentousness of the First Communion day and of respect for the Blessed Sacrament (p. 157 ff.).

In her concluding chapter, Bales notes how her methodology is one "by which children's perceptions of other religious events may be studied" (p. 171) and also gives inklings of what such studies will find. Children have been heretofore, the "most invisible participants" in rituals (p. 173). Because ritual by definition involves action manifest as gesture, children learn ritual by mastering its requisite actions. While much of the book reports on differences between the parents' and children's interpretations of the sacrament, the conclusion allows us to see commonalities among them—"God's love" and "the celebratory nature of the Sacrament" (p. 179).

The extensive and multi-disciplinary bibliography convincingly credentials Susan Ridgely Bales for her ambitious project. Besides Jean Piaget and Robert Coles (psychology) and Ronald L. Grimes (ritual studies), she cites Philippe Ariès (social history/childhood), John T. McGreevy (church history), newspaper articles, unpublished parish commemoratives, and church bulletins.[2] Still, I must express two objections in this regard. First, some of her sources on Catholic sacramental theology seem dated. Regis Duffy's 1984 book on initiation may remain serviceable, but works from the 1920s and even 1960s should be carefully justified as witnesses to pre-Vatican II Catholic conceptualizations. Second, the book's attempt to apply the anthropological literature on food to these cases rings feeble. On the other hand, a fully committed reader should peruse the endnotes where she will find some surprising gems, admittedly not intrinsic to the project. In this regard, two candidates for First Holy Communion manifest great flexibility, if not full-blown postmodernist relativism. Obviously, they both

worship in their Catholic parishes, but one also with a United Church of Christ congregation and the other also at a synagogue.

Except for spelling the past participle of the verb “to lead” as “lead,” the text is tidy. The illustrations are necessary for the book’s method, “reading” the minds of children. As do many books that stem from dissertations, this one lacks economy of expression.

In conclusion, Bales’s case studies of First Communion preparation, practice, and interpretation in two Catholic parishes in North Carolina illustrate her method and the sacramental programs at the parishes of Holy Cross and Blessed Sacrament support her generalizations. Readers whose interest lies in Catholicism, however, may find that cases from North Carolina are anomalous with respect to the Church in the United States. Would that she had studied Chicago parishes! Still, her observations will prove of benefit to an audience outside of the academy, especially to catechists, religious education publishers, and most of all to bishops, from whom the failures of religious education (Faith Formation), as Bales deduces from rates of attrition after First Communion, are likely concealed.

And finally, the emphasis upon methodology reveals the solid contribution here—truly a paradigm expansion, if not a shift—in the way scholars in various disciplines treat the child in ritual. Quite straightforwardly, Bales urges that age should henceforth be articulated as one of the variables in ethnographic research, as conventionally are gender and marital status. As such, Bales’s work is a

worthy addition to the literature.

#### Notes

[1]. Arnold van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, tr. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960); Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theater: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982), and *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969); Ronald Grimes *Marrying and Burying: Rites of Passage in a Man’s Life* (Boulder, Colorado: Westbrook Press, 1995), and *Ritual Criticism: Case Studies in Its Practice, Essays on Its Theory* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1990); and Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

[2]. Jean Piaget, *Judgment and Reasoning in the Child*, tr. M. Warden (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1928), and Piaget with B. Inhelder, *The Psychology of the Child*, tr. H. Weaver (New York: Basic Books, 1969); Robert Coles, especially *The Spiritual Life of Children* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1990) and for the methodology of analyzing drawings, *Children of Crisis: A Study of Courage and Fear* (Boston: Little, Brown: 1967); Grimes, *Marrying and Burying*; Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, tr. Robert Baldick (New York: Vintage Books, 1962); John T. McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

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