



Sarah Carey
reflects on her son's
recent First Holy
Communion

A fresh approach...

AS the current pandemic drags on, we're all wondering when we'll return to normal, but I wonder if there are some normals we can do without. More than a few people have whispered to me conspiratorially they hope there will be no return to big weddings.

In Ireland, a one day celebration has, over the past twenty years, escalated into a three-day pageant with hen and stag parties adding an extra weekend and expense to the put-upon guest. But my favourite part of the wedding is the church. I love all the warmth and love in the ceremony and dread standing around in painful shoes afterwards with a drink in my hand, dying for dinner while the hapless bride and groom are tortured with photographs.

Leaving aside all the money saved, I think couples forced to have pared down ceremonies with just their closest friends and family present will look back in fondness rather than regret. The small wedding might be here to stay.

Rather guiltily I harboured the same dread of First Communions as I did of weddings. Like any other parent I adore the rite of passage and thankfully only having sons, was able to keep life simple enough

with a suit rather than worrying about dresses, hair, bags and shoes. But the circus surrounding the sacrament itself wore me out. Last year, my third and final son made his First Communion in October. It had been postponed twice. With strict social distancing rules in place, only the child and parents were present. We were arranged in small groups and spaced out around the church rather than having the entire cohort of children and several relations packed in.

Instead of the usual school choir we had a lovely folk singer and there was no big party at home or in a hotel. To some it might sound drab and sad. In fact, I thought it the loveliest of all the ceremonies my children had experienced. It was an intimate family occasion with just our lovely local priests and removed all the fuss and work. It was so relaxed and with the focus off the party, we could enjoy the moment. Standing outside in the sunshine afterwards everyone agreed it was brilliant. The ceremony had been streamed online with grandparents watching at home and relations all around the world tuning in. I was getting text messages from my brother in America who had never been able to watch before. So perhaps the time is right to decide on the First Communions of the future.

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Here in Ireland, the public conversation about First Communion tends to be dominated by two themes. First, there are those who protest that preparation for the big day takes place mostly in school.

Over 90% of our primary schools are under Catholic management and yes it's true, teachers spend hours, days and weeks teaching the theory and logistics of First Communion. Some people resent the educational priorities displaced by this activity while others feel it creates social pressure for their children to conform and take the sacrament, even if they'd rather opt out.

The second public complaint usually arises on the popular phone-in radio shows. Parents get very angry when some parishes insist that First Communion be confined to those who actually attend Mass.

So you have two paradoxical complaints – from those who feel pressured into taking part and those who are furious at the prospect of being excluded. But both stem from the same origin – the system in Ireland whereby most children get their First Communion, even if they're not committed Catholics. The religious element is almost entirely irrelevant. Instead it's seen as an almost mandatory rite of passage. So those who don't want to be included and those who feel excluded get very annoyed.

In our school there's a rather brilliant female catechist who gives an annual talk to parents to assure them that if they want to opt out their child won't be made feel different in school. She encourages them to only put their child forward for Communion if they genuinely want to be an active Catholic. She asks parents to really think about why they want to take part. It's a great question.

It's easy to criticise parents who proceed simply because it's a tradition when they have little or no faith themselves, are going with the crowd or are just obsessed with the fancy dress and party.

But I remember when the debate came to our house. My middle son is an outgoing and independent personality. When it came to his First Communion he called me to his room for a chat. He very seriously declared that he didn't believe in God and therefore felt he shouldn't go through with the sacrament. His doubt sprang from the age-old problem of evil, or, as he put it, "If God existed, he wouldn't have allowed Hitler to

be born". Since this thorny problem has challenged the best of theologians and philosophers I was extremely proud he was applying a thinking mind to the issue. I was also alarmed at the prospect of creating a fuss and offending both our priest and his grandparents who would be appalled if I let him drop out so precociously. We'd never live it down.

So I decided to handle this carefully and showed no resistance. I complimented him on his philosophical bent and assured him this question was indeed a difficult one that occupied great minds for centuries. But I put it to him that opting into a religion later was much harder than opting out and that perhaps bearing in mind *Pascal's Wager*, he should get his Communion now in case he changed his mind later. Then his religion would always be there for him if he needed it in the future. I thought this a high-minded approach and meant it sincerely.

To my shame, I also added there would be no party or money if there was no Communion. The dread of breaking the news to the grandparents may have pushed me too far on that score. Thankfully he accepted these points and once he could see I'd taken his lack of faith seriously, he sailed on.

Being faced with the dilemma showed me how hard it is to break a social norm. I'm not personally very religious but it is important to me that my children are reared as Catholics. While they may not observe their religion much now, or ever in their adult lives, at least they have some resources to draw on should they be required. When we least expect it, the traditions of our childhood and foundation of faith can emerge to give us comfort later in life.

However, relying on the schools to put in so much work doesn't create the right environment. If parents had to opt-in rather than opt-out then families would think about it more seriously and positively. The intimate atmosphere of First Communion during the pandemic revealed the very best of this sacrament.

As the world resets for life after the pandemic, a fresh approach to First Communion would be a lovely legacy. ■

Sarah Carey is a columnist for *The Irish Independent* and a communications consultant.

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