

### **Community Rituals:**

I HEARD something Gerry Ryan this morning about how the responsibility for preparing children for Communion might be transferred from the school to the parents.

The discussion about it was sober and insightful with all of the obvious points being made. It appears that events such as Communion and Confirmation will ultimately be removed from schools. One thing was not being expressed which, from a psychological perspective, needs to be articulated. It is simply this: Children need rites of passage.

Children need to participate in community-based rituals that symbolically give expression to their belonging, their significance, and to their specialness. Children have few enough experiences of these things. These include Christmas, Birthdays, Communions, Confirmations, and often participating in team-based sporting events.

When people reduce the First-Holy-Communion experience to being just about teaching children some Catholic view of the world, they miss the point entirely for the child. For the child their communion is less about these things and more about being made feel special. For one day in their seventh year they, in the eyes of their family, their community, and their school they are not just children, they are given a special status .

On the day in question they go through a rite-of-passage where they are important enough for family, friends, relatives, and neighbours to salute them, applaud them, and make them feel worthy and important. In the ritual they are part of something bigger than themselves. On days like these old hierarchies are reversed and they break out of the role of being just children and are elevated to a position of status and meaning that most children remember for the rest of their lives. The meaning of all of this for a small child is immeasurable.

For the small child its meaning has little to do with Church beliefs and much more to do with going through a community ritual that recognises them. Not only that, they are made feel special in the eyes of the Beyond, of their God, of the Universe.

Such experiences in the life of any child are quite profound because they buffer they small child's heart against the cold indifference of everyday life when they feel small and invisible. On this day, in their own little world, they are heroes.

My concern is that in removing community rituals from the life of a child and 'privatising' them down to something they go through just with their parents is to miss the point of them entirely. The importance of rites of passage is that they *are community based and public*.

Whether one likes the Church or not, it is a fact that all of the community and family rituals mark one's personal place in the world are provided through religious rituals: Baptisms and Christenings, Communions and Confirmations, Marriages & Funerals. At all of these times the heart of a family and community opens up and gives expression to what remains wordless in everyday life. Removals and funerals illustrate this powerfully. How bereft we would be as a society if we did not have these vital rites of passage at the heart of our community life.

The secularisation of educational and social life is all very well if a society is capable of creating its own rituals that emphasise the meanings and values of that society.

Regretfully, I fear that secular society does not have the stomach for it. Who answers to the tragedy of children losing such experiences in their lives?

It is very clear that for teenagers the only modern rite of passage they have left now is the Leaving Certificate. There are no other community-based rituals that signify and help teenagers to move from adolescence to adulthood. In primitive tribes young boys were initiated in adulthood through dramatic ordeals. Teenagers now are left to hang around looking for their own violent ways of marking their territory and proving their manhood.

So if our children are to lose the last remnants of age-old traditions and rituals that mark their importance and value, then what can we offer in their place? These old rituals emerged not just from Christianity but also from ancient universal human needs to give meaning to the cycle of birth, growth, decay, and death.

Christmas and the Santa experience touches the same part of a child's heart; on this one day they have a specialness that is bestowed not on adults but solely on them as children. When a small child cries at the Baptism, blows out the candles of their birthday cake, when they see the sight of Santa's bag at the Christmas tree, when they dress up for Holy Communion, when they are applauded by their family and community, it is then that they are reminded of their true value. They are all simple events, but we lose them at their pearl. If Holy Communion excludes some denominations, then change it to be inclusive of all children because the message that they belong and are loved is all that it is. But, let's not deprive them of their moment in the Light because of our lack of Imagination.