

Eastern Catholic Infant Communion: Has Catholic Dogmatic Teaching Prohibited It?

Mark M. Morozowich

Abstract

(Українське резюме на ст. 90)

After briefly noting the considerable and currently burgeoning literature on the topic of infant communion among Christians of all traditions, the author turns his attention to one very important but rarely noted feature of the debate: the perceived obstacle to infant communion in Latin conciliar and canonical literature. This perception, it is argued, historically kept some Eastern Catholics from retaining or recovering this part of their legitimate liturgical and sacramental traditions. Beginning in the late eleventh century, the author briefly reviews such relevant figures as William of Champeaux, Hugh of St. Victor, Gilbert of Poitiers, and Robert Pulleyn, and such relevant councils as Lateran IV and Trent, whose decrees are reviewed in Latin and English, along with the various catechetical manuals arising after Trent. Among more recent treatments, the 1910 curial decree *Quam singulari*, promulgated under Pope Pius X, is perhaps the most significant, and the author carefully considers what it does and does not say. The review of all the relevant literature clearly indicates that there is nothing in the canonical or conciliar tradition of the Catholic Church forbidding infant communion. The author therefore concludes that no official teaching prevents a recovery of this practice, and all recent Catholic teaching – including *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the 1990 *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches*, and the 1996 *Instruction for Applying the Liturgical Prescriptions of the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches* – most strongly encourages a recovery of infant communion among Eastern Catholics.



Introduction

In the wake of the many ecumenical and liturgical reforms begun by the Second Vatican Council, the consequences of which have spread far beyond the Catholic Church, the topic of infant communion has increasingly become a point of discussion and sometimes vigorous debate, especially among Lutherans,¹ but also among Anglicans,² and Reformed Protestants³ as well. The literature has grown considerably, especially in the last dozen years or so, and there is now a very helpful website that has sprung up with an abundance of resources on it, including a detailed and organized bibliography.⁴ This debate, to which Orthodox theologians have made some contri-

¹ There are even today numerous websites and blogs run by and for Lutherans where this topic is debated, sometimes rather heatedly. As for the written scholarly literature, see, among many other articles, the following, beginning with one of the earliest: Eugene L. Brand, "Baptism and Communion of Infants: a Lutheran View," *Worship* 50 (1976): 29–42. In the 1980s, see the three-part article by David Percy, "Infant Communion" in *Currents in Theology and Mission* 7 (1980): 43–47 (part 1) and 166–70 (part 2), and 8 (1981): 162–65 (part 3). In the 1990s, see Todd Nichol, "Infant Communion in Light of the Lutheran Confessions," *Lutheran Quarterly* 10 (1996): 241–47; Mark Tranvik, "Should Infants Be Communed? A Lutheran Perspective," *Word & World* 15 (1995): 83–90; and see many articles in the *Lutheran Forum* in the mid- to late 1990s. Finally, see "Lutherans Allow Infants to Receive Communion," *Christian Century* 114 (1997): 826.

² See, inter alia, the compilation by the editors, "Children and Communion: Agreed Statements," *Anglican Theological Review* 68 (1986): 185–97; C.F. Allison, "Anglican Initiatory Rites: a Contribution to the Current Debate," *Anglican and Episcopal History* 56 (1987): 27–43.

³ See, inter alia, James B. Torrance, "Some Theological Grounds for Admitting Children to the Lord's Table," *Reformed Review* 40 (1987): 200–205; David R. Holetson, "The Communion of Infants and Hussitism," *Communio Viatorum* 27 (1984): 207–225.

⁴ See <http://www.paedocommunion.com/churches.php>. This site has more Anglican, Reformed, Lutheran, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox resources and literature on it than can be cited here.

butions,⁵ occasioned a paper produced by the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches.⁶

A similar and largely concomitant conversation has been happening among Eastern Catholics. This study could not possibly review all this literature – Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox – in the space allotted here. This article, rather, finds its originality in an examination of a more particular – though no less substantial – issue, and that is the status of infant communion in Roman Catholic canonical and conciliar literature through the centuries, especially from the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) onwards. This study examines any objections in this literature to infant communion, and then considers the implications of the findings for the ongoing recovery of the practice of infant communion by Eastern Catholics.

For many centuries, Eastern Catholics have been trying to express their own Eastern Christian identity and live their theology, spirituality, and liturgy while being in union with the Roman Catholic Church. This often difficult union has produced at times a hybrid liturgical practice of Eastern and Western liturgical rituals pejoratively referred to as a Latinization of the Eastern liturgical traditions. The effects of Latinization continue in Eastern Catholic parishes today. Chief among the varied contemporary difficulties remains the question of whether or not to reintroduce the practice of infant reception of Holy Communion. This curious problem persists despite the historical reality that Eastern and Western Christians shared this tradition for well over a millennium.⁷ This heated and at times emotional debate could benefit from a detailed comprehensive look at major dogmatic pronouncements of the Roman Catholic Church regarding infant Communion.

⁵ See, e.g., Thomas Hopko, “Children and Holy Communion,” *Lutheran Forum* 30 (1996): 35–35; Cyrille Argenti, “Children and the Eucharist” in the Faith and Order publication noted in the following note (pp. 51–58).

⁶ *And Do Not Hinder Them: An Ecumenical Plea for the Admission of Children to the Eucharist* (Faith and Order Paper 109) (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982).

⁷ See the short review of this issue in Robert F. Taft, “The Liturgy in the Life of the Church,” *Logos: A Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 40 (1999): 217–223.