

## CHAPTER 5

### First Communion

At school Mr Benson says it's time for our First Communion<sup>1</sup>. We have to learn questions and answers about being a good Catholic. We have to know the difference between right and wrong. And we have to be ready to die for the Church. [...]

"The best thing about First Communion", Mikey tells me, "is The Collection. Your mother gets you a new suit. She takes you round to all the family and neighbours and they give you money and sweets. Then you can go to the cinema and see James Cagney<sup>2</sup>." [...]

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Our teacher Mr Benson is very old. He gets very angry when he's trying to prepare us for First Communion. We have to learn everything in Irish and English. If we forget an Irish word he gets his stick out. He tells us we're a disgrace to Ireland and her long, sad history. He says we're the worst class he's ever had for First Communion. He says he'll hit us until we're good Catholics.

"There are boys in this class", he shouts, "who will never know the love of Our Lord. And why? Because they are greedy. I have heard them in the school playground talking about First Communion, the happiest day of your life. Are they talking about receiving the body and blood of Our Lord? Oh no! Those greedy little beggars are talking about the money they'll get." He says that if he hears another boy in this class talk about The Collection, he'll hit him until his blood pours out.

He shows us how to receive Holy Communion in the classroom. We get down on our knees by our desks. We have to stick out our tongue and he places a bit of newspaper on it. Then we pull in our tongue, put our hands together in prayer and look up to heaven.

"Make sure you put your tongue out correctly" he says. "The worst thing for a priest is if you let the Communion wafer<sup>3</sup> fall to the floor. The priest has to pick it up with his tongue. He could get an illness from the floor and die."

Before we receive First Communion, we have to tell the priest all our sins. Mr Benson tells us what to say "I told a lie. I hit my brother. I stole a penny from my mother's purse. I ate a sausage on a Friday<sup>4</sup>." We've all got the same sins to tell the priest.

But then I get a sin that no one else has. Mikey Molloy tells me a rude story about women. Then he says it's a sin to listen to a story with a bad word in it.

Now I don't know what to do. How can I tell the priest this terrible thing before my First Communion? The priest will say I'm a disgrace and throw me into the street.

From *Angela's Ashes* by Franck McCourt.

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<sup>1</sup> People take communion in church. The priest gives them a wafer to eat and wine to drink.

<sup>2</sup> James Cagney was a famous Hollywood actor of the 1930s and 40s.

<sup>3</sup> The Communion wafer represents the body of Christ

<sup>4</sup> Catholics are not allowed to eat meat on Fridays