


# 'First' or 'Solemn' Communion Images in France, 1885–2021

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*Arguably, the 'first' or 'solemn' communion, later also called 'profession of faith', was a rite of passage for generations of French eleven- or twelve-year-old children. It remained virtually unchanged, under these different names, until the early 1970s, when it gradually fell into decline. Friends, relatives, and even state school teachers, were customarily given small religious images with a commemorative inscription on the reverse, stating the communicant's name as well as the date and place of the ceremony. This article analyses a small private collection of such 'popular' objects and discusses the evolution in their representations of lived religion in a secular country where a strong Roman Catholic tradition has given way to a post-Christian society.*

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For generations of French children, 'making their communion' (*faire sa communion*) was arguably a rite of passage, combining religious ceremonies with profane feasting. Communicants and their parents customarily presented friends, relatives and even their state school teachers with small illustrated commemorative cards. That the gift was usually accompanied by small bags of sugared almonds (*dragées*) exemplifies the intertwining of the sacred and the secular in this event.<sup>1</sup> These religious images were meant to be used as book-marks in the recipients' missals or Bibles, but people who did not own

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<sup>1</sup> This combination is confirmed by Yann Raison du Cleuziou, in 'Penser les images de dévotion à partir des hypothèses de Serge Bonnet sur le catholicisme populaire', in Dominique Lerch et al., eds, *Les Images de dévotion en Europe XVIe–XXIe siècle. Une Précieuse Histoire* (Paris, 2021), 87–111, at 94. The greater part of this article was written before the publication of Lerch's volume, which deals with many categories of devotional religious images and has no specific chapter about communion cards. Communion cards are only a subcategory of a much larger genre. Lerch discusses many possible approaches to the production, publication, dissemination, history, ideology, iconography and diversity of these small religious images, not only in France, but also in other continental countries.

a prayer book also treasured these ‘precious souvenirs’ (Figure 1), keeping them, for instance, in a cupboard with the family archives, in a wallet, or tucked into a poetry book.<sup>2</sup> The standard size of these holy cards, predominantly vertical in format, is roughly 60 x 110 mm. The recto typically includes a picture, often with a caption consisting of an aphorism, a short prayer or a quotation. In the nineteenth century, the image was sometimes surrounded by a border of delicate paper lace called *canivet* (Figure 1). A minority of religious cards imitate the layout of medieval illuminated manuscripts, with the illustration being placed in the margin, and the text given pride of place (Figure 2). An inscription on the verso usually includes at least the date and place of the ceremony, as well as the communicant’s name. Depending on the family’s wealth or religious commitment, these details could be printed, typewritten, calligraphed by an adult or handwritten by the child. Occasional traces of old adhesive tape suggest that some may have been displayed, perhaps on a wall or in a notebook. That some cards were intended for such display may be discerned in their layout, with a thin gold outline and a white space emulating the frame and mount traditionally used to enhance the visual appeal of a picture. Other signs of wear and tear, even fingerprints, are visible on some of these fragile objects (Figure 3).

This article will analyse a small private collection of such ‘popular’ items, which can be divided into two subsets. The original collection includes 240 holy cards, collected, used and treasured over the course of a century (1885–1991) by four generations of three related branches of my family, predominantly in the Paris area. The second group comprises 150 devotional pictures used more recently (1944–2009) by a single family of practising Roman Catholic friends, with a more provincial bias and a culture of education in private Roman Catholic schools, who kindly offered to lend me their personal collection.<sup>3</sup> With 390 images overall, this represents a very modest assortment compared to the hundreds of thousands of such items

<sup>2</sup> This last example, given to a young woman in the 1960s, was provided in an e-mail from Brigitte Friant-Kessler, dated 28 February 2021.

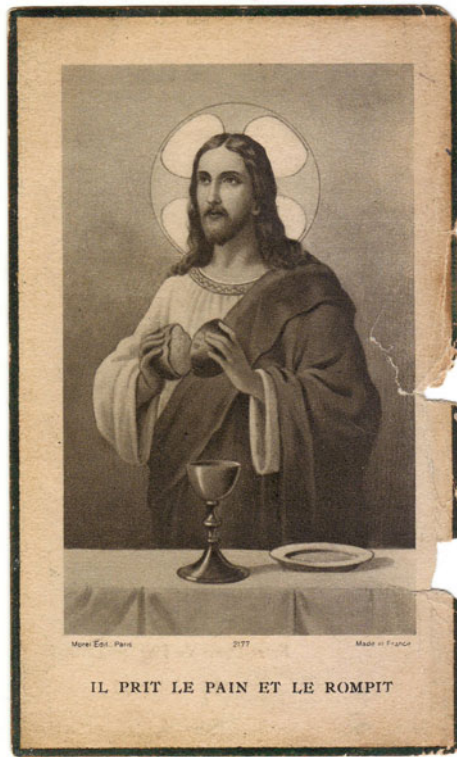
<sup>3</sup> The original owners of the cards, and the names of communicants, are anonymized throughout the article. Dates given are of when cards were used, rather than of publication.



**Figure 1.** ‘A precious souvenir of first communion’ (1885), image n° 2460, Bouasse-Lebel, Paris. Private collection. 78 x 121 mm. Photograph credit: Françoise Deconinck-Brossard. © The author.



**Figure 2.** 'Rejoice with me for I have received my God. Souvenir' (1888), image n° 859, Bouasse-Lebel, Paris. Private collection. 77 x 119 mm. Photograph credit: Françoise Deconinck-Brossard. © The author.



**Figure 3.** ‘He took bread and broke it’ (1937), image n° 2177, Morel, Paris. Private collection. 66 x 109 mm. Photograph credit: Françoise Deconinck-Brossard. © The author.

held by libraries such as the Bibliothèque du Saulchoir (Paris)<sup>4</sup> and the print room of the Bibliothèque nationale de France (Paris).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Michel Albaric estimates that the collection held by this Dominican library amounts to perhaps 200,000 or 250,000 items: ‘La Collection d’images de piété de la Bibliothèque du Saulchoir’, in Lerch et al., eds, *Les Images de dévotion*, 45–62, at 50. I am very grateful to the staff of the library for their assistance. At a crucial stage in the research for this article, Isabelle Sérurier provided extremely helpful information.

<sup>5</sup> The Bibliothèque nationale holds deposit copies of ‘almost 20,000 small images’ produced between 1830 and the Second World War: C[atherine]. R[osenbaum].-[Dondaine], ‘L’Imagerie de piété du XIXe siècle au Département des Estampes de la Bibliothèque Nationale’, in Michel Albaric, Catherine Rosenbaum-Dondaine and Jean-Pierre Seguin,

While commemorative cards were given to mark other religious events, the vast majority of images in this small private collection commemorate admission to communion. Indeed, of the other rites regarded as sacraments by Roman Catholics (and which could similarly be considered rites of passage), only ten baptisms, five confirmations<sup>6</sup> and one ordination are memorialized. Marriage is not represented, though the collection includes two jubilee cards, one of which is in thanksgiving for a golden wedding anniversary.<sup>7</sup> Penance and extreme unction do not appear at all,<sup>8</sup> perhaps unsurprisingly considering both the confidential nature of confession and the context of emergency in which extreme unction was sought and administered.

Such visual memorabilia deserve attention and study before they fall into oblivion or are discarded. Were it not for the relatively recent interest in popular art and traditions,<sup>9</sup> these humble objects might

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eds, *L'Image de piété en France, 1814–1914. Musée-galerie de la SEITA* (Paris, 1984), 179–82, at 179. The chronological order in which they have been catalogued highlights production issues, and reveals how manufacturing processes, as well as religious and aesthetic taste, changed over time.

<sup>6</sup> For many young Protestants, confirmation is the rite of passage that holds a significance comparable to the 'first communion' or 'solemn communion' in Roman Catholic families. For the history of confirmation, see Freddy Sarg, *La Confirmation en Alsace* (Strasbourg, 1981). The Musée de l'image populaire in Pfaffenhoffen (Alsace) holds an archive of commemorative confirmation images that could be paralleled with their Catholic equivalents: see online at <<https://commune-valdemoder.fr/culture-loisirs/musee-de-l-image-populaire>>, last accessed 22 September 2021. I owe this information to Brigitte Friant-Kessler. On small Protestant commemorative confirmation images, see also Gustave Koch, 'Y a-t-il une Image de dévotion protestante? Les Petites Images bibliques protestantes', in Lerch et al., eds, *Les Images de dévotion*, 317–26. The confirmation souvenirs analysed by Dominique Lerch are much larger documents (200 x 250 mm), similar to the certificates sometimes received by Roman Catholic youngsters after their first communion: 'Un Aspect de l'activité pastorale. Les Souvenirs de confirmation aux XIXe et XXe siècles', *Bulletin de la Société d'histoire du protestantisme français* (1978), 67–83.

<sup>7</sup> Jean-Claude Schmitt comments that he has not come across any holy card for marriage: 'Conclusion', in Lerch et al., eds, *Les Images de dévotion*, 521–9, at 527.

<sup>8</sup> At least one souvenir of first confession prior to private communion is known to have existed elsewhere: Michel Mallèvre, 'Trois Générations de missels et leurs images', in *ibid.* 113–29, at 126.

<sup>9</sup> The *Religions et traditions populaires* exhibition by the Musée national des arts et traditions populaires (Paris) in 1979–80 was a pioneer in this respect: see the sections on 'Les Images de dévotion' and 'La Communion solennelle' in the eponymous exhibition catalogue: ed. Jean Cuisenier, Françoise Lautman and Josselyne Chamarrat (Paris, 1979), 181–6, 217–22 respectively.



easily have been overlooked. They are particularly interesting as a means to explore how the representation of lived religion in a secular country with a once strong Roman Catholic tradition has changed over time. As this article focuses on usage rather than production, the dates mentioned refer to the ceremonies, rather than to the years of publication. It will consider how changes in the representation of first and solemn communion, as exemplified in these popular objects from the 1880s to the early 2020s, reflect a broader evolution in French religious culture.

First communion has a long history.<sup>10</sup> The earliest descriptions of a particular celebration to mark first reception of holy communion in the Roman Catholic Church date back to the early seventeenth century, while its main features had been established by the mid-eighteenth century.<sup>11</sup> In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, first communion took place at Eastertide, but after the French Revolution it became customary in France to schedule the celebration in May or June, at the end of the school year and before the harvest season.<sup>12</sup>

The question of the age at which first communion was made emerged in the early twentieth century. In 1910, Pope Pius X allowed younger children to receive the sacrament once they had reached ‘the age of discretion, ... that is about the seventh year, more or less’.<sup>13</sup> Pointing to the gospel accounts of Jesus’s willingness to welcome all children, Pius X sought, in *Quam singulari*, to combat what he viewed as ‘abuses’ in the French church, namely ‘the growing custom ... of postponing the First Communion of children until more mature years’, that is, until they were older than twelve.<sup>14</sup> What was at stake was whether or not ‘a full and perfect knowledge of Christian doctrine’ was necessary for the child to be admitted to confession and communion. Pius X wanted the children to ‘be obliged to learn gradually the entire Catechism’ after their first communion.

<sup>10</sup> Jean Delumeau, ed., *La Première Communion. Quatre Siècles d'histoire* (Paris, 1987), 9–10.

<sup>11</sup> Louis Andrieux, *La Première Communion. Histoire et discipline. Textes et documents. Des Origines au XXe siècle* (Paris, 1911), 282.

<sup>12</sup> Andrieux, *La Première Communion*, 288.

<sup>13</sup> Pope Pius X, *Decree of the Sacred Congregation of the Discipline of the Sacraments on First Communion* (1910), online at: <<https://www.papalencyclicals.net/pius10/p10quam.htm>>, last accessed 18 July 2021.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

The French clergy, on the other hand, knew from experience that many would never attend religious instruction if it was not a compulsory requirement for admission to communion.<sup>15</sup> Although the rite is to be found elsewhere in the francophone world, for instance in Belgium, Québec or Switzerland,<sup>16</sup> and in other countries with large Roman Catholic communities, only France and Alsace (which at that time was annexed to the German Empire) were explicitly mentioned in the papal decree.

From then on, first communion received at an early age was deemed to be ‘private’ and could be an event focused on an individual child during a normal eucharistic service, whereas the collective rite for cohorts of twelve-year-olds was renamed ‘solemn communion’ (*communion solennelle*) or – especially after the Second World War – ‘profession of faith’ (*profession de foi*). However, the inscriptions in our collection of images show that it took a generation for the phrase ‘solemn communion’ to be regularly used to describe what remained the major rite of passage: the first such usage is dated 1937. Moreover, despite what the Church advocated, the term ‘private communion’ never caught on. It only appears thirteen times altogether in our collection, with all instances occurring after 1952. In post-Second World War circles of practising Roman Catholics, the distinction between ‘private communion’ and ‘solemn communion’ (or ‘profession of faith’) became very clearly marked, although the latter remained the significant rite of passage.<sup>17</sup> With its tripartite rhythm of mass, lunch and vespers, the special clothing, photography, the distribution of images and the reception of gifts, it was a popular, day-long feast, in contrast with the much more low-key ‘private’ communion that only involved attendance at mass. A quarter of the inscriptions do not name the occasion. The omission could perhaps be explained by a desire to save the expense and labour of writing an extra line. Before 1910, there

<sup>15</sup> In the early twentieth century, there was already a considerable drop-off in church attendance after the first communion. The trend continued throughout the period under review. A 1967 opinion poll, quoted in Serge Bonnet and Augustin Cottin, *La Communion solennelle. Folklore païen ou fête chrétienne* (Paris, 1969), 244, revealed that one third of the sample said that after their first or solemn communion they immediately stopped going to church; one third continued to attend mass for a few years; and only one third continued to practise their religion regularly and longer term.

<sup>16</sup> Bonnet and Cottin, *La Communion solennelle*, 247.

<sup>17</sup> Dominique Lerch, *Imagerie populaire en Alsace et dans l’Est de la France* (Nancy, 1992), 234.



would have been no ambiguity, but after that date the meaning was implicit.

The rites of both ‘first communion’ and ‘solemn communion’ remained virtually unchanged until the early 1970s. As late as 1967, the Institut français d’opinion publique (IFOP) found that 87% of a representative sample of French adults had formally made their communion.<sup>18</sup> The permanence of these rites may have derived from the fact that they both manifested the three phases – or rather, the three different categories of rites – initially identified by Arnold van Gennep in his tripartite scheme: preliminary separation, liminality, and incorporation or aggregation.<sup>19</sup> Neither van Gennep nor Victor and Edith Turner include ‘first communion’ or ‘solemn communion’ in their lists of religious ceremonies that might be identified as rites of transition.<sup>20</sup> However, we can confidently accept the Gennepian invitation to apply the tripartite scheme to our own subject matter, as will become apparent.<sup>21</sup>

After a religious retreat which included, among other activities, a question-and-answer examination designed to verify that the creed and main prayers had been learnt properly during the period of religious instruction,<sup>22</sup> and which ended with auricular confession, the youngsters publicly (‘solemnly’) partook of the eucharist.<sup>23</sup> The retreat temporarily separated the youngsters from their usual

<sup>18</sup> Sylvie de La Baumelle, ‘[L’Éducation religieuse des catholiques] Résultats d’ensemble’, *Sondages. Revue française de l’opinion publique* 29/2 (1967), 19–40, at 19, 32.

<sup>19</sup> Arnold van Gennep, *Les Rites de passage. Étude systématique des rites de la porte et du seuil, de l’hospitalité[,] de l’adoption, de la grossesse et de l’accouchement[,] de la naissance, de l’enfance, de la puberté[,] de l’initiation, de l’ordination, du couronnement[,] des fiançailles et du mariage[,] des funérailles, des saisons, etc.* (Paris, 1909).

<sup>20</sup> Victor Turner and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives* (Oxford, 1978), 2–4.

<sup>21</sup> ‘Je crois ... ma démonstration suffisante, et prie le lecteur de s’en assurer en appliquant le Schéma des Rites de Passage aux faits de son domaine personnel d’étude’ (‘I believe that my demonstration is sufficient, and I invite the reader to check it by applying the Scheme of the Rites of Passage to data in his / her own field of study’): Van Gennep, *Rites de passage*, ii.

<sup>22</sup> In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, children were catechized several times a week during Lent: Andrieux, *La Première Communion*, 285. Since the nineteenth century, the ‘first communion’ or the ‘solemn communion’ (or ‘profession of faith’) has been the culmination of three years of weekly catechism classes.

<sup>23</sup> Sylviane Grésillon, ‘De la Communion solennelle aux fêtes de la foi’, in Delumeau, ed., *La Première Communion*, 217–53, at 234. There would be no auricular confession among Protestants, but Sarg identifies similar stages in the preparation for Protestant confirmation (catechism classes, examination, retreat and the ceremony itself), to which he explicitly applies

environment, their schoolfellows of other faiths and none, and their families.<sup>24</sup> It may therefore be regarded as the preliminary stage in the rite of passage, or even as the first rite of separation. The retreat usually lasted for three days, although some were up to a week in length.<sup>25</sup> A small leaflet with the programme of ‘hymns and prayers’ for a five-day retreat, followed by two days of ‘first communion’, confirmation and a thanksgiving mass in an unspecified parish in May 1914, shows a combination of ‘instruction’, attendance at religious services and a rehearsal including prayers, hymns, a procession and baptismal vows.<sup>26</sup> In 1937, Jean B.’s small retreat notebook (80 x 110 mm), handwritten in pencil, began with the statement that the purpose of the retreat was ‘communion and the Christian life that begins more personally’.<sup>27</sup> Paradoxically, in the French context of *laïcité*<sup>28</sup> – the result of the 1905 French law on the separation of the churches and the state – the children’s absence from secularized state schools whilst they were on retreat was de facto tolerated.<sup>29</sup> In his memoirs, the country vicar Bernard Alexandre (1918–90) explained how, in his Normandy parish, the children thoroughly enjoyed the extra-ordinary experience of spending three ‘full’ days ‘together’, ‘differently’, away from school.<sup>30</sup> When the school-leaving age was raised – initially to fourteen in 1936, and more significantly

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the Gennepian scheme: *La Confirmation en Alsace*, 9. However, he also underlines the fact that there have been many variations within this broad outline: *ibid.* 17.

<sup>24</sup> Jean Mellot, ‘Rite de passage et fête familiale. Rapprochements’, in Delumeau, ed., *La Première Communion*, 171–96, at 174.

<sup>25</sup> The practice and custom of three days of ‘pious exercises’, far from being specific to France, was encouraged in Italy, the USA and South America from 1855, 1866 and 1899 respectively: Jean Pirotte, *Images des vivants et des morts. La Vision du monde propagée par l’imagerie de dévotion dans le Namurois 1840–1965* (Bruxelles, 1987), 149 n. 2; Andrieux, *La Première Communion*, 283–4. On longer retreats, see Mellot, ‘Rite de passage et fête familiale’, 174.

<sup>26</sup> Paris, Bibliothèque du Saulchoir, box VI 2–8, ‘Communion des enfants’, n° 5, ‘Communion (Documents Paroisses)’.

<sup>27</sup> ‘Le but de la retraite e[s]t la communion ou la vie chrétienne qui commence plus personnellement’: Private collection.

<sup>28</sup> I have never found an adequate English translation for this word, but ‘secularism’ is one possibility.

<sup>29</sup> Bonnet and Cottin, *La Communion solennelle*, 197.

<sup>30</sup> ‘La retraite va durer trois jours pleins. Trois jours sans école: les enfants sont radieux, ils ont l’impression d’être en vacances et surtout de vivre ensemble ... “autrement”, ce qui n’arrive quasiment jamais’ (‘The retreat will last for three full days. Three days without school: the children are beaming with joy, they have a feeling that they are on holiday

to sixteen in 1959 – high school chaplaincies, rather than parishes, took over the ceremonies, even in state-run institutions, such as the Lycée Pasteur in Neuilly-sur-Seine on the outskirts of Paris. Indeed, an inscription on the verso of one communion card reads: ‘Bernard L. ... 27 mai 1955 Lycée Pasteur – S<sup>t</sup> Pierre de Neuilly’, demonstrating how some ceremonies were taking place in the church to which the chaplaincy was attached, rather than the parish where the family worshipped.

As co-education was only gradually introduced after 1959, and more generally in 1975–6, this meant that the ceremony could end up being a single-sex experience, unlike in the parishes, where all the boys and girls in a particular age group would have taken their first communion together, albeit in segregated areas of the church or at separate altar rails. This probably explains why gendered representations of communicants are to be found on commemorative images until the mid-1960s. The most extreme example is a pair of sepia monochrome images used in 1949 and 1951, in which a boy and a girl kneel on the same altar step and receive communion from the same angel, with the same landscape in the background (Figures 4 and 5). In producing both these images, the publishers were targeting two separate markets, depending on the gender of the individual communicants, whether or not they had actually taken part in single-sex celebrations.

Between mass and vespers, the communicants were treated to a festive family meal, often with Pantagruelian menus.<sup>31</sup> Alexandre recalled that the timing of the two religious services had to allow at least four hours for the lunch: this could be considered the second, liminal, Gennepian stage of the rite.<sup>32</sup> The youngsters received

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and especially that they are living together ... “differently”, which hardly ever happens’): Bernard Alexandre, *Le Horsain. Vivre et survivre en Pays de Caux* (Paris, 1988), 358.

<sup>31</sup> For instance, the menu for Jacques F.’s communion in 1934, headed with a picture similar to many a first communion card, included seven or eight courses. Three years later, the menu for Jean B.’s communion ended with the traditional pyramid of choux pastry at the top of which stood the small figure of a male communicant that has been kept to this day. Cf. Cuisenier, Lautman and Chamarrat, eds, ‘La Communion solennelle’, in *Religions et traditions populaires*, 217–22, at 221, according to whom neither the lavishness of the meal, nor the care with which the menu was kept, were exceptional.

<sup>32</sup> ‘[M]esse à 10 heures, vêpres à 16 heures (il faut bien compter quatre heures pour le repas)’ (‘mass at 10 a.m., vespers at 4 p.m. [you must allow a good four hours for the meal]’): Alexandre, *Le Horsain*, 358.



**Figure 4.** 1949. Private collection. 55 x 98 mm. Photograph credit: Françoise Deconinck-Brossard. © The author.

presents to mark their coming of age and their entry into the adult world. From that day onwards, they would be regarded as grown-ups, which often meant that their first communion would also be their last communion, or one of very few.<sup>33</sup> In the nineteenth-century working class environment described in Émile Zola's most famous

<sup>33</sup> Not only was there a significant fall in religious practice after first or solemn communion, as mentioned above – hence the clergy's recurrent emphasis on the need to 'persevere' – but even regular churchgoers rarely partook of the eucharist; frequent communion was only encouraged from the 1960s: see Delumeau, ed., *La Première Communion*, 240.



**Figure 5.** 1951. Private collection. 55 x 98 mm. Photograph credit: Françoise Deconinck-Brossard. © The author.

naturalistic novel, *L'Assommoir* (1877), the French author explicitly connected the young Nana's entry into adulthood with her having made her first communion. He described how Nana and her friend Pauline 'by now ... ought to know how to cook, to darn socks, and to run a house'.<sup>34</sup> During the first communion meal, the diners arranged

<sup>34</sup> Émile Zola, *L'Assommoir*, transl. Atwood H. Townsend (New York, 1962), 359. This is given in the original as 'elles devaient désormais savoir faire la cuisine, raccommoder des chaussettes, conduire une maison' (Émile Zola, *L'Assommoir* [Paris, 1964; first publ.

for Nana to start work ‘the next morning’ (*dès le lendemain*).<sup>35</sup> In the following century, Bernard Alexandre’s catechumens looked forward to being allowed to help themselves to food at the family table once they had made their communion. In Gennepian terms, they had reached the stage of ‘incorporation’ into the adult world. The retired vicar cogently commented that ‘here the religious act still ha[d] a social impact.’<sup>36</sup>

In exchange for the profane and religious gifts that they received, the youngsters distributed commemorative cards to guests. They also presented images to their teachers the following week and exchanged them with their schoolfriends, which explains the great variety in styles that can be found among cards from a single child. For instance, eight different images, with a wide range of aesthetic and religious styles, commemorating Jean B.’s communion in Paris on 23 May 1937 are extant. They include not only monochrome rectangular pictures with simple frames (Figure 3), but also more sophisticated cards with deckle or feathered edges, and a composition showing a frame within a frame, a technique traditionally used in the visual arts to draw the spectator’s attention to the subject. Three of these items represent Jesus Christ, and the Virgin Mary appears in five images, although not always as the central character. The captions are as varied as the pictures. Contrary to the common belief that Roman Catholic laypeople were long kept ignorant of the Bible, a gospel quotation (Matthew 19: 14) is illustrated by a black-and-white picture with a classical three-distance composition showing Christ surrounded by several children.<sup>37</sup> Even though the chapter and verse

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1877], 369). A few lines earlier, the English translation for ‘Nana et Pauline étaient des femmes, maintenant qu’elles avaient communiqué’ (369) reads ‘Nana and Pauline were women now that they had been confirmed’ (transl. Townsend, 359), implicitly comparing the significance of the Roman Catholic rite with that of confirmation in Protestant communities, and acknowledging the difficulty of finding an equivalent for ‘first communion’ or ‘solemn communion’ in the British context.

<sup>35</sup> Zola, *L’Assommoir*, 368 (transl. Townsend, 359).

<sup>36</sup> ‘L’acte religieux garde encore ici un impact social. Après sa communion, Jean pourra se servir à table, comme les grands’ (‘The religious rite still has a social impact here. After making his communion, Jean will be allowed to serve himself at table, like the grown-ups’): Alexandre, *Le Horsain*, 143 Mellot and Delumeau mention many other activities that would become accessible to the youngsters after their ‘first communion’ or ‘solemn communion’.

<sup>37</sup> Dominique Lerch’s claim that from the 1960s biblical quotations appeared and replaced mawkish prayers needs qualification: *Imagerie populaire en Alsace*, 234.



are not explicitly identified, there would have been no doubt about the source of the text. This is not at all an isolated case in the collection. Two other quotations are attributed to Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556) and the prelate and apologist Louis-Gaston de Ségur (1820–81), son of the famous children's author, the Comtesse de Ségur. Some of the other captions include prayers and maxims.

A generation later, communion cards continued to be varied in style. François P. had at least three images, again in completely different styles, for his 'solemn communion' in Rouen on 6 May 1964. They range from a sepia monochrome portrait of the Madonna by the Italian Renaissance painter Bastiano Mainardi (1466–1513) to contemporary religious art with simplified outlines. Here, a young Jesus is depicted, with a limited palette, as he blesses the bread and wine, with his right hand raised in a benediction gesture reminiscent of Byzantine art, icons or medieval statues. Étienne P. had no fewer than eleven cards for his profession of faith in a private school in Rouen on 14 May 1966, the majority comprising black-and-white photography, with two very simplified imitations of a manuscript. Even though it would be far beyond the scope of this article to address the complex issues of marketing and supply,<sup>38</sup> the variety suggests that communicants' parents were able to select a range of images that appealed to them (or to their children), and which characterized their religious and artistic tastes. There must have been plenty of choice, as the collections under discussion contain very few instances of duplication. One exception is the reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* (c.1495–8) with its horizontal format, unusual for these commemoration cards (Figure 6). This image was used by two different families thirty years apart (1907 and 1937), which suggests that it had lasting appeal.<sup>39</sup> As well as reproductions of popular artworks, a number of motifs recur, such as a candle, a reminder of the communicants' renewal of their baptismal vows (with the lighting of a candle) at vespers, which took place after the celebratory meal. Vespers

<sup>38</sup> The market was huge. Lerch reckons that in Alsace alone, in the year 1962, with a population of approximately one million Roman Catholics, there would have been about fifty thousand communicants at 'first communion' and 'solemn communion' in total; at the rate of a dozen or more commemorative images per child, the figure could well have been near the one million mark for that year alone: *ibid.* 236.

<sup>39</sup> Lerch has found that, through both Roman Catholic and Protestant imagery, Leonardo's painting has become the standard reference for the Last Supper: 'Un Aspect de l'activité pastorale', 77.



**Figure 6.** ‘The Last Supper’ (1907, 1937), image n° 2.500, Morel, Paris. Private collection. 111 x 67 mm. Photograph credit: Françoise Deconinck-Brossard. © The author.

often ended with a prayer known as an ‘act of consecration to the holy Virgin’ in which the communicants ‘offered their hearts’ to Mary and asked for her guidance and ‘motherly protection’ in order to remain faithful to their commitment to follow Jesus and ‘persevere in their love of God’.<sup>40</sup> This may partly explain the large number of representations of the Virgin in the collection under discussion.

Confirmation sometimes took place the following day, or even on the same day. To some extent, the summary of the religious experience of Jean-Marie D. (born in November 1946), printed on the reverse of his holy card, exemplifies the post-1910 distinction between private

<sup>40</sup> ‘PRENDRE MARIE POUR GUIDE et pour protectrice. ACTE DE CONSÉCRATION A LA SAINTE VIERGE: Très Sainte Vierge ..., les enfants que vous voyez ici ... viennent réclamer votre maternelle protection. Nous vous offrons notre cœur; ... avec votre protection nous persévérons dans l’amour de Dieu’ (‘TAKE MARY AS YOUR GUIDE and protector. ACT OF CONSECRATION TO THE HOLY VIRGIN: Most Holy Virgin ..., the children you see here ... come to claim your motherly protection. We offer you our hearts ... with your protection we will persevere in the love of God’): Église catholique, *Missel pour les jeunes et pour tous ceux qui veulent prier ensemble* (Sèvres, 1953; first publ. 1946), 237 Andrieux (born in 1877) seemed to consider that this prayer had become standard, but noted that in the mid-eighteenth century it had not yet been included in the celebration: *La Première Communion*, 302.

and solemn communion: ‘The great days of my life: BAPTISM 6 May 1947 — PRIVATE COMMUNION 13 April 1952 — Profession of Christian faith and Confirmation 1 May 1958.’<sup>41</sup> Holy cards usually only included the date of a single ceremony on their verso. This particular card is unusual in including several. The wording of the inscription, with its use of the first-person singular pronoun, shows that devotional pictures were meant to be kept as souvenirs, not only by friends and family, but also by the communicants themselves. The use of capital letters suggests that, in this devout family, the first private communion (at the very early age of five and a half in this particular case) was regarded as more momentous, from a religious point of view, than the later profession of faith, even though it was the latter which remained the major rite of passage, as has been seen above.

Over time, the only major change in the rite was in the communicants’ traditional clothes, which are repeatedly depicted on these holy cards. Before the Second World War, girls’ communion outfits resembled an elaborate wedding dress, albeit slightly shorter, with a long veil held in place by a tulle cap and / or a flower crown, together with a small white purse, an adult’s missal, rosary beads and a candle (Figure 7). The garments would sometimes be hired, and professional photography arranged to commemorate the event. At other times, however, these items would be part of the gifts for the occasion, as portrayed by Zola:

The thought of the white communion dress made Nana dance with joy. The Lorilleux as godparents had promised to provide the dress, a gift which they advertised throughout the building. Mme Lerat was to give the veil and cap, Virginie the purse, Lantier the prayer book, with the result that the Coupeaus could look forward to the ceremony without much to worry about.<sup>42</sup>

Boys’ clothes represented a smaller outlay. Male communicants wore trousers (rather than shorts) for the first time in their lives, a symbol

<sup>41</sup> ‘Les grands jours de ma vie: BAPTÊME le 6 mai 1947 — COMMUNION PRIVÉE le 13 avril 1952 — Profession de foi Chrétienne et Confirmation le 1<sup>er</sup> mai 1958.’

<sup>42</sup> ‘Nana dansait de joie en pensant à la robe blanche. Les Lorilleux, comme parrain et marraine, avaient promis la robe, un cadeau dont ils parlaient dans toute la maison; Mme Lerat devait donner le voile et le bonnet, Virginie la bourse, Lantier le paroissien; de façon que les Coupeau attendaient la cérémonie sans trop s’inquiéter’: Zola, *L’Assommoir*, 364 (transl. Townsend, 354).



**Figure 7.** ‘Souvenir of first communion’ (1904). Private collection. 67 x 123 mm. Photograph credit: Françoise Deconinck-Brossard. © The author.

of their entry into the world of adulthood. On the left sleeve of the jacket, an armband knotted with a long white ribbon symbolized the purity of the communicant’s soul as he approached the sacrament.

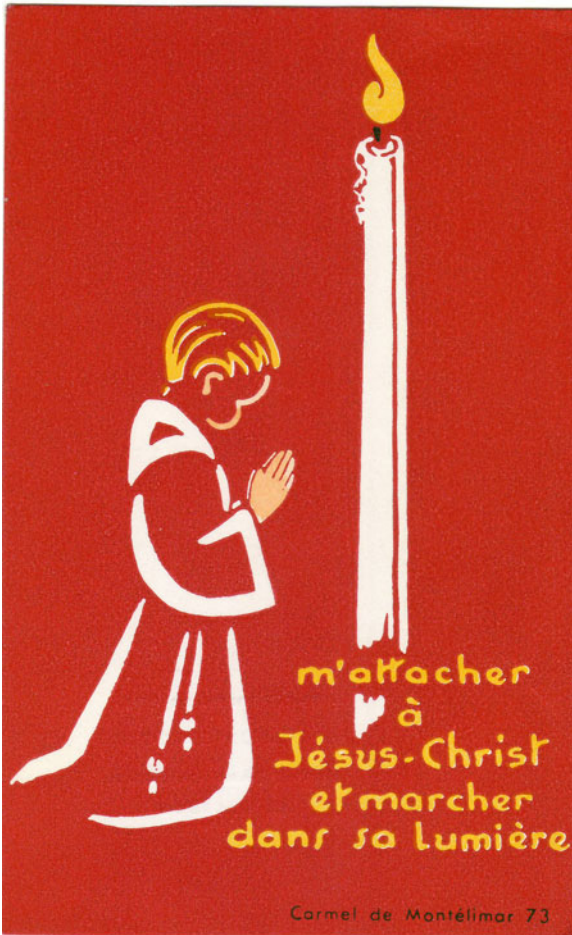
Along with the candle, the armband and knotted ribbon became visual shorthand for male communion in pre-Second World War devotional pictures.

However, after the Second World War, these quasi-wedding garments were gradually replaced by unisex albs that were supposed to mask social inequality, since all the communicants now wore the same clothes, which the parish or chaplaincy church often arranged to hire at a reasonable price. At first, girls still had to cover their heads, usually with short veils or small caps, even though they now wore the same robes as the bare-headed boys. The new fashion soon found its way onto holy cards,<sup>43</sup> where the alb now represented the ‘solemn communion’ or ‘profession of faith’. As white prevailed in the depiction of the central subject, whether male or female, the traditional pictorial order of colours continued to be reversed, with a dark background remaining a widespread feature (Figure 8).

In some places, the images themselves were blessed by the priest at the end of the mass, ahead of their distribution to friends and family.<sup>44</sup> Although the rite was the communal experience of a specific age group, until the 1950s these devotional images portrayed the act of communion as a highly individual religious experience. Only a handful show several communicants or groups of children. In some of these rare instances, the youngsters are not even wearing the traditional communicants’ clothes. However, even if depicted alone, the child was understood to be part of a community: the text printed on the recto often emphasizes the child’s intercession for family and friends, for whom the communicant acts as a mediator (Figure 9). Moreover, the fact that the images were circulated as gifts highlights their significance as signs of identity and of belonging to a community of Roman Catholic believers, however intermittently the members of that community may have practised their religion. Beyond the earthly community, the communicants were also assisted, in turn, by the mediation of the communion of saints. Many images used until the early 1950s show the youngsters being either led to the altar for communion, or brought in front of the tabernacle for adoration, by one or several angels (Figure 7), the Virgin Mary or, more

<sup>43</sup> Grésillon draws an interesting parallel between the widespread adoption of affordable solemn communion albs from the 1950s and the development of ready-to-wear fashion: ‘De la Communion solennelle aux fêtes de la foi’, 240.

<sup>44</sup> Rosenbaum-Dondaine and Seguin, eds, *L’Image de piété en France*, 166.



**Figure 8.** 'To unite myself with Jesus Christ and walk in his light' (1966), image n° 73, © Carmel de Montélimar, Montélimar, now at Develier, Switzerland. Private collection. 70 x 112 mm. Photograph credit: Françoise Deconinck-Brossard.

rarely, a saint such as St Joseph or St Bernadette, often accompanied by other angels or cherubim. The communicant was not alone in his or her approach to the sacrament. The sense of awe generated by Christ's real presence was emphasized visually. Drawing on a variety of pictorial techniques borrowed from classical painting, artists designed devotional pictures that focused on Christ, or the host





**Figure 9.** ‘Lord, on this beautiful day, bless those whom I love’ (1959), É[tablisement] J[acques] P[etit], [Angers]. Private collection. 60 x 104 mm. Photograph credit: Françoise Deconinck-Brossard. © The author.

and chalice.<sup>45</sup> In some of these images, a leading line in the foreground diagonally guided the communicants’ eye to the hand from

<sup>45</sup> I am greatly indebted to Marie-Madeleine Martinet for all her technical explanations in this respect.

which they were receiving communion, or to the host in a monstrance or tabernacle, while accompanying angels and saints modestly remained in the background or in the second part of the foreground (Figures 7 and 9). Moreover, the classical rules of perspective were applied in such a way as to direct the viewer's eye to the central figure. For instance, the step on which the communicant knelt out of reverence towards the sacrament, together with any floor tiles, provided convenient vanishing lines (Figures 4, 5 and 7).

Paradoxically, the emphasis on transubstantiation often led artists to replace the celebrant with Christ himself, with many pre-1960s pictures showing boys and girls receiving communion directly from him. In one instance, Christ is even wearing clerical vestments (Figure 10).<sup>46</sup> Such an identification visually represents the doctrine defined in the Decree for the Armenians (1439) at the Council of Florence (1438–45), which stated that the priest makes this sacrament *in persona Christi*.<sup>47</sup> Arguably, such a representation of two simultaneous modes of Christ's presence, one physical and one sacramental, may be interpreted as 'a negation' of the Roman Catholic belief that the real presence of Jesus Christ in the eucharist differs from the mode of his presence during his life on earth.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, the representation on some of the cards of the infant Jesus distributing communion to young children, or having his Last Supper with them, was perhaps intended to appeal to youngsters, but seems to

<sup>46</sup> In a smaller collection of 65 twentieth-century images used in Alsace (1914–54), more than half represent Jesus wearing clerical vestments when distributing communion to youngsters: Lerch, *Imagerie populaire en Alsace*, 234.

<sup>47</sup> Henri Denzinger and Adolf Schönmetzer, eds, *Enchiridion symbolorum definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum*, 32nd edn (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1963; first publ. 1854), 335, §698: 'sacerdos ... in persona Christi loquens hoc conficit sacramentum' (translated as 'The priest speaking in the person of Christ effects this sacrament', in Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 2 vols [Washington DC, 1990], 1: 546). In contrast, Gervais Dumeige translates the term *in persona Christi* as 'au nom du Christ' ('in the name of Christ'): *La Foi catholique. Textes doctrinaux du magistère de l'Église* (Paris, 1961), 407, §732. Thanks are due to Laurent Chauvin for drawing my attention to this doctrine.

<sup>48</sup> Elisabeth Oberson, 'La Grâce d'être humain: un savoir du cœur. Essai de dialogue avec le corpus d'images de piété Saint-sulpiciennes de la maison Desgodets-Lorthioir', 3 vols (PhD thesis, Institut catholique de Paris, 2001), 1: 231. I am grateful to Isabelle Sérurier for drawing my attention to this work. Compare also Les évêques de France, *Catéchisme pour adultes. L'Alliance de Dieu avec les hommes* (Paris, 1991), 253: 'La présence de Jésus ainsi réalisée n'est pas celle des jours de sa vie sur la terre.' ('The presence of Jesus thus effected is not that of the days of his life on earth.')



**Figure 10.** ‘Souvenir of first communion’ (1912), A. & M. B. [unidentified], n.pl. Private collection. 47 x 102 mm. Photograph credit: Françoise Deconinck-Brossard. © The author.

deny the eucharistic memorial of the life and resurrection of Jesus Christ. One rare instance, used in 1963, shows a communicant wearing an old-fashioned armband; a window in the background refers to the transfiguration or the resurrection, a combined reference to the depiction of an elevated Christ with both arms raised in Raphael’s

famous painting of *The Transfiguration of Christ* (1516–20) and to the panel of the Resurrection on the Isenheim altarpiece (1512–16) by Matthias Grünewald, as if the transfigured Christ had borrowed the red cloak of the risen one (Figure 11).

The reception of communion from the hands of angels (Figures 4 and 5) might appear even more unorthodox, were it not for the traditional description, until at least 1960, of the eucharistic host as ‘the bread of angels’.<sup>49</sup> The phrase dates back to Thomas a Kempis’s *Imitation of Christ*, with a reference to Psalm 78: 25 and John 6: 33–51: ‘Thou givest unto me the meat of heaven and the bread of angels which is the bread of life.’<sup>50</sup> Likewise, one would search Scripture in vain for a reference to the recurrent theme of the holy Virgin receiving communion from the hands of St John, presented as a model of sanctity. This popular scene is inspired by the revelations of seventeenth-century mystic Mary of Jesus of Ágreda regarding the life of the Virgin Mary.<sup>51</sup>

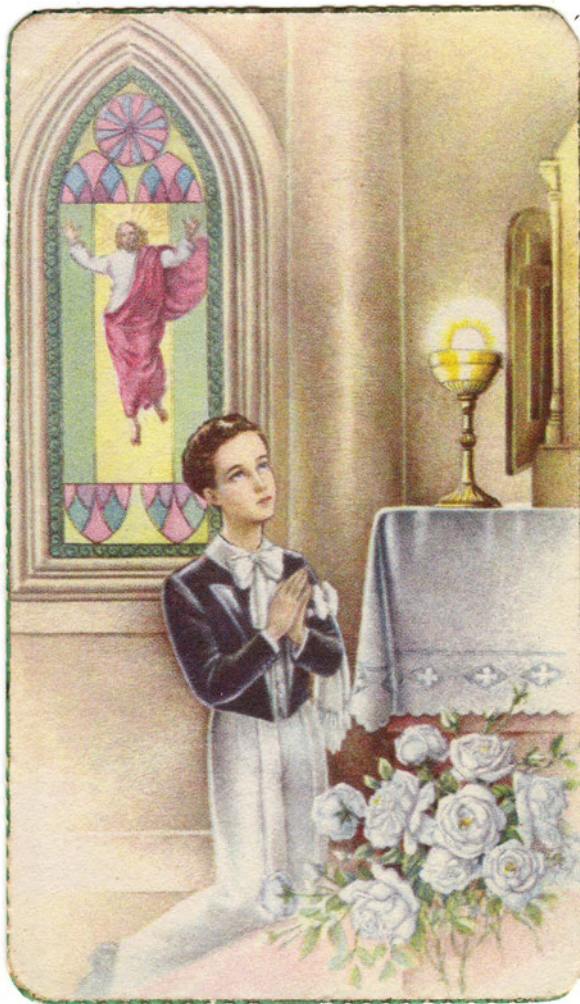
From the early 1960s,<sup>52</sup> that is to say before, during and immediately after the Second Vatican Council (1962–5), and before the events of May 1968, the landscape changed radically, both from an aesthetic and spiritual point of view. Gone were the three-dimensional representations based on Renaissance practice, which gave depth to the scenes and borrowed artistic techniques from classical art. These gave way to simplified images without backgrounds, silhouette-style drawing and flat, two-dimensional colour poster style. The act of communion lost all its mediators: angels and saints disappeared from religious cards. However, images relating to Marian devotion remained widespread. Mary was sometimes represented as the central figure, particularly with several different representations of ‘Our Lady of all Joy’ (*Notre-Dame de toute joie*). However, she was more often invoked as a mediator and intercessor. For instance, the caption of an image used in 1986, showing male and female communicants gathered around a large thick candle near a statue of the

<sup>49</sup> This is the central theme of a rather spectacular image on a communion card used in 1960.

<sup>50</sup> Thomas a Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ* (London and Toronto, 1916), 236; *De Imitatione Christi*, ed. Friedrich Eichler (Munich, 1966), 4.3.16: ‘Tu mihi dare vis caelestem cibum; et panem angelorum ad manducandum’.

<sup>51</sup> I am indebted to Thomas O’Loughlin for this reference.

<sup>52</sup> Hugh McLeod suggests that the period ‘between about 1958 and 1962’ might be termed ‘the early 1960s’: *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford, 2009), 60.



**Figure 11.** 1963. Private collection. 56 x 96 mm. Photograph credit: Françoise Deconinck-Brossard. © The author.

Virgin, reads 'O Mother of LIGHT, hear our prayer' (*Ô mère de LUMIÈRE entend notre prière*). On another image, used in 1960, a female communicant addressed the Virgin in words attributed to St



Bernadette: 'Virgin Mary, keep my heart for Jesus and Jesus in my heart' (*Vierge Marie gardez mon cœur à Jésus et Jésus dans mon cœur*). References to the eucharist became more allusive or symbolic, although quotations on the recto of images included excerpts from the liturgy, especially the rite of peace or the invitation to behold 'the Lamb of God'. Both colour and black-and-white photography were introduced and widely used. Images sometimes showed the portrait of a boy or girl wearing an alb, whether the actual communicant or a posing model. Other photographs showed religious statues, church buildings, beautiful landscapes, liturgical moments, or a close-up shot of the act of communion itself against an unidentified, neutral background. In the increasingly secularized world of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, communion and 'profession of faith' images have often become general statements of faith, rather than specific references to the eucharist.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the rite of 'first communion' was much criticized for being 'pagan folklore', rather than a Christian feast.<sup>53</sup> In response to such objections, and in the quest of spiritual authenticity, it was abolished in many parishes. Even where it survives, some of its traditional features have been altered. The profession of faith and solemn communion now take place during mass, and the communicants are not expected to attend vespers. The retreat will often be organized out of school hours, shortly but not immediately before the event. In addition, the social context has changed radically. Practising Roman Catholics now represent less than 5% of the French population,<sup>54</sup> to the extent that they may be said to belong to a minority church. With the post-Vatican II liturgical reforms, especially the widespread use of vernacular language, most laypersons now consider it unnecessary to own a proper missal, with some subscribing to ephemeral monthly or yearly missals. As a result, sales of pious bookmarks (including holy cards) have plummeted.<sup>55</sup> The number of young communicants has dwindled, and the tradition of solemn communion and profession of faith has lost much of its impact on the local economy. The 2020

<sup>53</sup> Cf. the title of a book by Serge Bonnet and Augustin Cottin: *La Communion solennelle. Folklore païen ou fête chrétienne* (quoted above).

<sup>54</sup> Guillaume Cuchet, *Comment Notre Monde a cessé d'être chrétien. Anatomie d'un effondrement* (Paris, 2018), 16. 'Practising Catholics' is to be understood in the strict sociological definition of believers attending Sunday mass every week, so the figure may be slightly exaggerated.

<sup>55</sup> Lerch, *Imagerie populaire en Alsace*, 10.





**Figure 12.** ‘Go and tell all your brethren, that God exists and that he loves us’ (2021), image n° 427, 70 x 120 mm. © Ateliers de l’Abbaye de Jouarre, Jouarre, reproduction interdite.

lockdown cancelled or delayed most ceremonies. In 2021, with restrictions aiming at reducing the spread of COVID-19, cohorts of communicants had to be split into smaller groups in order to abide by government regulations regarding the number of people allowed to be seated indoors at any one time. In at least one semi-rural parish in the Paris area, a series of pious images designed and produced by the Benedictine monastery of Jouarre (Île-de-France) found a new use. These were glued onto large decorative boards

prepared by the youngsters during their retreat in order to decorate the church on the day of their 'profession of faith'. None of these images focuses on the act of communion, but they include short prayers as well as excerpts from the liturgy, especially the Lord's Prayer, including the petition to 'give us this day our daily bread', illustrated with two green fishes and three loaves of bread,<sup>56</sup> as well as a confession that 'he is risen CHRIST our Hope'.<sup>57</sup> The final image shows a group of communicants holding their candles, with the text 'Go and tell all your brethren that God exists and that he loves us'.<sup>58</sup> The words 'God exists' and 'loves' are highlighted through the use of different colours, and a cross in the background specifies the Christian context (Figure 12).

One may conclude that, over the course of the past century and a half, French commemorative communion images have evolved to mirror the changes within French society. Earlier images focussed on a personal and intimate communion with God in the eucharist, represented by an emphasis on transubstantiation, along with Marian devotion. Later images, more allusive and symbolic in nature, capture the move away from a clearly defined Roman Catholic religious culture towards the more diffuse apologetics of a post-Christian world.

<sup>56</sup> Jouarre, Ateliers de l'Abbaye de Jouarre, image n° 454.

<sup>57</sup> '[I]l est r[e]ssuscité le CHRIST notre Espérance': *ibid.*, image n° 398.

<sup>58</sup> '[A]llez dire à tous vos frères, que Dieu existe et qu'il nous aime': *ibid.*, image n° 427.