



Fig. 1. Claire Beaugrand-Champagne, *La leçon de catéchisme, Soeur Élisabeth et Sylvain, Prieuré Saint-Pie-X, Shawinigan, Québec (projet Prieuré Saint-Pie-X), série « Petits projets »*, 1988, print 2012, gelatin silver print, 27.7 x 35.2 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.



Fig. 2. Claire Beaugrand-Champagne, *La première communion, Montréal (projet Les enfants), série « Petits projets »*, 1971, print 2012, gelatin silver print, 27.7 x 35.2 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.



Fig. 3. Roger Charbonneau, *Première communion, réception chez les Arnold*, série « *Les Quartiers populaires de Montréal* », 1972–74, gelatin silver print, 2/5, 27.94 x 35.56 cm (sheet), 20.32 x 30.48 cm (image), Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.



Fig. 4. Clara Gutsche, *Hélène Brisebois, with Aunt and Uncle, First Communion*, from the Series “*Milton Park*,” 1972, gelatin silver bromide print, selenium toned, 35.4 x 27.8 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

## Photography and the Body of the Child in Twentieth-Century Quebec Catholicism:

### Documenting Children's Role as Mediators Between Heaven and Earth

Daniel Santiago Sáenz

The years between the 1960s and 1980s were characterized by social, political and religious upheaval and modernization in Quebec.<sup>1</sup> During this period, documentary photography in Quebec captured these realities, paying particular attention to the lived experiences of its inhabitants.<sup>2</sup> Focusing on Quebec Catholicism in the 1970s and 1980s, this essay examines the theme of children in the works of Montreal-based photographers Claire Beaugrand-Champagne (b. 1948), Roger Charbonneau (b. 1947) and Clara Gutsche (b. 1949). The photographs selected for this study are Beaugrand-Champagne's *La leçon de catéchisme, Soeur Élisabeth et Sylvain, Prieuré Saint-Pie-X, Shawinigan, Québec*, série « *Petits projets* » (1988) (fig. 1) and *La première communion, Montréal*, série « *Petits projets* » (1971) (fig. 2), Charbonneau's *Première communion, réception chez les Arnold*, série « *Les Quartiers populaires de Montréal* » (1972–74) (fig. 3) and Gutsche's *Hélène Brisebois, with Aunt and Uncle, First Communion, from the Series "Milton Park,"* (1972) (fig. 4). I argue that these photographs illustrate the use of children's bodies as points of contact between heaven and earth. In other words, the children in these images represent the tangible presence of the divine in the lives of French Canadian Catholics. Ultimately, adults deployed notions of innocence and childhood to enhance their religious worlds and devotions.

Religion has commonly been understood as a way of explaining and understanding the world around us.<sup>3</sup> Such a functionalist definition, although useful and interesting, does not explain the

emotional and devotional aspects of religion. Instead, I would like to borrow scholar of religion Robert Orsi's definition of religion "as a network of relationships between heaven and earth involving humans of all ages and many different sacred figures together."<sup>4</sup> In thinking about religion in terms of relationships, we can begin to unpack a more nuanced understanding of devotional practices. Religion is less about explaining the universe, and more about making the invisible tangible to the believer in his/her everyday life.<sup>5</sup> This definition allows us to analyze the relationships between humans and deities and between adults and children in the works of Beaugrand-Champagne, Charbonneau and Gutsche.

All but one of the photographs in this analysis explore these relationships through the First Communion. This key Roman Catholic ritual marks the moment in which, after a process of instruction and learning based on the Catechism of the Catholic Church, children are invited to partake in the Eucharist. This is the first time that Catholic children are permitted to receive the host, which becomes the body of Christ through a process known as transubstantiation. An integral part of Catholic religious life, this rite commemorates the Last Supper, where Jesus first instituted the Eucharist. According to the New Testament, Jesus "took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me'."<sup>6</sup> When Catholics partake in the sacrament of the Eucharist, they re-enact the Last Supper as a family of believers who, like Jesus's disciples, share in the body of Christ.

The photographs of children at their First Communion by Beaugrand-Champagne, Charbonneau and Gutsche attest to the role of Catholic rituals as important events in a person's life and within

the broader Catholic community. Rituals such as communion, baptism, confession and ordination allow the sacred to materialize, bridging earthly and transcendental realities. However, rituals are fleeting, occasional and temporal;<sup>7</sup> in other words, they exist beyond the realm of everyday life. The images of children at their First Communion preserve a moment in time where the sacred permeated their earthly lives.

That Beaugrand-Champagne, Charbonneau and Gutsche documented important moments in the religious development of children also suggests a desire to capture the enduring strength and assured future of the Catholic community in Quebec during a period of religious upheaval. Although children have historically been overlooked and sometimes deemed as uninteresting subjects in art (with some exceptions, of course), they are the central focus of the four works in question. Children were vital to the future of Catholicism in Quebec and North America more broadly. They became mediums for the materialization of the sacred in the lives of Catholics.<sup>8</sup> The religious experiences and beliefs of adults were made present and real through the religious edification of children, who are vulnerable and malleable.<sup>9</sup> Orsi argues that this youthful vulnerability “can lead [adults] to fantasies of power and possession.”<sup>10</sup> Children have the potential to become proper Christian adults under careful supervision and surveillance. The bodies of children in twentieth-century Catholicism became the repository of religious needs and desires.

The importance of proper instruction and supervision of children is the subject of Beaugrand-Champagne’s *La leçon de catéchisme, Soeur Élisabeth et Sylvain, Prieuré Saint-Pie-X*,

*Shawinigan, Québec (projet Prieuré Saint-Pie-X), série « Petits projets », in which a nun is teaching a young child, Sylvain, the basic tenets of Roman Catholicism.*



Fig. 1. Claire Beaugrand-Champagne, *La leçon de catéchisme, Soeur Élisabeth et Sylvain, Prieuré Saint-Pie-X, Shawinigan, Québec (projet Prieuré Saint-Pie-X), série « Petits projets », 1988, print 2012, gelatin silver print, 27.7 x 35.2 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.*

Beaugrand-Champagne avoids staging her photographs,<sup>11</sup> centring the discourse on the human subjects in the photograph rather than on the photographer's keen, critical eye.<sup>12</sup> The photographer has captured a moment of intent eye contact between Sylvain and Sister Elisabeth. The lesson is set in a room devoid of decoration except for a statue of the Virgin and a crucifix. The one-on-one lesson, the eye contact between teacher and student and the religious imagery in the room convey a disciplined environment intended to teach Sylvain how to be a proper Catholic. In this one-on-one session we can imagine the pressure that Sylvain feels to be attentive, responsive and engaged with Sister Elisabeth. Nevertheless, her gestures and kind expression suggest a welcoming and nurturing relationship with her student. This relationship is emphasized by the presence of the Virgin Mary and her role as mother and nurturer of Christ, whose body rests on the crucifix behind Sister Elisabeth. The role of the religious educator is

equated with the role of the Mother of Christ. As such, Catholic children ought to be educated in a serious yet nurturing manner. This hints at the creation of a new idea of family, where Catholic children and religious educators negotiated their relationships with one another, and modelled their interactions in accordance to the relationship between the Virgin Mary as nurturer and Jesus as nurtured.

Beaugrand-Champagne's image of a child learning the Catechism represents the transfer of religious knowledge and the perpetuation of the Catholic faith. Providing children with an understanding of the basic tenets of Catholicism and of the significance of rituals and sacraments is essential to producing active and productive members of the Church. Holy Communion also plays a crucial role in sustaining the Church by drawing Catholics to their local parish on a regular basis. This ritual "must establish a pattern of weekly reception of communion that will ensure that the Sunday congregation is constantly rejuvenated, and be the clearest possible sign of the adherence of successive generations of Catholics to the formal teaching of the Church."<sup>13</sup> Failure to do so could lead to the secularization of Catholic identity and contribute to the decline of a parish.<sup>14</sup> This was, in fact, a delicate matter, especially for Catholics in Quebec after the Quiet Revolution, a period of rapid sociopolitical change in the province during the 1960s. At stake was the very existence of the Catholic faith.<sup>15</sup>

Although the Holy Communion is essential to the continuation of Catholicism, the significance that families ascribe to the First Communion of children may have more to do with the ritual's emphasis on the family, particularly its identity and status within the local community.<sup>16</sup> Having gone through the Quiet Revolution, Québécois families may have retained their religious identity

as Catholics since it was conflated with French-Canadian identity, but it is possible that many of them were not fully invested in the future of the Church.<sup>17</sup> As such, the photographs in this study demonstrate a yearning for the continuity of familial identity. In other words, the Holy Communion serves as a vehicle for the preservation of familial identity.<sup>18</sup>

Families mobilized the bodies of first communicants to emphasize their social standing within their community. The ritual's "highly public nature provides the family with an opportunity to project self-image and to externalize broader social aspirations."<sup>19</sup> In Beaugrand-Champagne's *La première communion, Montréal (projet Les enfants), série « Petits projets »*, the first communicant's sophisticated suit and the elaborate reception showcase not only the family's participation in the life of the Church, but also their socio-economic standing. Through this lavish celebration the family sets itself apart from those who cannot afford such garments, decorations and cakes.



Fig. 2. Claire Beaugrand-Champagne, *La première communion, Montréal (projet Les enfants), série « Petits projets »*, 1971, print 2012, gelatin silver print, 27.7 x 35.2 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

Similarly, in Charbonneau's *Première communion, réception chez les Arnold*, série « *Les Quartiers populaires de Montréal* », the elegant dresses of the two young girls point to the family's intention to emphasize their position as engaged members in their parish, as well as their ability to afford refined clothes for their children. Ontologically speaking, these images capture First Communion as a constitutive and communicative ritual in which the bodies of children become an effective vehicle for the communication of theological principles and family values.



Fig. 3. Roger Charbonneau, *Première communion, réception chez les Arnold*, série « *Les Quartiers populaires de Montréal* », 1972–74, gelatin silver print, 2/5, 27.94 x 35.56 cm (sheet), 20.32 x 30.48 cm (image), Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

Catholic adults in twentieth-century Quebec came to understand children as the living embodiment of the sacred. This can be seen in Gutsche's photograph *Hélène Brisebois, with Aunt and Uncle, First Communion*, from the Series “Milton Park.”



Fig. 4. Clara Gutsche, *Hélène Brisebois, with Aunt and Uncle, First Communion*, from the Series “*Milton Park*,” 1972, gelatin silver bromide print, selenium toned, 35.4 x 27.8 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

The child, who has presumably just received her First Communion, stands between her uncle and aunt, her hands joined together in prayer. Their happy expressions convey a sense of accomplishment. Hélène herself seems proud of her First Communion; perhaps months of preparation have led to this moment. Her aunt and uncle seem rather happy, too, as if their niece’s accomplishment is an accomplishment of their own. Hélène’s joy and grace are contagious to those around her. Her body, having undergone First Communion, serves as a vehicle for the materialization of the sacred in the lives of her family.

The postures of the children in the photographs show a strong emphasis on prayer. The First Communion photographs show children with joined hands, looking intently at the viewer, standing or kneeling rather rigidly as their photographs are taken. Orsi notes that Catholic

children in the twentieth century were encouraged to pray constantly, and there was much discussion among religious educators about how to teach children to pray.<sup>20</sup> He explains that “the goal of Catholic prayer pedagogy and practice in its ideal expression ... was to create children who prayed unceasingly, who experienced the world across the thrumming of prayer in their bodies, and whose praying bodies could be seen by all.”<sup>21</sup> The poses of these children suggest that they have been told, again and again, how to stand or kneel during prayer, or how to act when praying. Such emphasis on prayer is partly due to the belief that children’s prayers could save souls in purgatory.<sup>22</sup>

The photographs by Beaugrand-Champagne, Charbonneau and Gutsche capture the centrality of children to Quebec Catholicism in the 1970s and 1980s. The relationships between children and adult members of the Catholic community, such as family members and religious instructors, reveal the control and mobilization of children’s bodies for the purposes of ensuring the future of the faith, preserving familial identity and materializing the sacred. During a period of religious upheaval in Quebec, the bodies of children became essential to Catholic practices: they were a bridge between sacred, eternal reality and the earthly lives of Catholic adults.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, “Photographers of Quebec from the 1960s to the 1980s: The Museum Collection Grows by Leaps and Bounds,” *The Magazine of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts* (September–December 2010): 22.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 2.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 73–74.

<sup>6</sup> Luke 14:19 (New Revised Standard Version).

- <sup>7</sup> Orsi, 74.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid., 76.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid., 77.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid., 79.
- <sup>11</sup> Claire Beaugrand-Champagne, interview by Marcel Bélanger, May 5, 1982, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.
- <sup>12</sup> Catherine Guex, “Claire Beaugrand-Champagne : l’intimité, en toute simplicité,” *Vie des Arts* no. 233 (Winter 2013–14): 26; Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 22.
- <sup>13</sup> Peter McGrail, *First Communion: Ritual, Church and Popular Religious Identity* (Aldershot; Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2007), 170.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid., 171.
- <sup>15</sup> Orsi, 77.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>17</sup> McGrail, 171.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid., 170.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>20</sup> Orsi, 99–100.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid., 100–101.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid., 100.

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