

such a statement as that 'the Christian Church began in the service of the State.' The Christian Church—whose founder, Jesus Christ, allowed Himself to be done to death at the hands of the State rather than abate one jot or tittle of His claims; the Church, whose first earthly Head, St. Peter, was crucified head downwards rather than render to Cæsar the things that are God's; the Church, whose early disciples allowed themselves to be torn by the lions of the amphitheatre rather than submit to a State-imposed creed and worship. These elementary historical facts are known in our kindergarten and primer classes. As a matter of fact, in bringing the early Christian Church into the discussion, Professor Mackenzie has brought forward what is really the most striking historical vindication possible of the present attitude of the Catholic Church in refusing, at any cost, to sacrifice conscience and Christian principle.

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Incidentally—and of course without intending it—Professor Mackenzie furnishes ammunition to the enemy. One of the 'arguments' which is being forever dinned into the public ear by the upholders of secularism, is that if recognition be given to the schools of one or two religious bodies all the others will clamor for recognition, and the break-up of our great 'national' system is inevitable. Well, in England, under the Act of 1902, voluntary schools (mainly Anglican and Catholic) receive direct aid from the State; and here is how the matter pans out in respect to 'breaking up' the English Board or National system. The figures were submitted at the annual meeting of the Northern Counties League, held at Leeds on November 14 last, by its Secretary (the Rev. C. Peach); and they are quoted on p. 4 of Professor Mackenzie's pamphlet: 'Since 1903 (that is, in seven years) voluntary schools in England have decreased in number by very nearly 1200, and the number of pupils on their registers by over half a million. On the other hand, during the same period the number of Council (or State) schools has increased by over 1700, and the number of pupils on the register by over three-quarters of a million. In 1903 the pupils in the voluntary or Church schools outnumbered those in the Council schools by 650,000; in 1910 the pupils in the Council schools outnumbered those in the voluntary schools by 600,000. In other words, the Council schools have 1,250,000 more pupils than they had seven years ago, while the voluntary or Church schools have more than half a million fewer than they had seven years ago.' The explanation of this falling away of the Church Schools is to be found, in part, in the fact that they have been 'starved' by hostile administrative regulations; but, after making due allowance for this circumstance, it is evident that the State schools have easily held their own. An ounce of fact is worth a ton of theory or guess-work; and in view of the foregoing figures—advanced on high secular authority—we may reasonably expect to hear a 'little less of the bogey about the 'break-up' of the 'national' system if recognition be given to denominational claims.

THE AGE OF FIRST COMMUNION

TEXT OF THE DECREE

THE SACRED CONGREGATION OF THE SACRAMENTS

Decree on the age of those who are to be admitted to their First Eucharistic Communion.

Christ's Example.

The pages of the Gospel clearly witness to the extraordinary affection shown by Christ to little children when He was on earth. It was His delight to be in their company; He was wont to lay His hands upon them, to embrace them, to bless them. And He was indignant at their being turned away by His disciples, whom He rebuked in these grave words: 'Suffer the little children to come unto Me, and forbid them not; for of such is the kingdom of Heaven' (Mark x. 13, 14, 16). He showed sufficiently how highly He esteemed their innocence and candor of soul, when calling unto Him a little child, He said to His disciples: 'Amen I say to you, unless you be converted, and become as little children, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, he is the greater in the kingdom of heaven. And he that shall receive one such little child in My name, receiveth Me' (Matt. xviii. 3, 4, 5).

Infant Communion.

Mindful of this, the Catholic Church, from its very earliest beginnings, took care to bring little children to Christ by Eucharistic Communion, which it was accustomed to administer even to children at the breast. This took place at Baptism, as was prescribed in almost all the ancient Rituals down to the thirteenth century, and in some places the custom lasted longer; among the Greeks and Easterns

it still obtains. In order, however, to remove the danger that children at the breast should reject especially the bread, the custom prevailed from the beginning of administering the Eucharist to them under the species of wine only.

Nor was it at Baptism alone, but very frequently afterwards, that the infants were refreshed by the Divine food. For it was the custom of some Churches to give the Eucharist to the little ones immediately after the clergy, and elsewhere after the Communion of the adults to give them the fragments remaining over.

Postponement of Communion.

This custom then grew obsolete in the Latin Church, and children began to take their place at the Holy Table only when they had a certain use of dawning reason, and some knowledge of this August Sacrament. This new discipline which had already been accepted by some local synods, was confirmed by the solemn sanction of the Fourth General Council of the Lateran, held in 1215, by the promulgation of the famous 21st Canon, whereby Sacramental Confession and Holy Communion are prescribed to the faithful, after they have attained the age of reason: 'Every one of the faithful of both sexes, after they come to the years of discretion, shall, in private, faithfully confess all their sins, at least once a year, to their own priest; and take care to fulfil to the best of their power the penance enjoined on them, receiving reverently, at least at Easter, the Sacrament of the Eucharist, unless, perhaps, by the counsel of their own priest, for some reasonable cause, they judge it proper to abstain from it for a time.'

The Council of Trent (Sess. XXI., on Communion, ch. 4), without in any way disapproving the ancient discipline of administering the Eucharist to little children before they had the use of reason, confirmed the Lateran Decree, and anathematised those who should not conform to it: 'If anyone denieth, that all and each of Christ's faithful of both sexes are bound, when they have attained to the years of discretion, to communicate every year, at least at Easter, in accordance with the precept of Holy Mother Church, let him be anathema' (Sess. XIII., on the Holy Eucharist, ch. 8, can. 9).

In virtue, then, of the Lateran Decree just quoted and still in force, the faithful of Christ, on reaching the years of discretion, are bound by the obligation of going to the Sacraments of Penance and Holy Eucharist at least once a year.

Deferment of Confession.

In fixing this age of reason, or of discretion, however, not a few errors and deplorable abuses have been introduced in the course of time. For there were those who considered that a different age of discretion was to be fixed for the reception of the Sacrament of Penance, and for the reception of the Holy Eucharist. For Penance they considered that the age of discretion was that at which wrong could be distinguished from right, and therefore at which sin could be committed. But, for the Eucharist, they held that a more advanced age was required at which a fuller knowledge of the truths of faith and a more mature preparation of soul could be obtained. And so, according to the different local customs or opinions of men, the age for the first reception of the Eucharist was fixed at ten or twelve years in some places, at fourteen years, and even more, in others, and in the meantime children or youths not having attained the prescribed age were forbidden to approach Eucharistic Communion.

Consequent Evils.

This custom, whereby, under the pretext of safeguarding the honor due to the August Sacrament, the faithful are kept away from It, became the cause of many evils. For it came to pass that the innocence of the age of childhood, torn from the embrace of Christ, was not nourished by the sap of the interior life; whence this also followed that youth, deprived of its all-powerful protection, surrounded by so many snares, on losing its innocence, fell headlong into vice before it had tasted of the Sacred Mysteries. Now, even if the First Communion is preceded by more diligent instruction, and a careful Sacramental Confession—which is not everywhere the case—nevertheless the loss of baptismal innocence is ever to be regretted, a loss which, had the Eucharist been received in more tender years, might perhaps have been avoided.

No less to be condemned is the custom existing in many places of forbidding Sacramental Confession to children who are not yet admitted to the Holy Table, or of not giving them absolution. Whence it comes to pass that, caught in the toils of sins possibly grave, they may long remain in great danger.

But what is most serious is that in some places children who have not yet been admitted to their First Communion are not even allowed, when in imminent danger of death, to be strengthened by the Holy Viaticum, and at their death are carried to their grave like infants, and so are not assisted by the Church's suffrages.

Origin in Jansenism.

Such is the harm done by those who insist more than is right on making extraordinary preparation precede the First Communion, probably not noticing that such kind of precaution has its roots in Jansenistic errors, maintaining that the Most Holy Eucharist is a reward, not the remedy of human weakness. And yet the contrary was certainly held by the Council of Trent when it taught that the Eucharist is 'the antidote whereby we are delivered from