

First Communion Pictures



by Guest post by Larry Racioppo

Apr 23, 2018

I've been photographing First Communions, one of the three Catholic Initiation Sacraments, since 1971. One of my first 'serious' photographs depicts my Aunt Millie and her son John standing in the rain outside our parish church. John has just made his First Communion and is proudly holding his little prayer book wide open for me. Over the years I often returned to photograph at this church St. Michael the Archangel in Sunset Park (where I had made my First Communion), and to St. John the Evangelist in South Brooklyn where I lived in the 1970's and 80's.



Millie and John, Fourth Avenue, 1971



L: Communion Boy, 1983; R: Communion Girls, 1997

Lately I've been photographing at St. Francis De Sales in Rockaway, Queens where I live.



Photo Session, Rockaway Beach Blvd., 2015

The First Communion photos I most admire now were routinely taken in neighborhood studios in the past: well-lit and sharply focused portraits printed in black and white or sepia on thick, fiber-based 5x7 inch paper.



L: My grandfather Angelo and Uncle Patsy, c.1935; R: My Aunt Angelina, c.1939

There no longer are many photographers using these types of painted backgrounds but I found one in the Bronx.



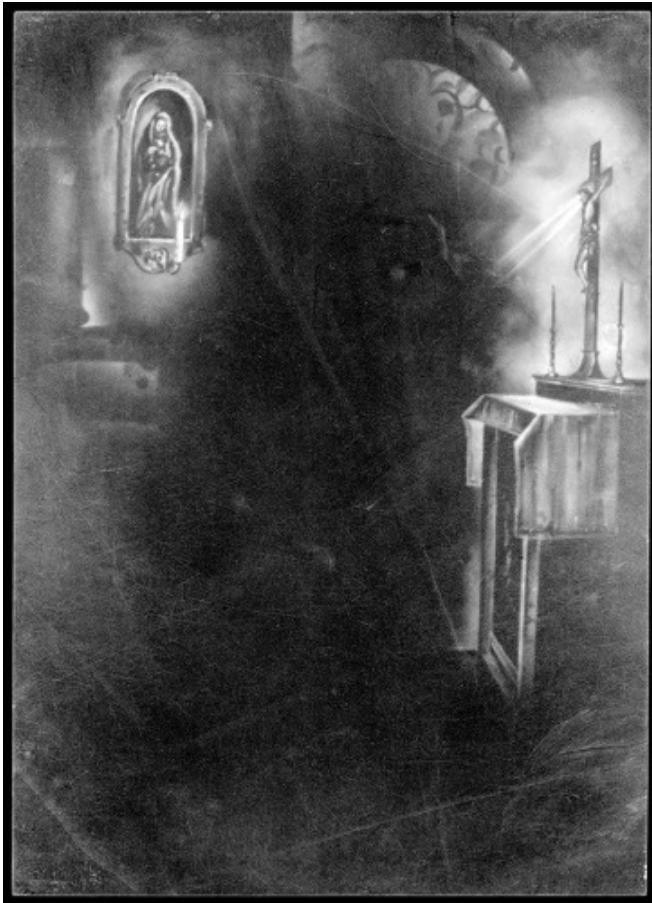
Bronx Photo Studio and Studio Photographer, 2009

Based upon the small sample of studio portraits my extended family has saved, and the ones I've bought at flea markets or found discarded in dumpsters, photographers eventually stopped using actual painted backgrounds. Instead they photographed their subject in front of a neutral or black background, and then in the darkroom, double exposed the resulting image with a sheet of film containing religious imagery, often drawn in 'soft focus'.

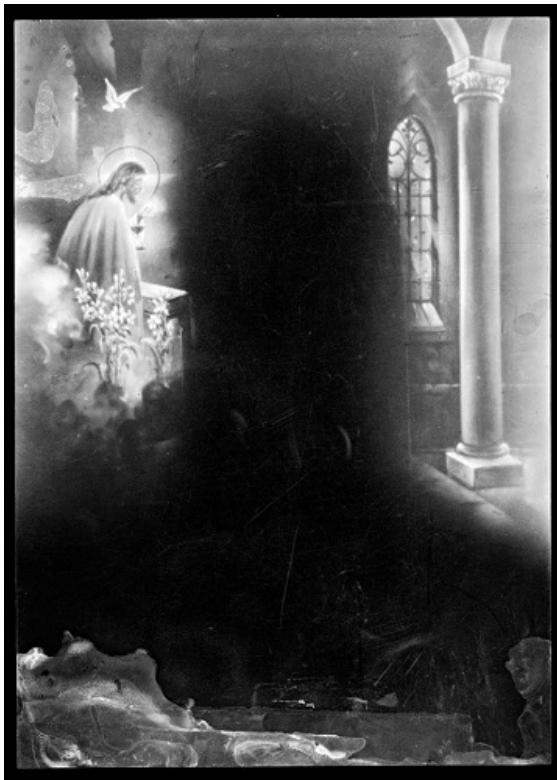


My cousin Joe T., c.1956

I have photos of my cousins Joe (black and white) and Kathleen (hand-colored black and white) along with the sheet film drawings used for double exposing. I bought the first one at a studio's going out of business sale, and found the second in dumpster outside a recently closed photo studio in Bay Ridge.



L: Film with religious drawing, 2018; R: My cousin Joe A., c.1955



L: Film with religious drawing, 2018; R: My cousin Kathy T., c. 1965

When I was growing up in the 1950's, long before everyone had a cell phone, there was a small photo studio in almost every Brooklyn neighborhood. Folks went there to commemorate important events in their lives, such as getting married, and of course, in the predominately Catholic neighborhoods I knew, Baptisms, First Communions and Confirmations. Purchased photographs were sold in cardboard frames that could be folded to stand.

I have one of these with my cousin Kenny looking – with the hint of a smile – directly at the photographer. Years later I photographed three of his children at First Communion parties in their 16th Street backyard.



L: My cousin Kenny's photo, c.1954; R: Kenny, wife Marie and daughter Lisa, 1978



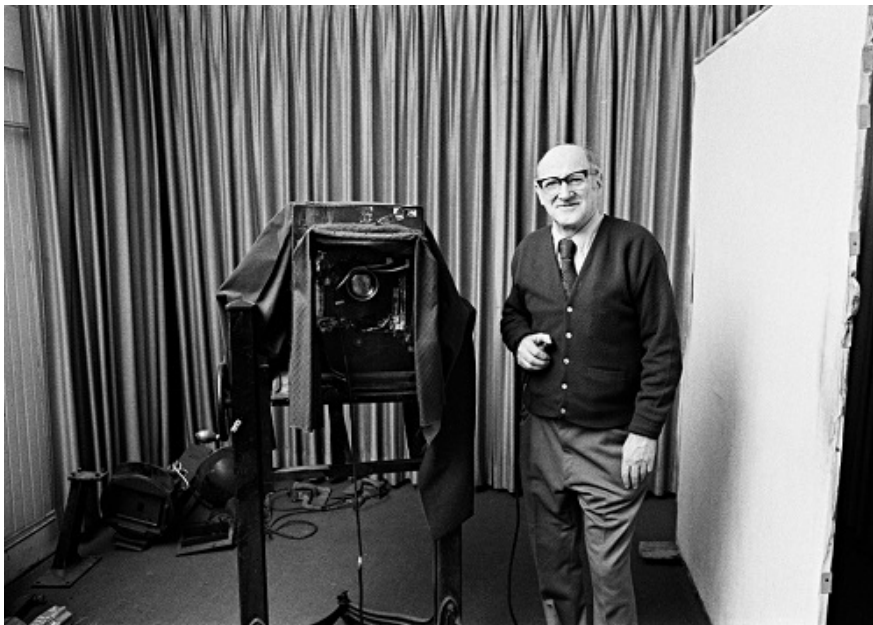
Kenny's daughter Debra, 1977



Kenny's son Michael, 1980

The 'go to' photo studio used by most of my extended family was Gabriel's on Fifth Avenue, near 12th Street. I met Mr. Gabriel briefly in 1980, as he was closing his business. I did not appreciate his artistry then as I do now.

I wish that I had spent more time with him...but years later I did buy his large Century camera from a third party.



Mr. Gabriel with his camera, 1980

My beautiful cousin Marilyn had her first Communion photo taken there.

One could count on the work of these local artists/craftsmen at a time when most amateur photographers were pretty inconsistent.



L: My cousin Marilyn's Communion photo, c.1964; R: Marilyn with her parents, 18th Street, c.1964

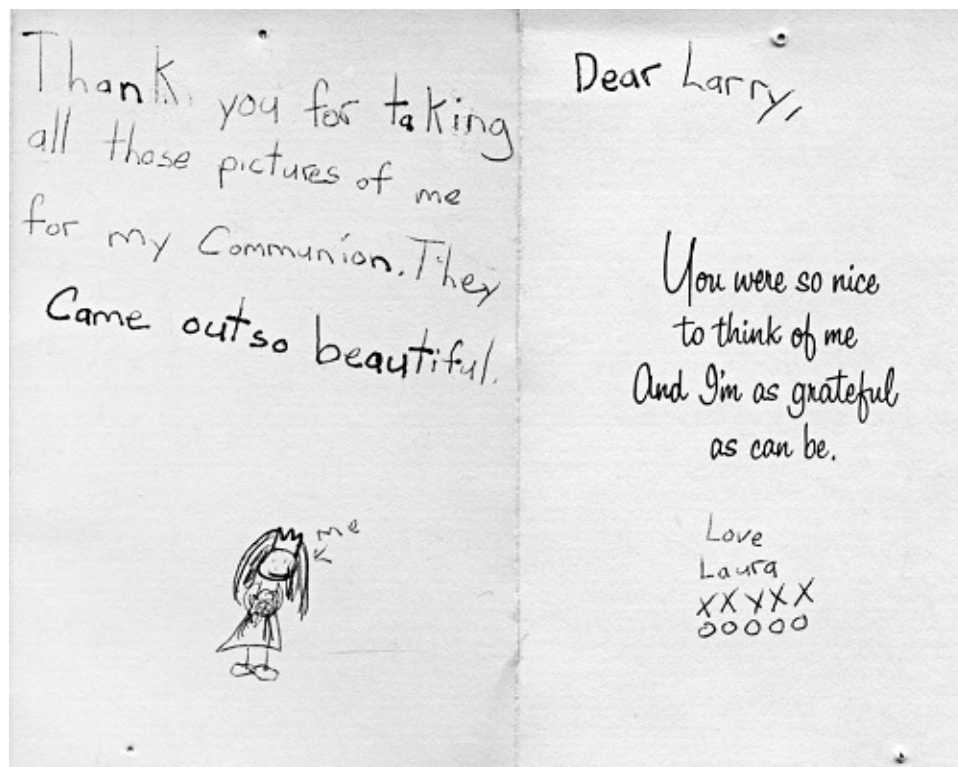


Marilyn, Sixth Avenue, 1971

Although I worked for a while in a commercial studio, I've always preferred shooting on location. I photographed my cousin Joe's daughter Laura outside their home, alone and with her brother Joe Jr. Nineteen years later I photographed them at her wedding.



L: Joe A's daughter Laura, 76th Street, 1985; R: Laura with her brother Joe, 1985



Laura's Thank You Note, 1985



Laura with her brother Joe, 2004

Here is my own first Communion photo, circa 1954.



My First Communion Photo, c.1954

All photographs are property of Larry Racioppo. Visit Larry's website here.