

CHILDREN: A DIFFERENT WAY OF BEING CHRISTIANS

by Patricia Coulter

This article is placed at the end of this journal for the spiritual discussion of grace and courtesy: the child's relationship with God. It is chapter three of Patricia Coulter's new book, Like Leaven, which touches on the highest order of grace, one that comes through the child and is expanded to the parent's spirituality as documented by Patricia Coulter. Like the grace and courtesy lessons, joy and dignity from knowing God can only be lived but can never taught by direct instruction.

Because there is in the child,
there is in childhood a unique grace,
An entirety, a firstness
That is total.
An origin, a secret, a spring, a point of departure,
A beginning which might be called absolute.
Children are new creatures.³⁰

Generally speaking, every catechesis is based on a certain approach to God and to the human person as well. There is a dimension specific to this catechesis: the vision it holds of the child. It is an important element in relation to adults who accompany children, especially because, as Dr. Maria Montessori states, "If you have not got a vision of the child's soul, you cannot help in its development."³¹

We will look briefly at the spirituality of this catechesis on a pastoral level. Before doing so, however, there are two fundamental points to note. The first is that

There is something peculiar about childhood that makes it difficult for anyone to think straight about it. We have all of course been children once, and that alone is enough to

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stock us with a powerful set of presuppositions, to make us all feel we know something about the subject.³²

Therefore we will address some fundamental presuppositions in this catechesis.

The second point is the profound insight that Sofia learned from her work with children. With respect to the spiritual lives of children, Sofia maintained that “fundamentally—it would seem—it is about a different way of being Christians.”³³ Thus we will allude to the approach to God and the child (the who), the content (the what), and the methodology (the how) in this catechesis.

PART 1: SPIRITUALITY OF CHILDHOOD

I have come so that they may have life,
and have it in all its fullness. (John 10:10)

On the pastoral level, the catechesis contains theological and educational presuppositions, along with basic psycho-pedagogical principles. We will look at some of the major ones associated with this catechesis, drawing mainly on the work of Dr. Maria Montessori and Sofia Cavalletti.

The child is a central paradox in Christianity: it is the littlest who are the greatest; if we are to receive the Kingdom of God we must become like a child (Matthew 18:3-4). An aspect of this paradoxical quality of childhood is captured by G. K. Chesterton who observed these two facts about children: “First, they are very serious, and secondly, that they are in consequence very happy.” He adds: “The gravity of the very young child...is the gravity of astonishment at the universe.”³⁴

These are two qualities that characterize the spiritual lives of children. They have important implications for the religious growth of children. First, children are hungry for God. Feeding their hunger is a serious concern: “Children not only have religious capacities but a particular hunger as well. When a child is hungry, he or she must be fed now, without waiting until tomorrow.”³⁵ Second, children have the potential to encounter God. Actualizing their potential generates joy in them. As Sofia states,

The constant and repeated manifestations of joy children show in their relationship with God inclines me to say that the “image” of God, which is in all of us (Genesis 1:26), is reflected with a special transparency in children.³⁶

Thus, in accompanying children along their religious path, we are invited into the child’s way with God, which is to emphasize that:

There are no *ordinary* people... This does not mean that we are to be perpetually solemn. We must play. But our merriment must be of that kind (and it is, in fact, the merriest kind) which exists between people who have, from the outset, taken each other seriously.³⁷ (author’s emphasis)

In the case of the child’s religious development, Maria Montessori stresses the need to “respect the child’s own religious life” and to recognize “its lofty seriousness.”³⁸

“MERELY” SERVANT

What is said above implies the need to serve (*diakonia*) the God-child relationship. To return to the analogy of the child’s hunger, it is obvious that the food provided to children directly influences their physical health, present and future. Generally, the younger the child, the more determining this influence is. This is just as true in terms of the child’s religious formation.

That is, what is given, or not given, significantly affects the child’s harmonious growth as a whole person, both now and later in life as well. Thus this can have long-term ramifications, either positively or negatively:

The Christian spiritual path is based on a deepening trust in God... Because trust is so important, our spiritual journey may be blocked if we carry negative attitudes toward God from *early childhood*...which are implanted in us largely as a result of early religious training...³⁹

In helping the relationship between the child and God to be established, we serve this relationship as “merely” servants, as stated in the Gospel of Luke 17:10. Other translations use variations such as “unworthy,” “useless,” “unprofitable” servants.

Now if we extend the analogy, on a physical plane it is evident that the child is born with the physiological apparatus and mechanisms required to digest the food crucial for survival and growth. On the religious plane, however, it is not easily discernible that the young child is equipped with all the essentials necessary to receive and internalize the nourishment necessary to assuage his or her inner hunger and thirst.

First and foremost among these essentials are the child's capabilities for giving and receiving love: "In this covenant relationship with God, children find what is most precious in themselves: the capacity to love."⁴⁰

COVENANT RELATIONSHIP

We know from scripture that only God can love immeasurably, for "God is love" (1 John 4:8). It is only God's love that can completely satisfy the child's need for love without limits.

We also know from scripture, as St. Paul maintains, that no one can come to know who God really is without being told (Romans 10:14). Therefore, children need our help if they are to hear the good news of the Christian message (*kerygma*). Sofia expressed it this way:

Christianity is above all an event. Children cannot know that Christ died and is risen if they are not told and they need to know this.⁴¹

There is a request the child makes of us, even though it is unspoken in the early years: "Help me to come close to God. Help me to be fully who I am."⁴² When children are helped in their relationship with God, their response is joyful: "I dare say...each time the child allows us to see the joy that she/he feels in drawing near to God...the child is allowing us to see his/her response to the God of the covenant."⁴³

THE CHILD'S WAY

There is something of an urgency in responding to this silent call of children, in so far as the childhood years are the most formative in one's life. What is experienced at this time has a radical impact.

This is particularly the case in relation to the child's religious formation, understood as comprising all the potencies of mind and heart, body and spirit: "For the child, God is not a 'stop-gap God', as Bonhoeffer phrases it, but someone to whom one goes in the fullness of one's whole person."⁴⁴

Yet, this is a delicate service because as Sofia states, "children seem to want to point out to us that their way of going to God is different."⁴⁵ (author's emphasis) It involves introducing children to scripture and liturgy in a way that helps children to experience their own personal encounter with God, independent of the adult. Thus children need to be given direct access to age-appropriate means of actualizing their encounter. Additionally, in offering children the proclamation of the Christian message, first and foremost we are called to be listeners to the Word of God together with the children:

Listening in community is always enriching. Listening with children is especially so, in our estimation, because God's Word resounds in a different manner in young children than in adults, and thus it is through children that another nuance of the Word reaches us. This will happen, however, on the condition that the catechist [has] the attitude of one who is open to listening...⁴⁶

METHOD: INCARNATIONAL APPROACH

This is why signs occupy a predominant place in this catechesis. Signs provide the essential instrument, such as biblical images and words, and liturgical symbols and gestures. Even the prepared space (atrium) and special objects (materials) share in this sign-quality. Indeed, Sofia characterizes this catechesis as a "method of signs," that method which

always remained alive where the life of the Church is living, and that is in the Liturgy. The Liturgy has always spoken through 'signs'; and Jesus taught only 'in parables' (Mark 4:34).⁴⁷

Therefore our service as catechists entails presenting signs in their most tangible form, as required by the different age groups of children. The sign is incarnated, so to speak, in the concretized form of biblical-liturgical materials. For example, the wooden figures rep-

representing the elements of the Good Shepherd parable. In this way the sign's inherent power to captivate the child is further enhanced, and allows the child an immediate, first-hand experience. For this reason, an integral aspect of the catechist's service is to prepare and present these materials that "incarnate" these themes/signs, which thereby give the child access to a direct and personal experience of God.

Moreover, in this way children are enabled to meditate on the Christian message contained in the sign in a manner that involves them wholly. That is, children immerse themselves with all their faculties—physical as well as relational, cognitive as well as affective. This is also why the positive resonance generated by these themes can continue, in a different key, beyond the present experience to extend into the later stages of the child's life.

CONTENT: BIBLICAL AND LITURGICAL THEMES

The following is a very short synthesis of some of the pivotal biblical-liturgical "generative themes" that call forth such resonance in young children (3-6 years) and older children (6-9 years). "Generative themes" is a term employed by Thomas Groome. It is used here because Groome refers specifically to the work of Sofia in explaining what he means by "generative theme." For example:

...the generative theme signals to participants, and from the beginning, the vital core of the curriculum to be attended to... Then it functions akin to what Sophia [sic] Cavalletti, in her Montessori approach to religious education, calls a 'linking point.' By this she means 'an especially striking element that emphasizes the vital nucleus of the theme. The linking point should introduce us into the heart of the subject in such a way that it gives us, in a flash, the global intuition of the essence of the subject we are considering.' The generative theme then should be of life import to participants, pertain to their very 'being' in place and time...⁴⁸

For children around the age of three to six, some of the generative themes are:

1) Christ the Good Shepherd knows and calls us by our own name (John 10); gives us his very life (in Baptism); and desires to meet us in a most particular way in the Eucharist.

2) God's life is within us (Christ, the light). It is so powerful that it permeates the entire created world (parables of the seed and the leaven, Matthew 13:31-33); and is given to us as a precious gift of inestimable value (parables of the pearl and the treasure, Matthew 13:44-46).

For children around the age of six to nine, some of the generative themes are:

1) Christ the True Vine invites us to share in the inexpressible intimacy of the Trinity (John 15); immerses us in God's cosmic plan of love; and calls forth our unique contribution in the building of the history of God's kingdom (Ephesians 1:10).

2) We are empowered to do this by God's presence and action in our lives (especially in the Eucharist), and God's constant love for me personally (experienced particularly in the sacrament of Reconciliation).

SUMMARY

Across their long years of working with children, Sofia and Gianna discovered that what strikes the deepest chord in the young child is relationship—to be “known” and “called by name.” This gives the child the reassurance of safety and protection. Even more, in the relationship with God young children gradually discover their identity and dignity as a “partner” in God's covenant. This is a primary descriptor of young children in Sofia's writings.⁴⁹ As she explains further: “In the covenant relationship the child finds the Partner who is limitless, unfailing love, who meets the child's deepest need, and the child is in harmony with the world.”⁵⁰

The children that the catechists speak about here (six to nine years) are at the age when they desire to explore new moral, intellectual and social horizons. They are “thirsty for a great vision,” as Maria Montessori states.⁵¹ Their fundamental need is for a steadfast, unchanging love, a love that never fails:

I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you. (Jeremiah 31:3)

In this kind of relationship with God the older child discovers a new identity and dignity as a “collaborator” in the covenant. This is a dominant theme in Sofia’s writings about older children: “The older child wants to know what his/her place is in the world that he or she is in the process of discovering, and what his/her task is in it.”⁵² Sofia adds however, that before attention is given to the level of doing—the “task,” we must first attend to the level of “being”—the relationship. In other words, first we need to attend to the questions that the older child is asking us, even though they are not expressed explicitly: “Tell me with whom I do it, for whom I do it, with whom I am in relationship.”⁵³ In other words, the foundation, first and foremost, is the covenant relationship with God. We will take a brief look at this in the next chapter.

ENDNOTES

30. Charles Péguy, “Innocence and Experience,” *Basic Verities: Prose and Poetry*. Rendered into English by Ann and Julian Green. (New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1972), p. 227.
31. Maria Montessori, “On Religious Education” (Course Lecture, London, 1946), *The Child, Society and the World: Unpublished Speeches and Writings* (The Clio Montessori Series, Volume 7), p.40.
32. Edward Robinson, *The Original Vision: A Study of the Religious Experience of Childhood* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1983), p. 7-8.
33. Sofia Cavalletti, Chapter 5: “My Readings,” *Way of Holy Joy*, p. 68.
34. Gilbert Keith Chesterton, “A Defence of Baby-Worship,” *The Defendant* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1947), p. 149.
35. Sofia Cavalletti, *Joyful Journey*, p. 9.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

37. C.S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Harper One, 2001) p. 18-19.
38. Maria Montessori, "God and the Child," in *The Child in the Church*, p. 16 ff.
39. Rev. Thomas Keating, *Intimacy with God* (New York: Crossroad, 1995), p.22.
40. Sofia Cavalletti, *Joyful Journey*, p. 12.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 9. This is one of the many points of connection between the Montessori approach and this catechesis, which I highlighted in schematic form in the reflection, "The Spirituality of Childhood" (*Journals of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd* 1998-2002), p. 118-9.
43. Sofia Cavalletti, "On Moral Formation" (*Journals of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd* 1984-1997, Fall 1988), p. 133.
44. Sofia Cavalletti, Chapter 4, "An Adventure: The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd," *Way of Holy Joy*, p. 34.
45. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
46. Sofia Cavalletti, "The Receivers of the Proclamation," *Religious Potential I*, p. 49. Obviously, this is also a core theme in Gianna Gobbi's work *Listening to God with Children*.
47. Sofia Cavalletti, Chapter 10, *Religious Potential I*, p. 159. Dr. Montessori also states that she found her "pedagogical technique" (technique pédagogique) in the liturgy itself, and she sought to "open" the liturgy (the Eucharist particularly) by opening "the book" (of Scripture, and the Roman Missal, in use at the time). For example, see *L'Education Religieuse: La Vie En Jésus-Christ*. Trans. Georgette J.- J. Bernard et Anne-Marie Bernard. (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1956), p. 19ff; 136-37.

48. Thomas Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry: The Way of Shared Praxis* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), p. 156-57. Groome is quoting from Sofia's *Religious Potential I*, p. 98.
49. For example, see Sofia Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child, Vol. II*: "The child brings to the relationship all the dignity of a true partner," p. 8.
50. Sofia Cavalletti, *Joyful Journey*, p. 12.
51. Maria Montessori, "On Religious Education," (Course Lecture, London, 1946), *The Child, Society and the World: Unpublished Speeches and Writings* (The Clio Montessori Series, Volume 7), p. 38.
52. Sofia Cavalletti, "Religious Formation and Later Childhood" (*Journals of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd*, 1984-1997), p. 4. See *Religious Potential II*, p. 25.
53. Sofia Cavalletti, *Religious Potential II*. p. 84.

