



Occasional Papers

...exploring the theology and spirituality of children

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The Center for Children and Theology researches the spiritual life of children. It seeks to encourage dialogue, inquiry, to listen to the voices of children and to explore the theological gifts children have to offer. Reciprocally, the Center seeks the best theology and methodology that the community of faith has to offer children today.

Occasional Papers

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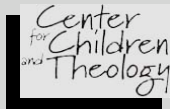
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Abstract

Children and Theology

by Catherine Maresca

Theology is "faith seeking understanding" (St. Anselm). But in the 20th Century theologians have learned to pay attention to whose faith is seeking understanding of what experience of God. These components significantly nuance theology. Theology that incorporates the insights of women, the poor, people with disabilities and from around the world, will be a fuller, richer understanding of God than one impoverished by a narrow perspective. Children also have a significant contribution.

This paper argues that theology of children does exist and ought to be seriously considered. Maresca uses principles of Aquinas to support the idea that children contribute to theology. While children do not develop a formal and systematic theology they are full of faith, and seeking to understand their physical and metaphysical world. The paper goes on to explore three characteristics of children that create their unique perspective of God: essentiality, wonder and joy.

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Children and Theology

by Catherine Maresca

At age 2 my son Kevin was introduced to the parable of the Good Shepherd. A catechist used simple wooden figures of a shepherd and sheep so that afterward he could continue his reflection on the parable independently. As the lesson came to a close, Kevin stopped at the table, lifted the shepherd above his head, and sang to him, "Alleluia!"

Kevin's response and others like it provide the church with a window into the rich relationship between God and children.

Maria Montessori spoke of this relationship as well in her preface to *The Mass Explained for Children*: "Our Lord perceived in children something that the adult did not perceive two thousand years ago and does not perceive today. Yet the Gospel says plainly that many mysteries shall be revealed to these little ones." Because of their rich relationship with God, illustrated by Kevin and observed by Montessori, children have a gift for the church.

This gift is, in part, a contribution to the theology of the church. Our challenge is to remove the obstacles to receiving this contribution. The first obstacle for many is to be open to the idea of the theology of young children. This paper addresses that obstacle.

Thomas Aquinas, writing as a scholar of the 13th Century, did not seriously consider the possibility that children were capable of contributing to theology, and it is not my intention to show that he did. However, a number of his statements seem to lay the foundation for the idea to be discussed in the light of our current understanding of the religious capabilities of young children.

During his discussion of the question, "Can we know God by our natural reason in this life?" Aquinas states, "...our understanding cannot reach to the divine essence" (Aquinas, p. 191). He includes in this plural "our" those scholars best trained to reach for an understanding of God, and acknowledges that even they are too limited for this task.

Aquinas continues in his next discussion to state, “by grace we have a more perfect knowledge of God than we have by natural reason” (Aquinas, p. 193). Taken together, these statements indicate that the distance between the natural reason of any one person and knowledge of God can only be bridged by God’s grace. We cannot limit the reach of God’s grace to any particular group of people such as theologians, or other adults. And so, because knowledge of God depends on grace and not on human achievement, it is possible that children may also be graced with knowledge of God.

As Sacred History unfolds, our understanding of God becomes multifaceted. Together, the events and people of the Bible reveal not many gods, but one God; not many kingdoms, but one Kingdom. “Things seen in the Word are not seen successively but together” (Aquinas, p. 187). Aquinas concludes this is the case because of the “one essence of God” and not because of the comprehensive vision of people. Yet, in the religious life of children there is an essentiality of heart that corresponds more fully to the one essence of God than does the heart of adults (Cavalletti, p. 50-51). Children, who by nature demand the most essential proclamations of our faith may aid the whole community of faith in seeing the “one essence of God.”

Writing in 1972, Schubert Ogden describes Christian theology as “the fully reflective understanding of the Christian witness of faith as decisive for human existence” (Hodgson, p. 16). He goes on to explain that “fully reflective understanding” implies that “theology ought to exhibit at least some of the formal marks of any ‘science’” (Hodgson, p. 16). It seems logical to conclude then, that children would be incapable of contributing to theology as scientists using a formal scientific methodology.

Ogden divides theology into three studies: historical, systematic, and practical. This further emphasizes the inability of children to contribute to theology. Before the age of six, children are unable to imagine a time in history that they have not experienced. They struggle to distinguish elements of reality from fantasy, as encountered on television and in dreams. As such, they are poorly equipped to “represent the understanding of reality that is true” (Hodgson, p. 25) as required by systematic theology. Finally, their grasp of the current needs of the human community is too limited to consider a contribution to practical theology possible.

Using St. Anselm’s definition of theology as “faith seeking understanding”, it seems important to establish that young children are capable of faith. The relationship between people and God is important when speaking of faith in the Christian tradition. James Fowler speaks of faith as an “irreducibly relational phenomenon” (emphasis his; Fowler, p. 18). Evidence, then, of a relationship between God and children may be understood as evidence of their faith.

For over 45 years, Sofia Cavalletti has been observing and documenting the religious life of children between the ages of three and twelve. She writes of the youngest children, “recently it became clear to me that what is primary for the child in front of the Good Shepherd is the relationship. I think relationship is an important element, because in the relationship the child shows his great capacity as a partner in the covenant” (Cavalletti, letter to the author, 2/18/89). Cavalletti’s understanding of covenant denotes a relationship initiated by God, and responded to by people. She is convinced that not only does this initiative of God reach children as well as adults, but that children are capable of responding to God’s love in a unique and wonderful way.

Cavalletti documents this relationship in her book *The Religious Potential of the Child*. The first chapter concludes, “We believe that the child, more than any other, has need of love because the child is rich in love... God - who is love - and the child, who asks for love more than his mother’s milk, thus meet one another in a particular correspondence of nature” (Cavalletti, p. 44-45).

If children are capable of faith, however, are they also capable of “faith seeking understanding”? In Ogden’s sense of the scientific nature of theology, they are not. Piaget, Fowler, and Cavalletti all agree that children before the age of six or seven do not demonstrate the ability to use the logic required by Ogden and demonstrated by Aquinas (Fowler, pp. 27 and 42; Cavalletti, p. 31). How then, may young children contribute to theology?

James Cone notes in *a Black Theology of Liberation* that most theologians agree that theology is “a discipline which functions within the Christian community” (Cone, p. 9). He goes on to say that because white theology developed in isolation from the black condition “it is not Christian theology at all” (Cone, p. 10). From this, one can infer that a complete theology of the Christian community must reflect the experiences and insights of all of its members.

God, who is the object of theology, cannot be seen or known completely by any one person or group of people. Thus, all people can participate in theology, even children. As each person or group contemplates God from a different perspective, a different facet of the one God is revealed. Children have a radically different faith perspective than that of adults, and thus have the potential to contribute to theology in an important way. Jesus stressed this difference, and the importance of children to the Christian community, when he said to his disciples, “I assure you, unless you change and become like little children, you will not enter the kingdom of God” (Matthew 18:3).

Christians who have pondered this text have tried to understand in what ways they are called to be like little children. I propose three characteristics of young children, observed as they pray or contemplate God, that may serve the Christian community in its theological task. These are: essentiality, wonder and enjoyment.

Essentiality. Cavalletti writes, “As long as we are able to stay on a plane of essentiality, the children will listen to us, enchanted, happy, and never tiring; as soon as we leave this level, their attention will abandon us: (Cavalletti, p. 51). The essential themes she refers to are the greatest of our faith, including the love of God, the death and resurrection of Jesus, the kingdom of God among us, and the incarnation. The children’s response to these themes can help the community to focus on them as the heart of our faith, a nucleus that unites rather than divides. Kevin’s immediate response to the Good Shepherd indicates one of these essential themes: we are loved by Jesus, and belong to him.

Wonder. When children hear the kerygma of the gospel in a way that they can continue to contemplate it, wonder is their inherent religious attitude. Rather than say, “I already know that,” and constantly seek new things, the children return to the simple, concrete materials that enable them to revisit the kerygma again and again until they begin to know its content deeply. Thus three-year-olds may return to the figures of the sheep and the Good Shepherd, mustard seeds smaller than ground pepper, or the water and light of Baptism with the enchantment and contentment that wonder engenders.

Enjoyment. The child does not stand before God in fear of judgment. The child does not worry about a vocation, or attempt to capture God in theological papers. Nurtured by the kerygma without and wonder within, the child’s relationship with God is characterized by “a joy that puts the child in peace, that makes him serene and calm” (Cavalletti, p. 41). In the last 18 years, I have witnessed this joy countless times, often in the form of spontaneous song in which “Alleluia” is a frequent word. Kevin’s “Alleluia,” was repeated often in spontaneous songs as he went about his business at home.

These three characteristics may serve theology in a number of ways. Essentiality helps Christian theology to focus on its most essential themes. Wonder engenders in adults a sense of humility and gratitude before God and every gift of God. Enjoyment keeps the theological task in perspective: while theology flows from faith, it does not supersede it. The relationship between God and people is of primary importance and is a relationship of mutual enjoyment and delight.

The statements of Aquinas lay the groundwork for conclusions that he never reached. God alone bridges the gap between natural reason and Godself, and this bridge is crossed by many, not only by those who scale the heights of Scholasticism. Children, women, people with disabilities and doubtless many others not imagined by Aquinas have responded to God’s initiative as partners in the covenant, entering into the theological task of the Christian community. Furthermore, his focus on knowing the “one essence of God” corresponds to a more recent understanding of the essentiality of young children in their relationship with God.

On the other hand, theologians such as Ogden, with a focus on theology as a scientific task, need to recognize that while they may be the ones to systematize and reflect the understanding of the Christian community, they depend on the perspectives and insight of the whole community for that understanding. The very limitations that prohibit children from addressing historical, systematic and practical theology, allow them to embody and proclaim the wonder and joy of humankind's encounter with God.

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