

The Blessings of Children

There is within children a yearning, a natural affinity to be at one - at home with God. These two great mysteries, the Child and God, seek each other. They desire a holy meeting. As educators and formation leaders, our call is to create an atmosphere where this can happen and then get out of the way because they both mean business! There are many stories told by modern researchers of this phenomena found in a variety of cultural, racial and religious backgrounds.

Dr. Sophia Cavaletti shares many in *The Religious Potential of the Child*. Two stories come to mind from my own experience: (1) A child of atheist parents, upon hearing that the world was created by God proclaimed, "I always knew there was a God." and (2) A friend from Bulgaria never heard the word "God" spoken as she was growing up in a communist country. She shared that as a child she always knew there was a power of love or someone to whom she prayed.

Another story has grown out of our All Saints Day Intergenerational Event. When an inquisitive four-year-old questioned our "in resident" St. Francis about his bare feet, he was told that this saintly man had given his shoes to Jesus to give to the poor. Now four-year-olds can be very literal, so the following week on a cold November morning he accompanied his mother outside to fetch some wood for the fireplace. When she discovered him following behind her in bare feet she quickly admonished him and sent him back inside. He replied, "I don't have any shoes. I gave them to Jesus to give to the poor. I'm a saint, you know." Yes, he had learned that through our baptism we are all saints of God.

This same child also told his mother as she was leaving for a meeting at church, "Oh, God lives at church. Would you please give God a message for me? Tell him to hurry up and tell us the name of our new rector!" Maybe those of us who are in an interim process should recruit him for the Search Committee!

We all have stories of toddlers learning to express themselves at the altar rail. When receiving a communion wafer a whisper is heard, "Are you God?" They know whose bread they eat! Or a little boy stating after receiving communion, "Every time I go to the altar to eat the bread of Jesus, he just makes my heart go thump."

Not only do young children see their priest as God as they are offered the bread of heaven, they also experience their parents as God, giving them the gift of life. Sometimes this is acknowledged openly, most often it remains an interior knowledge. It acts itself out for acceptance, approval and affirmation. The response that children receive in this quest will affect the way they view themselves, their self-image, for years to come. Few of us have grown into adulthood without having that image tarnished or twisted. We, in fact, are seeking from our parents a blessing, one that is ultimately God's alone to give. But we all need a tangible expression of this reality.

In a book appropriately called *The Blessing*, authors Smally and Trent (clinical psychologists) detail the fine elements of what they call the biblical blessing, expressed through Scripture beginning with the patriarchs. These elements called a blessing are:

1. Meaningful touch
2. The spoken word
3. The expression of high value
4. The description of a special future
5. The application of a genuine commitment

Each of these elements - touch, word, value, future, commitment or covenant are present at the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan and are present in our own sacrament of baptism. We need search no further, we are home at last. We are blessed by the one who tells us, "You are my child, with you I am well pleased!"

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