

CHILDREN ARE A SPECIAL GIFT TO THE CHURCH

Pope John Paul II

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We cannot overlook the role of children in the Church, but must speak of them with great affection. They are heaven's smile entrusted to earth. They are the true gems of the family and society and the Church's delight. They are like the "lilies of the field," of which Jesus said that "not even Solomon in all his splendor was arrayed like one of these" (Mt 6:28-29). They are Jesus' favorites, and the Church, the Pope, cannot fail to hear beating in their own heart the feelings of love for them in Christ's heart.

To tell the truth, we already find in the Old Testament signs of special concern for children. The First Book of Samuel (1-3) describes the call of a child to whom God entrusted a message and mission for his people. Children participate in the worship and prayers of the assembly of the people. As we read in the prophet Joel (2:16): "Gather the children and the infants at the breast." In the Book of Judith (4:10f.) we find the penitential prayer raised by all "with their wives and children." At the Exodus God already showed a special love for orphans, who are under his protection (Ex 22:21f.; cf. Ps 68:6).

In Psalm 131 a child is the image of abandonment to God's love: "I have stilled and quieted my soul like a weaned child. Like a weaned child on its mother's lap, so is my soul within me" (v. 2).

It is significant that later in salvation history the powerful voice of the prophet Isaiah (7:14f.; 9:1-6) announced the fulfillment of messianic hope in the birth of Emmanuel, a child destined to reestablish the kingdom of David.

Here the Gospel tells us that the child born of Mary is the foretold Emmanuel (cf. Mt 1:22-23; Is 7:14). This child was then consecrated to God during the presentation in the temple (cf. Lk 2:22), blessed by the prophet Simeon (cf. Lk 2:28-35) and welcomed by the prophetess Anna, who praised God and "talked about the child to all who looked forward to the deliverance of Jerusalem" (Lk 2:38).

In his public life Jesus showed great love for children. The evangelist Mark attests: "He embraced them and blessed them, placing his hands on them" (10:16). It was a "tender and generous love" (CL 47) by which he attracted children and their parents, about whom we read: "They were bringing their little children to him to have him touch them" (Mk 10:13). In *Christifideles Laici*, I recalled that the little ones "are the eloquent symbol and splendid image of those moral and spiritual conditions that are essential for entering the kingdom of God and for living the logic of total confidence in the Lord" (n. 47). These conditions are simplicity, sincerity and receptive humility.

The disciples were called to become like children. The "little ones" accepted revelation as a gift of the Father's gracious will (cf. Mt 11:25f.). For this reason too children should be welcomed like Jesus himself: "Whoever welcomes one such child for my sake welcomes me" (Mt 18:5).

For his part Jesus professed deep respect for children, and warned: "See that you never despise one of these little ones. I assure you, their angels in heaven constantly behold my heavenly Father's face" (Mt 18:10). When the children shouted "Hosanna to the Son of David," Jesus appreciated and justified their attitude as praise given to God (cf. Mt 21:15-16). Their homage contrasted with his enemies' disbelief.

Jesus' love and esteem for children are a light for the Church, which imitates her Founder. She cannot fail to welcome children as he did. It should be noted that this welcome can already be seen in the Baptism administered to children, even if they are infants. By this sacrament they become members of the Church. From the beginning of their human development, Baptism fosters their growth in the life of grace. The Holy Spirit's influence gives direction to their first inner inclinations, even if they are not capable yet of making an act of faith. They will do so later as a confirmation of that early influence.

Here we see the importance of infant Baptism, which frees them from original sin, makes them children of God in Christ and gives them a share in the Christian community's life of grace.

The presence of children in the Church is also a gift for us adults. It makes us better understand that the Christian life is first and foremost a gratuitous gift of divine sovereignty: "Children are a continual reminder that the missionary fruitfulness of the Church has its life-giving basis not in human means and merits, but in the absolute gratuitous gift of God" (CL 47).

Children are an example of innocence, which discloses the simplicity of holiness. They live a holiness appropriate to their age and thus contribute to building the Church.

Unfortunately, there are many children who suffer: the physical sufferings of hunger, want, disease or illness; moral sufferings resulting from mistreatment by their parents, from their discord, from the exploitation to which the cynical selfishness of adults sometimes subjects them. How can our hearts not be moved by certain situations of unspeakable pain involving defenseless creatures guilty of nothing other than being alive? How can we not protest on their behalf, lending our voices to those who cannot make their own interests known? The only comfort in this great wretchedness is the word of faith, which assures us that God's grace transforms these sufferings into an opportunity for mysterious union with the sacrifice of the innocent Lamb. They contribute to enhancing the value of these children's lives and to the spiritual progress of humanity (cf. CL 47).

The Church feels zealously committed to promoting the Christian formation of children, something that is frequently inadequate. It is a question of forming them in the faith by teaching Christian doctrine, in charity toward all, in prayer according to the most beautiful traditions of the Christian family, which for many of us are unforgettable and ever blessed!

From the psychological and pedagogical standpoint, we know that a child easily and willingly begins to pray when encouraged to do so, as the experience of so many parents, educators, catechists and friends shows. The responsibility of the family and the school for these matters should be pointed out continually.

The Church urges parents and educators to see that their little ones are formed in the sacramental life, especially in using the sacrament of forgiveness and in participating in the Eucharistic celebration. She advises all her pastors and those who work with them to make a serious effort to adapt to children's abilities. As far as possible, especially when religious celebrations are planned exclusively for children, the adaptations provided for by the liturgical norms are advisable. If wisely used, they can have a very significant effect.

In this catechesis devoted to the "apostolate of the laity," it is natural for me to close with an incisive expression of my predecessor, St. Pius X. In explaining why he lowered the age for First Communion, he

said: "There will be saints among the children." And indeed, there have been saints. But today we can add: "There will be apostles among the children."

Let us pray that this prediction, this wish, will be increasingly fulfilled, as was Pius X's.