

Incarnation and a Theology of Childhood

This year's Christmas challenges us to look and learn something new from the real-life experiences of children



In much of the Western world, the sacred rituals of the Nativity of Jesus, the Christ, have been overtaken by secularization and commercialization.

Christmas has become a [festival](#) about Santa Claus and gifts or sentimental stories about families coming home. It has become completely disconnected from the wondrous spiritual and theological mystery of the Incarnation.

God so loves us that He sends his Son Jesus to take on our fragility, vulnerability and dependence in becoming embodied and en-fleshed Jesus *"emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human*

likeness" (Philippians 2, 6).

A visceral experience of vulnerability

The Incarnation makes all flesh holy: glowing young flesh, sagging old flesh, bruised and bleeding flesh, and flesh of every color and hue.

Sermons through Advent and the Christmas season predictably lament the secularization and call for "keeping Christ in Christmas".

Celebrating the Nativity in the shadow of COVID-19 provides a deep and visceral experience of this vulnerability.

There has been an increase in physical and sexual violence to children in isolation and quarantine. The ravaging effects of poverty, war and social exclusion on their health and development have been made tragically clear.

Churches and other places of essential spiritual support were closed. The role of the family as the "domestic Church" handing on the faith in times of suffering and trial became crucial.

Every crèche and crib celebrate the sign of the all-powerful God's infinite love in a helpless infant born in poverty, political oppression and social exclusion.

"She gave birth to a son, her firstborn. She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger because there was no room at the inn" (Luke 2, 7).

We are given an opportunity to ponder with Mary this wondrous event and its meaning for our own vulnerability.

Jesus and children

Jesus demonstrates a special care for and profoundly counter-cultural approach to children. The disciples try to keep children away so that the

'really important people' can meet Jesus. He rebukes them and teaches that "*the Kingdom of God belongs to them*" (Mark 10, 13-16).

At the miracle of the feeding of hundreds, Jesus seeks the help of a small boy who provides the first loaves and fishes (John 6, 9-10).

When asked by the disciples "*who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?*" Jesus places a child in their midst and says, "*I tell you solemnly, unless you change and become like little children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven*" (Matthew 18, 1-6).

He shifts dramatically the focus from the powerful and privileged to little ones.

I bless you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for hiding these things from the learned and clever and revealing them to mere children (Matthew 11, 25)

He was acutely aware of their profound vulnerability in their dependence, but also their openness and trust in the goodness of others. In a stark challenge he states:

Whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it (Mark 10, 15)

A theology of childhood

In stunning contradiction to Jesus' countercultural care and concern for children, the Church has adopted Greco-Roman patriarchal understandings of children as property, totally under the father's authority.

Until recently, there has been little attention given to the theology of childhood, based in Scripture.

The late Jesuit theologian, Karl Rahner, published an essay in 1971 called, "Ideas for a Theology of Childhood."

He explored both what can be learned from Scripture and theology about

the meaning of childhood and what can the experience of childhood can teach us about God and the Church.

These were his key insights:

- There is a unique value of childhood from its beginnings, not just as a waiting time for completion as an adult.
- All are caught up in grace and sin, but it is God's will to save all, even the weakest.
- Children learn sharing, trust and the moral primarily from relationships and interactions, not from rules.
- Childhood is a mystery of growth and development in openness to God with whom "nothing is impossible".
- Adults can learn they too are children of God.

As a religious sister whose ministry has been in pediatrics caring for abused, seriously ill and dying children, I have been amazed at the wisdom and spiritual insights of children.

I marvel at intense alertness in the first hours and days of life which establishes maternal-infant bonding and the relational notion of care, trust and morality.

I was humbled when I witnessed Tammy, an eight-year-old with chronic renal failure and a second failing transplant, comforting a newly admitted five-year-old who was being investigated for renal failure.

Tammy had her arm around the crying girl saying, "Now, don't you worry. I have been through all this and will help you through it."

I have been astounded at the courage of Bob, a beautiful and talented twelve-year-old who was my own patient. He had leukemia and had failed two courses of chemotherapy.

He was clearly dying, but his parents could not accept it and were exploring un-proven treatment out of the country. One bad morning he asked me to tell his parents that he was ready to die, but he wanted to go home for one more fishing trip with Dad.

The development of a theology of childhood is finally being taken up by theologians, sociologists, psychologists and educators.

We are also challenged not to succumb to the idolatry of children, particularly in the affluent nations of the world and to support the family as the incubator for morality and justice.

A COVID Christmas challenge indeed!

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