

3 Unexpected virtues to learn from children



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[*Fr. Patrick Briscoe, OP*](#) - published on 10/03/21

To follow Christ, we have to constantly be ready to leave behind the way we see the world ...

“Let the children come to me; do not prevent them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Amen, I say to you, whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it.”

Mark 10:14-15

We teased our beloved Dominican friar philosophy professor endlessly in seminary. Jostling him as he trudged up the stairs or offering witty responses to his “cold-calling” in class, we loved him. And he loved us. With a twinkle in his eye, he would reprimand us saying, “The Gospel says be child-like, not childish!”

Mystery

It's a critical distinction between child-like and childish. Many interpreters have offered suggestions to illuminate the meaning of Our Lord's teaching to be like little children. We have only to consider the legend of St. Augustine's [sea-side meeting with a child](#) for one example. The child told the confused theologian that it would be easier to empty the sea with a shell than to penetrate the entire mystery of the Trinity.

Children appreciate mystery. Despite their often inquisitive nature (any of us can think of a toddler's incessant questions: why?), children are more comfortable with mystery. A child can accept that there are some questions that go unanswered. Consider how they delight in magic and fairy stories. It's not because children are trying to escape reality, it's because children can more easily be led beyond the things of this world.

Their comfort vis-a-vis mystery is a comfort with the transcendent. They want to rise, to stretch, to fly ... they want to be above, not caught in the mire, not trapped. As adults, we often get stuck in ruts, in patterns of seeing things the same way, from the perspective of below. Saints are saintly because they have the spirit of children who delight in mystery, who relentlessly pursue the transcendent.

Clarity

Children also see things clearly. In [fairy tales](#) characters are often "good" or "bad." Children very often either like things or they dislike them. Their experiences are either "awesome" or "terrible."

Contrast this black and white view with that of adults. In the moral life, it's very tempting for adults to create large swaths of grey area. Places where we can rest at ease with ourselves and how we're living. We have become very practiced at spinning complex webs of self-justification, when often, it would really be better in the long run for us to accept that certain things are good and others are bad.

There is no situation in the moral life that does not have the possibility of God's grace entering in and fundamentally, radically changing the course of life. When confronted with difficult ethical situations, whether in family life or the workplace, we have to have confidence that God is at work in our lives. That there's a path to holiness being proposed. That Our Lord is always calling us to conversion. Our contemporary world offers many chances for us to fall prey to relativism or scepticism. And yet the great saints, time and time again, show us that it's possible to know right from wrong and to live it.

[New things](#)

Finally, even if some are sometimes cautious, children often delight in new experiences, in new adventures, in trying new things. Children don't see the world in the same categories as adults. I often think of a passage in [Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's The Little Prince](#) where he makes this point. He writes,

Grown-ups are very fond of numbers. When you tell them about a new friend, they never ask you the kind of questions that should be asked, such as: "What kind of voice does he have?" "What are his favourite games?" "Does he collect butterflies?" Instead they ask: "How old is he? How much money does his father earn?" They really do imagine this is the best way to discover what sort of person he is!

As adults we have our set modes of assessment. We measure things in categories that are comfortable and often, as The Little Prince points out, quantifiable. Discipleship defies this way of life, however. To follow Christ, we have to constantly be ready to leave behind the way we see the world and adopt Christ's categories for life.

[Become like little children](#)

Pope Benedict XVI assures us, "If you follow the will of God, you know that in spite of all the terrible things that happen to you, you will never lose a final refuge. You know that the foundation of the world is love, so that even when no human being can or will help

you, you may go on, trusting in the One that loves you.” Perhaps that is the greatest virtue of a child: trust.

To become like little children, then, we need not cast caution to the wind or adopt every chaotic behavior of a toddler. But we should think seriously about these great virtues of children: their comfort with mystery, their clarity, and their love of new things.