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Introduction

This is what the prophet Isaiah said to the people of Israel:

“A child will be born in the family of Jesse.
This child will be filled with the Spirit of God,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of strength and truth,
the spirit of knowledge and love of God.
The one who is coming will not judge
by what others say or by what people look like
but will judge the poor with justice and fairness.
Then the wolf will live with the lamb.
The leopard and the goat will eat together.
The bear and the lion will be at peace,
and a little child will lead them all.
This child will be a sign for all the world.
Then no one will hurt others anymore
because everyone will know God.”

(*Isaiah* 11:1-10)

Christians believe that the child of whom Isaiah speaks in this colorful image of God’s Kingdom is Jesus. The description, however, also complements the life story of Moses, who, plucked from the river bushes, grew up to lead Israel to freedom from slavery in Egypt. In either case, is it mere coincidence that Isaiah should speak of one who liberates people as *a child* rather than as an adult?

Recall, too—as overly familiar as it may seem to us—what Jesus himself said:

“Amen I say to you,
whoever does not receive
the kingdom of God like a child
shall not enter it.”

(*Mark 10:15*)

Reflect also on the answer Jesus gave when his disciples asked him, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”

“And calling to him a child,
he put the child in the midst of them, and said,
‘Truly, I say to you, unless you turn
and become like children,
you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.
Those who humble themselves like this child,
are the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.
Whoever receives one such child
in my name receives me;
but whoever causes one of these little ones
who believe in me to sin,
it would be better for that person
to have a great millstone
fastened around the neck and
to be drowned in the depth of the sea.’ ”

(*Matthew 18: 1- 6*)

Such biblical texts are strong evidence of the central role children play in the gospel of Jesus. Equally important, they reveal Jesus’ attitude toward the place of children in the community. Moreover, they offer insight into the quality and character of Jesus’ own spiritual life. When Jesus prayed, he declared: “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to children.” (*Matthew 11:25*).

Jesus recognized the spiritual life of children is uncluttered and close to God. For Jesus, the child—not the adult—is his primary model of spirituality.

So often—too often—we parents and parish leaders forget that children already enjoy a spiritual life—*not* without the influences of socialization but also not without its own mysterious and original power. Although well-intentioned, we approach children as if their souls were some kind of empty container, given by God for us to fill with the truths of faith and certain moral codes to guide their behavior. This is not to say that we have nothing to teach children. The point is: we sometimes get in our own way—and in God’s way. Jesus did *not* tell us to teach children to be like us; rather, Jesus told us adults that *it is we who have something to learn from children*.

In his book *The Children’s God* (University of Chicago Press, 1986), David Heller reported that, based on his research, religion teachers and parents often block unconventional or noninstitutional views of God and thereby discourage children from their own original beliefs and discovery. I have found his observation supported again and again by stories adults have told me about experiences in their early childhood that continue to affect the quality and character of their spiritual lives as adults.

One lady, for example, reported that when she was 3 or 4 years old, she returned home from church one Sunday after mass and excitedly ran to the kitchen to get juice and bread so that she could celebrate mass like the priest. Upon discovering what she was doing, her parents told her, apparently in no uncertain terms, that little girls could not and should not do that. Only men who were ordained priests could change bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ.

On another occasion, a man described the image that he, when still a very young child, held of his father: a large and mighty man, more powerful than anyone in the whole world. One night the child entered his father’s bedroom where he found his father kneeling in prayer. In this otherwise ordinary experience, the child felt a presence even more powerful than his father, the hidden but nonetheless real presence of God. The discovery still stirs

wonder and awe in this person's spiritual life.

What does any of this have to do, you might ask, with celebrating the Liturgy of the Word with children? I'm sure you can make any number of connections, not the least of which includes the child's capacity to read symbolic action and the impact of ritual-making on a child's spirituality.

Aside from these, I want to focus on still another related observation: *attitude—our attitude* toward children and how we perceive of their spiritual lives, their sense of God's action in their lives, and how we might nurture and be enriched ourselves by the life of the Spirit in children. When we can recognize and acknowledge, as Jesus did, the unique expression of God's presence in children, then we can celebrate the word in a way that is meaningful to them and respectful of their spirituality. By so doing, it is we who will discover the wisdom and understanding that God has already revealed to them: the kingdom of surprise and wonder, where lions and lambs are friends.

In the reign of God, children are not second-class citizens, to be seen and not heard. The kingdom, as Jesus said, belongs to them. They—and those who become like them—are the gatekeepers. This relationship between children and God should tell us something about the way we “teach” children to pray either in private or in public worship.

We “teach” our children to pray when we ourselves pray in such a way that they can pray with us. This does not mean children adapt to accommodate us. Rather, our prayer is guided by the spiritual relationship that children—and those who are like them—enjoy with God. So, too, we celebrate the Liturgy of the Word in such a way that children can celebrate with us. In other words, our celebration should reflect and be guided by the spiritual relationship children enjoy with God as keepers of the kingdom.

The question is: how well do our parish liturgies show respect for children and draw upon their grace—the life of

the Spirit in them—to nourish and guide the spiritual growth of the entire community? Our language gives us away when we speak, for example, of the Liturgy of the Word *for* children, as if it were something different *for* adults. It is important to remember when we celebrate the Liturgy of the Word with children, we serve not only the needs and rights of children to hear God’s word in language they can understand, we also serve the spiritual needs of the entire community.

If we humble ourselves enough to let the child, of whom Isaiah so eloquently spoke, *lead us*, then we just may be in for a wonderful surprise. We may find through our children what we thought they would find through us. It is in this spirit and with this attitude that we write *A CHILD SHALL LEAD THEM: A Guide to Celebrating the Word With Children*.

Congregations can celebrate the word with children in a variety of ways. *One* way is to invite the children to a celebration that is an extension of the main assembly’s celebration. This style of celebration is the focus of this book.

You might liken this style of celebrating the word with children to the way a growing family—or group of families—manages family gatherings. The adults often eat at one table with the little children who are still too young to feed themselves. As the family grows in number and the children grow in age, the children eat with their older brothers, sisters, cousins or friends at another table where they are served by adults and eat the same food as the adults, but enjoy their own conversations.

After a time, when they have grown still older, they return to the larger table where they become part of the gathering of adults and the new family additions—who are, by now, grandchildren. The growing children do not feel any less a part of the family as they move from one table to the next. On the contrary, the movement takes on a symbolic, ritual character that gives recognition to each child’s evolving place in the family. Often, as the meal progresses and the very little children have finished eating,

the older children rejoin the adults at the larger table, or become involved in games with each other and the adults.

Such gatherings of individual families or groups of families, with their attending customs and family menus and recipes, give children their identity—not only as a McCarthy or Schmidt or Wong or Cywinski or Rivers but also as *Kathleen* McCarthy or *Willie* Schmidt or *Zenia* Wong or *Donald* Cywinski or *Marie* Rivers. We do not become members of our families first by studying our family rituals and customs. Nor are we required to know certain things before we can participate. From the beginning, we simply do what everyone normally does when they gather.

The parish gathering, with its attending rituals, also gives us and our children identity with Christ's life. We learn that identity not so much by formal instruction but by gathering with the community, sharing in its rituals and living the community's life in Christ. That is why it is so important that we *not* turn liturgy into learning experiences but that we celebrate well together, listen to God's word, and respond with good works.

We need, therefore, to keep in mind that the Liturgy of the Word with children is not intended to be a learning experience—though it has its own formative influence on children. Rather, the Liturgy of the Word is the ritual celebration of God's own presence with us. *God's own presence*: what an awesome influence!

The Liturgy of the Word with children is more properly identified with worship rather than as another form or part of parish religious education or catechetical programs. Moreover, as an integral part of parish worship, recognizing the place of children in our liturgical celebrations is a parish priority. Without such recognition and respect, our sacramental preparation programs, catechetical instruction, and religious education efforts—whether lectionary-based or otherwise—are like so many dinghies adrift at sea with neither mother ship nor harbor in sight—and, little hope for homecoming.

As you read the chapters of this book, you will find

these two points of view or attitudes apparent throughout. First, that *our children already enjoy a spiritual life that is the model for all who wish to enter God's kingdom*. Second, that *the Liturgy of the Word with children is worship—the ritual celebration of God's presence in the word*.

We want also to emphasize a third point: simplicity. We risk communicating the notion that celebrating the word with children is complicated when we spend so much verbiage on the significance of inviting the children to celebrate, the way we handle the book, listening to what the children have heard God say to them, incorporating music, creating a setting conducive to prayer, and all the liturgical refinements. Celebrating the word is not complicated. It is very simple. Moreover, it is in their simplicity that our ritual gestures, proclamation of the word, music-making and environmental effects succeed in awakening a profound sense of God's presence in our humble gatherings.

Simply put: it is the Spirit alive in the children, our love for one another, and our belief in God's presence in the word upon which everything else depends. We hope the discussion questions at the end of each chapter will serve you well in developing a parish team whose style of celebrating the word with children achieves a graceful simplicity characteristic of Jesus' own spirituality.

The ideas and suggestions that you will find here come not only from the authors, but from the experience of parishes throughout the country.

Sister Paule Freeburg has celebrated the word with children in a variety of parishes and parochial schools. She will be the first to admit that her sense of God's presence in the word reawakens each time she gathers with children and listens to what they have heard God say to them. These children share in her contribution to this book, specifically in chapters 8, 9, and 12. Sister Paule, of course, also brings her scholarly and personal love of the scriptures, as the primary author of the adaptation of the scriptures for children in the *SUNDAY Lectionary*.

Joyce Kelleher has 17 years' experience as a volunteer catechist and five as a parish director of religious education. She is currently the Director, Office of Initiation and Spiritual Formation, for the Diocese of Greensburg, Pennsylvania. She is one of the leaders in the development of the catechumenate and in recognizing the formative influence of ritual in Christian initiation. Her contribution to this book reflects that experience and vision, particularly in chapters 2, 3, 4, and 6.

Finally, as general editor and co-author, I have to acknowledge that, although I have been involved for over 30 years in the liturgical and catechetical movements, my focus during the last few years on celebrating the word with children and my involvement as publisher of *SUNDAY*, grows out of my friendship of almost 30 years and professional association with Christiane Brusselmans. Those who know Christiane through her workshops, publications, or proddings, should know that this book, too, is not without her influence. That is why we dedicate it to her memory on this first anniversary of her death.

Gerard A. Pottebaum
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