

The Spirituality of Our Children: Today's Prayers, Tomorrow's Prophets

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Often when the topic of spirituality surfaces, people presume we are talking about adults. We don't often talk about children and spirituality. I think we can. I think we need to.

What is spirituality? I find some definitions too limiting; others so wordy that we forget where we started when we finally reach the end. I once heard the definition: Spirituality is what we do because of what we believe. This definition touches upon our beliefs as well as our actions. It calls us to much responsibility and challenge.

Why do we need to talk about children and spirituality? Today's adults are searching for the spirituality of their lives. Perhaps this is today's reality because it wasn't a part of their youth. If that is true, we need to change that for the next generation. The exploration and integration of spirituality has to begin during the young years so that they might build upon it, not begin it as adults.

Secondly, the definition above makes it clear that we have to do something with what we believe. Therefore, our role as teachers is much more than just passing on knowledge. Content is very important, but we can't believe that if we just provide content, all else will follow. Faith formation is not primarily an educational enterprise. Formation and transformation are the goal, not just information.

We need to engage the whole person because our goal is to lead children, not to a body of knowledge, but to a way of life, a spirituality centered in discipleship. We have to give youth something to believe, but we can't leave it there. Today's world requires people of faith, not just people of belief; people who are on a deepened search for God in their lives, not people who are content with where they are at the moment.

We have to—immediately and always—connect our beliefs with life. There are always two parts to the Christian message: what we believe and what we do because we believe. We can never preach that God loves us without adding that we also are called to love one another. We can never teach that God forgives us without adding “as we forgive those...”

Every bit and piece of our story (what we believe) has a vision (what we do) which together makes up our spirituality. The vision can never be lost. The corollary of everything that we believe has a “so what,” an implication, a judgment, a critique, a consolation, an invitation.

A third reason to concentrate upon the spirituality of children is that children are innately spiritual. Children responded to Jesus; Jesus valued children. His apostles considered children too small, too inexperienced, too ignorant, too unimportant to belong to the Kingdom of God.

Jesus' attitude was different. During Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, it was the children who recognized him shouting "Hosanna to the Son of David."

Jesus understood children as ends and not means: "Then he took a child, set him in front of them, saying "Whoever receives one of these children in my name, receives me."

Jesus used childhood to define the entrance requirement for the kingdom: "Whoever does not accept the Kingdom of God like a child will never enter it." Jesus also thanked God for revealing to children what was hidden from learned and wise adults.

We know children are innately spiritual because:

1. Children are capable of the beginnings of faith. Faith experience is prior to cognitive understanding. Children's faith is not adult faith. It shouldn't be; we were created as human beings for continual growth. So, naturally, faith should grow and deepen. But just because faith isn't at the level of adult faith, doesn't mean that it hasn't begun. Intellectual understanding need not precede the beginnings of faith. Just as religion is danced before it is believed, it is experienced before it is explained. We hear God speak before we can express what God says.
2. Children are mystics. Children have the openness and wonder to see God everywhere. They are not dualistic; they do not put God in a box and only allow God to touch one part of life.
3. Children are naturally attracted to God. In *The Original Vision: A Study of the Religious Experience of Childhood*, Edward Robinson recalls a survey in which adults were asked if they "felt that their lives had in any way been affected by some power beyond themselves," to write an account of the experience. No mention was made of childhood. Yet, more than 15% related events and experiences from their early years. "As far back as I can remember I have never had a sense of separation from the spiritual force I now call God" was typical of many of the responses.
4. Children have all the characteristics that Jesus called for when he said what was necessary to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. (There is a beautiful greeting card which says, "God loves people who don't know how to be anyone but themselves... that's why He made children ... and that's why he leaves a little child in each of us.")

Some of the characteristics which are at the heart of all spirituality are:

- ◇ Simplicity. Adults seem to have a knack for complicating things. Children, in their simplicity, go to the heart of things.
- ◇ Trust. Once when I asked my niece what she wanted for her birthday, her immediate reply was, "If I tell you, it won't be a surprise." That response showed complete trust that I would choose the right thing.

- ✧ Wonder. One of the advantages of childhood over the other ages of life is that children see and experience things for the first time. Such wonder and awe is the basis of our relationship with our Creator and the background for prayer.
- ✧ An uncanny way of being open to new suggestions and new ideas. Jesus calls us to be open to the new rather than hanging on tenaciously to our seven last words: We've never done it that way before.
- ✧ Concern for others. At times their self-centeredness is certainly evident. But how can we forget their basic love and giving which prompts a small child to offer his/her bottle or food to you to taste or a youngster who brings home picked dandelions for his mother. Once (in a religious education program in which I worked) a kindergartner decided she wanted to be moved to another religious education class. For several reasons, we consented and said that we would make the switch the following week. However, the lesson for that week centered around the theme, "I'm needed." During the session, another child, Joey, was sad and spoke of his sadness because of a home situation. At the end of class, Sara came to the teacher and said, "I changed my mind. I don't want to move to another class. Joey needs me."

What kind of spirituality are we talking about? Let's look at four elements which are crucial for today's world and are conducive to children's development.

1. A mystical spirituality

Karl Rahner said, "The Christian of the future will be a mystic or he will not exist at all." A mystic is simply someone who experiences God. (We have been led to believe that only a few people are mystics.) Carl Jung was asked in an interview, "Do you believe in God?" His immediate answer was, "No. I know God."

Much of our religious education helps children (and adults) know about God. I think that most people do experience God, but they do not always have the vocabulary to talk about it and/or are not comfortable sharing faith experiences.

Our past spirituality can be summed up in *The Morning Offering*. The prayer attempted to put God into all of life. Our approach to spirituality today has a different emphasis: God is already in all of life. We need to become more aware of the Presence of God that is already present and experience it to the fullest.

2. A communal spirituality

The core of our spirituality needs to be an awareness and living of the reality that it's not just between me and God; if I'm connected to God, I am intimately connected to all in God's family.

The surprising thing about Jesus is that he calls us as a community; we do not go to God alone. Religion, church, prayer, spirituality cannot be an escape from people. A visit to the Blessed Sacrament is pure fantasy if it is in lieu of healing interpersonal relationships. A youngster

disagreed with her teacher that God always forgives. Her explanation: “It wouldn’t be fair. If my brother beats up on me and then can go to his room and tell God he’s sorry, and if God says, ‘That’s fine. You’re forgiven,’ that’s not fair to me.” She continued: “If I were God, I would tell him, ‘Go and tell your sister that you’re sorry, and then I’ll forgive you.’” She had a deep grasp of the community aspect of our faith.

Since Vatican II we have done a good job of forming the individual, of respecting the freedom of the individual, but we still have more work to do in forming the mentality of the Christian community. Who are we together? What can we be and do together? The challenges confronting Gospel values today (e.g.: racism, ecology, peace and justice issues, violence, sexism, etc.) are so monumental they can only be approached by a community.

3. A holistic spirituality

Spirituality touches all aspects of life. Nothing that is human, nothing that is created, can be left out of our spirituality. The outstanding characteristic of our Catholic identity is that of sacramentality where all life is seen as holy. God can be experienced everywhere. There is no division between the sacred and the secular; they have become homogenized. Robert Fulghum, in *All I Really Need to Know I learned in Kindergarten*, has the learning take place in the sand pile in Sunday school. The sand pile belongs in Sunday school, not just in school.

A worker at a Church drop-in center told the following story: “One day a woman came in and upon being told that we had the Blessed Sacrament in our chapel, knelt down to pray. After fifteen minutes, one of the sisters came in carrying a host in a little leather case, put it in the tabernacle and left.

The woman then came to me a bit huffily and inquired, “Was the tabernacle empty when I was in there praying?” “I guess so,” I said. “I think Sister Grace just replaced the host.”

The woman glanced at her watch irritably. “Huh. And to think of the time I wasted there, praying!”

The story is an example of a very limited spirituality, rather than a holistic spirituality which celebrates God’s Presence with us in countless ways.

4. A joyful spirituality

There are tremendous sufferings and injustices in our world. Our spirituality cannot ignore them, but our attitude needs to be one of wonder, awe, and joyfulness at all that we have been given. St. Theresa danced with her sisters. David leaped and sang before the ark of the Lord. There is a rabbinic saying that persons will have to give an account on judgment day of every good thing which they might have enjoyed and did not.

What can we do to nurture children’s spirituality; to help our children become today’s pray-ers and tomorrow’s prophets? All that we do and surround our children with impacts their spirituality. Let us look at a few realities of importance for teachers.

1. **Example and witness of the teacher.** Books don't teach people. People teach people. Pope Paul VI said, "Today people don't listen to teachers. They listen to witnesses. If they listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses." Children are imitators. The most influential ingredient for children's faith life is to be surrounded by people whose faith is alive and active.
2. **Cultivate wonder.** It has been remarked that one of the negative points of modern education is that it is losing more and more the sense of surprise and that we are no longer amazed by anything. Today's culture has an unfathomable amount of knowledge at its disposal. We can explain many things by theories and formulas: rainbows, human bodies, space, etc. Yet, ultimately wonder does not depend on how much knowledge we have, but on one's attitude toward life.

Wonder helps us to always go more deeply into reality. If we live life on the surface or skim over things we will never be surprised by them. What can we do as teachers?

- Vary the your activities and timing so that the children are always interested and eager for new approaches.
 - Spend time. Don't be so concerned about getting everything in, so that you jump from one thing to another so quickly that there is no time for appreciation, wonder, delight, reflection.
 - Listen. Wonder develops in an atmosphere where listening is possible. Provide an environment where listening is easy. Cut down on noises. Develop a respect for the person who is speaking.
 - Respect the sanctity of things: Scripture, people, your meeting place, special times of the year.
 - Celebrate the little things that often go unnoticed. Take your cue from the book, *The Geranium on the Windowsill just Died but Teacher Went Right On*. Don't be so busy that the important things in a child's life are ignored.
 - Pray about the concerns of the children. If it is important to the child, it is a subject for their prayer.
 - Reverently use the symbols and gestures of our heritage: candles, holy water, blessings, etc.
3. **Acknowledge that God has called us to be co-creators.** One of the implications of this is that we are called to use all of our abilities. Our educational system and our catechetical endeavors are often verbal and "head-y." As children grow into adults and try to understand, we substitute thought for feeling. In doing so, we lose much. The intellect may inform, but it is the imagination that comforts. Our catechetical methods need to include right-brained techniques; we need to tap into the imagination, pay attention to our feelings, and utilize the arts.

It has been said that we cannot do what we cannot imagine. On many levels today, our society seems bereft of imagination. This gift, so prolific in very young children, often seems to meet a swift death when formal education takes over.

Why is it that so many men and women cannot imagine a God who is both male and female? Why is it so hard to imagine that we might one day have a peaceful world without continuing to build weapons of destruction? Unable to reimagine either the divine or the worldly, we continue to pursue paths which thwart such dreams from becoming realities. Imagination is a gift we have to bring, if we will but foster it. Imagination means we believe in the possibility of change. Change is conversion; is that not what Jesus has called us to?

Can we help our young people imagine alternative futures among which to choose their preferred option, and to set out on a course to achieve it? Can we introduce creative and unexpected responses to the same old problems? If we can, perhaps our young people will grow to maturity knowing that they do have choices, that they can imagine and achieve more creative and life-giving solutions to the dilemmas that concern us all. Our failure to cultivate imagination can only doom us to go on repeating the past, accepting the same injustices, refusing to risk our comfort for discomfort.

The arts, our feelings, our imagination can make real our experience of wonder, mystery and awe. They put us in touch with the holy, the sacred, the God who created us and calls us to be co-creators.

Picture these faith formation settings:

- Each person has a lump of clay. They are modeling something that they fear. They name what they have modeled. They then reshape the clay into something that is a symbol of hope for them.
 - The children are reverently involved in a meditation prayer where they become a part of the Gospel story of Jesus calming the storm.
 - Youth are creating gestures or a dance which illustrates their feelings and understandings of Mary's Magnificat.
 - Children are invited to dream of Jesus: "Make him any age you want. Place him in today's world. Where would he be? What would he be doing? Who would his friends be?"
4. **Cultivate Questions.** Albert, in *The Color Purple*, says: "You know how it is. You ask yourself one question, it lead to fifteen. ... I think us here to wonder, to ask. And that in wondering about the big things and asking about the big things, you learn about the little ones, almost by accident. But you never know nothing more about the big things that you start out with. The more I wonder the more I love." Asking questions is crucial.
- Listen to their questions. "Why aren't all people good?" "Why does God let people die?" "Why does God allow children to be homeless?" Jesus encouraged the questions of the two disciples. So they said, "Are you the only one that does not know what happened to Jesus?" And Jesus replied to them, "Tell me about it."

Some teachers are so used to asking all the questions that they forget the simple fact that children have questions, too. Karl Barth once said, "God does not wait around to hear the questions of humans." Paul Tillich replied, "I know, my dear Karl, but neither do people go in search of answers to questions that are not on their minds."

- Ask questions. When we show interest in their questions, they will be open to hear our questions. Questions keep alive the childlike sense of wonder. In turn, wonder opens up the student to growth in faith. Good questions focus attention on the real interest of people and pull their religious concerns to the front of their minds: questions dealing with the issues of today: racism, violence, capital punishment, assisted suicide, sexism, abortion, etc.

The question of the day is “What would Jesus do?” Talk about it and then take them beyond that: “Well, since Jesus isn’t here and you are, what do you think you could do?”

5. Lead them to a spirituality of activism as well as quiet prayer and reflection. Any lesson is never over until it spills over into service and outreach to those in need. Connect them with others, all kinds of others. We are one family; we need to live that in all that we do. It’s not always easy; our world tells children something very different.
6. Always take them back to their roots. Scripture is where we are rooted. Do they feel comfortable with reading -- and really reflecting on -- Scripture. When using a Scriptural passage, don’t stop at simple recall of the passage: who did what? Always pose the questions: “What do you think Jesus wanted you to hear today? What does he want you to do about it?”
7. Pray! One of the most pervasive teachers of faith/spirituality is prayer ...at all ages of life. A few things to remember as we lead young people in prayer:
 - Our role is to teach prayer, not just prayers. Prayer is an attitude, an awareness of God, a taking time for God that can happen in many ways. Children are naturally attracted to God; we need to foster that. Give them the example; let them know how simple it is; give them time and space for prayer.
 - Spirituality is reflective of one’s personality. We are all different. Therefore, each person’s prayer is unique and different. In helping children to grow in prayer, then, we need to model various ways of prayer. There is no one way. For them to be able to choose and enjoy the type of prayer that appeals to them, that connects them with God, they need to have experienced various types of prayer.
 - Respect children’s (and youth) prayer. They usually pray differently than adults. If we tell them exactly how to pray, rather than bring out the prayer that is inside of them, we risk extinguishing the spontaneous expression of their relationship with God. We need to walk delicately and find the balance of allowing them to pray for what is important in their lives while also challenging them to always go beyond their own needs.
 - Encourage the prayer of thanksgiving. This is who we are: a Eucharistic people, a people of thanksgiving. This prayerful attitude of gratitude bears fruit in all areas of our lives: it develops a positive outlook; it reduces judgmental thoughts and actions; it doesn’t allow

us to take people (and things) for granted; we can't be thanks-givers without automatically also being givers.

- Always make room for silence. Not just for the sake of quiet, but for openness, for receptivity, for awareness of God in our lives. Help children to focus during silence: think of how you love God; can you feel God's peace around you? Talk with God about the best thing that happened to you yesterday; listen to God's words of guidance for you today.

A pastor asked a small boy, "Can you tell who made you?" After thinking for a moment, the young child replied, "God made part of me." Startled, the pastor quickly said, "What do you mean, 'part of you?'" "Well," the young boy answered, "God made me little. I grew the rest myself."

What an awesome gift we have: to be one of God's instruments to help children and young people grow as people of prayer and prophets who will influence the world and the building of the Kingdom of God.