

# Suffer the Little Children

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There is no mere mischievous intent in using for title part of the New Testament words about children, as amusingly translated; but a wish to deal helpfully, let's hope amusingly, and insist un-mischievously, with the problem of bringing children to their religion.

We must be aware of prickling, hindering difficulties at once. A priest without any of the responsibilities and therefore any idea of the responsibilities of day-to-day handling of children isn't on first view the one qualified to write about it. Any excursions of his among them in family or school are, he must remember, always special occasions, often prepared-for events, with an excitement and a response at least different from normal. He will, however, be aware, if only dimly, of what underlies the orderliness and respectful attention he meets; the discipline (or threat of force, to you) that may keep family or school from bedlam, but certainly can make nonsense of what might be said, in mere sentiment and simplicity, about religion, as anything else. If we put such realities behind our backs, we shall of course appear blind and perverse, and what we say sheer nonsense; as the majority of our children decide, for us, by what we call 'lapsing'. It is, I suggest, more than a specifically religious problem. Teachers will tell (and they should, more often; where it will have effect) of the forced competitiveness in practice of today's world jarring with the false idealisms in purpose of today's school. Lapsing from religion, terrible though it is, is not so striking and disquieting in its immediate effects, as the resultant lapsing from civilisation.<sup>1</sup>

Yet a priest must have something to say about it all, if only that he does have to deal with the people, all the people, involved. As well he is often given a remote, but still real managerial responsibility to discharge. My own qualifications for speaking are five years' sole responsibility for seven schools with over two thousand children, including slightly nightmarish months when it seemed another parish had to be incorporated, bringing those totals to eleven, and four thousand

<sup>1</sup>Readers who may be so fortunate as not to be able to imagine what I am talking about could read or recall what is represented in the disturbing new crop of writers, the Golding-Sillitoe-Braines of our time.

respectively. (I said 'sole': on such a scale we just couldn't *bother* with committees.) I had some unspecified supervision, too, of 'about a hundred' teachers involved, who were doing their best, I had to hope—some of them. I am thankful, for it made me see the truth, I think, as I looked at the eternal destiny in each thousand mischievous pairs of eyes and grinning mouths, under the woolly West Indian crop; as previously under the dusty mops of English hair; and learned, in time, to grin back. I mean that it taught me this: the child is responsible for itself.

We help, or hinder, all the rest of us; no more. The child is a free spirit, another mystery of creation, a sum of possibilities and centre for grace, however it appears to us, in smallness or inefficiency. An 'I' looks out, at whatever height from the floor, as total and irreducible as my own; only as few years back on the road to everlasting life or death as inches in height; quite able, and very likely, to frame and place me in its scheme of things as I am, writing about it here. New approaches, solutions, or school improvements, however commendable or desirable, are gimmicks that must not endanger our perception of this fact.

But an almost determining influence on the child comes from the parents. It grows up in their world, talking their language, sharing very much of their outlook and feelings, for many years doing—largely—what they command or allow. There must also be influences that we can't specify; a curious example corroborated by experiences of mine is of either partner 'missing a vocation', for whatever reason and however kept secret: only to find 'it' turning up 'again' in one of the children.

A priest, I don't like to say anything about parents and children. The commitment is so different and so total on both sides; as the Church has recognised, making the religious counsel of chastity binding on those men and women who make public profession of religion, and requiring a like celibacy on those who offer for her pastoral ministry; thus from priest and religious to parent there is a gulf. All I will say though quite prepared to be argued or laughed out of court by parents who just know the facts by living with them, is a reminder of the grim words about scandal and the bottom of the sea; recalling that giving scandal needn't involve dramatic and highly-coloured incident like smuggling or arson, but could mean mere lukewarmness, dull complacency, or sheer culpable ignorance and lack of interest and judgment in matters of the soul. I suggest, respectfully, that parents be ready to try to pull themselves up sharply on the dreadfully imperceptible slope;

even to say to the children if they can understand it, 'I'm sorry, we were gossiping there; we shouldn't'; or, 'Forgive me, I lost my temper with you', or 'I should have made that clear to you before'; anything, and everything, to show the real depths and heights of Christian living. There will follow a rewarding bond of deep respect and sympathy, *if all this is genuine*, not acted spurts of oppressive dominance or still more stifling love-plays: the reasons, so often, for children being defiantly opposite in character and even ability, and antagonistic, to disappointed or bewildered parents.

Parents need much more consciousness of their responsibilities, much more help and guidance given them. For this reason and contrary to all the usual advice, there should be stimulated or started parent-teacher associations (on the English model; but more and more approximating the—to me—desirable American type, as I understand it: a corporation that can almost run the school.) From experience I can state that priest and head teacher need not fear creating a juggernaut to crush themselves under. Unless there is something seriously wrong in the school or parish, an association that keeps up an attendance of more than twenty (of the most serious and loyal parents) is marvellous.

The (unspoken) purpose of the association is to educate the parents: to awaken a consciousness of their responsibilities; open their eyes all along, and keep them open, to the realities and problems of education today, and to make them see the necessity, and opportunity, in collaborating with organised society, to help their children decide vocations really suited to their discovered abilities. All else pales into insignificance. Hard blows should be expected, given, and taken, at the meetings. There is no harm in them. Responsibility for petty finance, discipline, the school's integration into society, pressure on local government, can all be put fair and square on the body of parents, and measure of their seriousness taken by inviting them to undertake luxury projects like library, visual aid equipment, decor improvements with furniture and tapestry; to fix talks on careers, delinquency, morality; to make arrangements with local entertainment, youth organisers, and so on—before much criticism is allowed. But a group that will do all this (there are some) should be encouraged to criticise. They will have much to teach the teacher, or priest, about *their* jobs!

Teacher comes a long way behind parent in influence, especially in early days. At least I think so. Childhood is such a whirl of fantasy and ferocity that it is hard to know anything about it.

I remember the age of four, when my mother-monster sent me to

*school*, of all places: an echoing labyrinth with youths and maidens and teacher-trolls all going in terror of a master-minotaur, who turned out to be *my own father*, from home. Traumatic just isn't the word for all this: I used to suffer a hallucination that my mother was drowning, all alone, at home, and would break into 'inexplicable' sobs. Imagine then the whole, hellish horror of discovering a tap left running, all by itself; chucklingly, evilly. School held breath while I stormed into my father's office and made him come and turn it off himself. Mummy was safe; we could proceed to the next phase. We dirtied ourself, quite 'unnecessarily' and 'unaccountably', during a particularly boring class, suspended while the room and ourself were attended to; or when sat outside a terribly important meeting—directors or something; which broke up in confusion. As you can imagine, I am rather baffled and apprehensive with very little children. I am sorry for them, and try to help them. Distantly.

It takes genius, conscious or unconscious, in an infant teacher, to lasso such bucking fears, contact such orbiting imagination; but that is her task. The priest can hardly help her here. He can urge her to make friends, above all else, in the deepest and most intimate way, with the children, and put aside schemes and plans if necessary. She will have to spend a lot of time teaching simple Catholic habits (that could better be learned at home: a point for P.T.A. meetings) as well as basic good manners and deportment. Good teachers' manuals exemplify how prayer and worship and even scripture can be got across at this level, though any zealous teacher will develop ways instinctively: mimes, songs, processions, solemn visits to Jesus in a statue or picture, with attempts to introduce, apologise for themselves, ask and explain their real needs and feelings, gently encouraged from the rear, and teacher not imposing forms, but blandly accepting and smoothing out kinky attitudes and wishes—for the death of an envied junior, and so on. Infant teaching must be *infantile*.

I have two main points to make in this article. The second will come in a moment. The first was this: that implicit, unconscious standing in faith is ultimately from the self, or the self-with-God. But for explicit consciousness and attitude to faith, the teacher holds a unique opportunity, and therefore a quite unique responsibility, subsequent to but distinct from parents, who are unable to affect this by the very closeness of the family. It is almost like the relationship between the sacraments: the teacher 'confirming' externally what is internal from 'baptism', birth. It means that the teacher must be a person of faith, with a living

love and interest in religion that communicates to the children; without which religion can be just another subject, a boring matter of rote and perfunctory drill. Teachers must decide in conscience just to be like this, or simply leave the school or the profession or, if this is not possible, ask in conscience to be relieved of the duty of 'RK'. There may be confusion, of course, in that he or she may find interest in religion apart from 'dry dogma', much more in, say, the social teaching or the history of the Church, or in the Bible. Arrangements could be made to encourage that bent and have it taught with conviction and profit to the whole school. But again, new catechisms, courses, teaching aids are only means that can never substitute for living interest, in the teacher.

I'd best illustrate with my experiences where teachers even with the old penny catechism did bring from time to time something flashing to light and life in my mind. I remember in Infants the story of Pentecost, read again from the mass of Sunday I suppose, quite overwhelming me. In a way I can't describe, I felt with the other gospel incidents I was learning just that *it happened*. Later on, two or three classes up, I remember understanding perfectly what the teacher was saying about our to-be-risen bodies. Slightly sceptical, even then, about the details as advertised, I still settled at that moment into a conviction, that underlies every other I have, that *it will happen*. My universe is simply polarised into past-and-future as I've described; only with polite but painful effort can I even consider the merely present, material universe of today's thinkers, and attempts otherwise to explain time, conscience, good-and-evil. Then later on, about the age of nine, something a teacher said about 'holding' prayer made me see for ever that prayer is like believing, is something you just do, without necessarily feeling anything: 'God knows why'.<sup>2</sup>

Against all that and obviously much more that has been worked in below consciousness and memory, though it might be churlish, I must set lacunae that make themselves still felt, and are not, in any case, particular to me but are quite general. There is, of course, the lack of knowledge and even liking of the Bible. There is the quite startling—on reflection—acceptance of the scientific world picture, and of existing social structure; both of which implicitly deny Christianity and any real religion. There is the never explicit but intangible 'tribalism' about

<sup>2</sup>This, too, is the best way I can put what seems to me the unbridgeable difference between the Catholic and the Protestant 'mind'; and to explain, in all charity, the crisis of Protestantism in today's debunking frankness.

everything Catholic; writers, statesmen, historical figures loyally upheld; 'we're right because we're us' about sums it up. There is the incomprehension of liturgy; above all in the Blessed Sacrament, presented as a phantasmagoria of empty appearance and grisly subreality; the delicate, apparent beauty of sacrament and feast quite missed. There was, too, nervous silence, total except for the occasional disturbing outburst, on the Subject You Can All Guess.

It seems to me, now, that all of these could be amended, and in some cases are being amended, by a few bold, clear sweeps. I'd like to elaborate, even at the risk of having to shoot this out with personalities and authorities concerned.

The Bible substantiates and pictures marvellously what we are trying to teach as religion; far more time should be given it. In fact, ten year's schooling could leave everyone familiar with almost every word of it. Presentation is a difficulty; but there are stages, the dramatic, to begin with. The Bible simply cries out for this; it is drama, set down. Even the New Testament is only understood as our Lord acting out the part 'as it is written' for him, Acts and Epistles as the apostles' publicising and explaining the performance. Any part of the Bible can be quite simply acted, with a voice reading descriptive passages and characters acting, speaking or miming their parts. Children seem to have special gifts for this. I was impressed myself by a performance I arranged for, in a (West Indian) C.Y.O. girls' camp.

While a voice read off, the fair Susanna swayed onto the stage, simply oozing appeal. One almost sympathised with the old men, represented by two little scamps crouched like dangerous beasts at each corner of the stage, and who leapt out dramatically. The audience was on its feet by this time. Susanna, with very expressive rolling of the eyes, made the proper refusal, and knelt, quite effectively, as she was condemned. The handsome young Daniel appeared just in time, to relieve the unbearable tension and outwit the two; but ended by walking off, to thunderous applause, hand in hand with the lady—a development I hadn't foreseen. I felt, however, that the substance of the tale had got across; where *was* the husband, anyway? Children are quite remarkably ingenious: on another occasion Jonah, thrown out of a boat, quite effectively represented by a bench on its side, was swallowed by a whale, represented by a girl crawling in a blanket with paper eyes and tail pinned on. The female audience fairly screamed in terror at this archetypal rodent, and the rest of the story, with its dry, subtly-pointed anti-prophet humour was rather lost in the disturbance.

For most other occasions except Eden, a few coloured towels and shawls skilfully draped, and we are *there*. Difficulties merely offer challenge. I saw Pentecost quite reverently done with hidden lit candles snatched and held on the heads, the wind a loud moaning.

For the study and explanation at more depth that must and can follow all this, knowledge and study is required of the teacher. Margaret Monro's *Enjoying the New Testament* and *Thinking About Genesis* help. The level at which ideas in the Bible work is shown to readers who can remember or turn back to Fr Herbert McCabe's series of articles on the Church,<sup>3</sup> also the series by Fr Joseph Bourke on *The Bible as Encounter with God*.<sup>4</sup> Something like this must be digested and passed on as much as possible to older children. They should be at least as perceptive and knowledgeable in Bible reading as they are expected to be about general literature.

I can't explain further the remarks about science and society, except to suggest care that the children don't jump to the man-in-the-street's conclusion that everything is 'just atoms' or 'runs by gravity': they must see that science is a set of working rules that seem to fit especially well with minerals, acids, etc., and that let us take respectful measure of the complex mysteries of gravity, electricity, life, and matter-nuclei. Children, too, without treason could be brought to see just how far the Land of Hope and Glory or God's Own Country are from the possible Christian society of community and vocation, and what steps they can take alone and in the group to bring it about. Tribalism is hard to avoid, except by frankness all the time. It is possible that popes and bishops and priests were and are wicked and stupid: all those nudes and so on; though I must confess it is their grim critics that make me shiver. I can't get out of my head someone once saying to me that all the Church's troubles came and come from unresponsive, if not obstructive laity; unfashionable these days, but it is a thought.

Liturgy like drama should come with full impact. Who ever forgets the crib; ashes; the May altar? I often remember and tell the story of that ogre of Europe, Napoleon, asked once the happiest day of his life. We think of Marengo, Austerlitz: triumphant victories in war still with colour, pageantry and music, rout clearly visible, enemy flags and uniforms scattered, valuable cannon taken, horsemen by the thousand. No. He said, his First Communion day. Readers will be

<sup>3</sup>LIFE OF THE SPIRIT, March, June, December 1961; July 1962; April and August 1963.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid*, March, May, November 1961; and April 1962.

unsurprised if I have to confess shocking an almost unshockable male parent on that day by whispering 'Tastes just like paper'; what that holds for my future place in time or eternity I hardly like to think.

For a living liturgy the idea of sacrament can be built up from symbols—like shaking hands; bonds—like letters which can be seen to be more than mere 'thing', though nothing nearly like the sacrament. I came nearest as a child to thinking of it when told the story of Emmas: the bread left on the table that is no longer bread but the bond or 'sacrament' of his presence. It makes me ashamed still to remember how unable I was to explain anything of it to honest and friendly Presbyterian youngsters enquiring; still angry, that the only advice I got was to 'refuse to talk about it'. And we expect the conversion of the country one day, when a million small opportunities are lost like this!

It has been established, by such research as there has been, that a main reason for eighty per cent of young people leaving Church with school is shame and confusion about That Subject. The children should be told the plain facts in class, about the age of ten, before it is personally disturbing and before they are initiated, by their witch-doctors, in the lavatories; after permission has been asked by circular from their parents (silence to mean consent). Thereafter it can be referred to quite openly if needs be, and questions answered about malpractices or more positive, attractive details. They could be encouraged to talk it out among themselves, helped to the conclusion that it is a special, difficult thing, and that the only hope for success is for boys and girls to respect each other in friendship—misbehaviour precisely making such friendships difficult for everyone: grim candour is necessary about disillusionments and dangers—until, with care and patience, the wonderful relationship of marriage can be approached. Friendships between boys and girls singly or in groups must be allowed: envious jeering or dirty-minded sneering jumped on. There is far less likelihood of 'danger'—I'm sure we all remember with far more shame foul, trampling conversations in the gang of boys or giggle of girls. Shy, stammering friendships teach that boys and girls are people; and the difficult truths, the girl swayed by heavy tides of mood, the boy restless and searching—if *la donn'* è *mobile*, much more *l'uom'* è *volatile*. And later married disillusion, incomprehension and bitterness may be avoided. Antonia White's *Frost in May* remains the classic account of cold cruelty to pitiful girlish fantasy; George Orwell's minor, dated, curiously effective *A Clergyman's Daughter*, of a sensitive teacher's getting her fingers badly burnt by unauthorised attempts at enlightenment; and his *Keep*



*The Aspidistra Flying* the typical tragedy and real danger, everything silent, conspiring, building up. The two against the world; the ritual, passionate gestures traditionally demanded, tremulously, curiously, performed; and the dismal disaster happens.

I'll try to finish with my second main point. Perhaps the words of the title, and those that follow them never really strike us. What is meant, for instance, by the words 'their angels always see the face' of the Father? I was taught it meant our guardian angels, who would be so ashamed of our failures as we went through life that they would hang their heads in God's presence; but this will hardly do, on examination, will it? Perhaps we don't know what it means; but might guess that by 'angel' could be meant one's larger self or greater presence; narrowed down disastrously, away from God, into our small, adult consciousness. If something like this is meant, the implications are enormous.

It means that children, not yet away from God, could teach us religion—go with us hand in hand over the course, in our systematic adult way, in their instinctual childish manner. The shepherd leads the flock, at their pace, over the best grass, towards the water or out of the sun; pasturing, not forced-feeding; much more delicate leading of the children's thought, much more listening to them, discussion among them, group work or individual projects, in the enlightened ways used in other subjects. It will be hesitant; fantastic; ugly to us, but their religion to them: Christ working the miracle on the simplicity of the poor of Galilee again, on the simplicity of our children. Charles Boxer's article-review of Hofinger's *Teaching All Nations*<sup>5</sup> showed practically, I think, how teaching on some such presuppositions could be done. Bishop Conway of Neve in *The Child and the Catechism*, a very excellent little pamphlet published by *The Furrow*, makes very plain all these points, adding the need for the all-important conspectus in the last year of school; when, I have found, a very valuable finish can be given and the children hardened by being made to teach, or lead discussions among, younger children; and also given honest talks about adult and social life, religious life, careers, politics, law, marriage in detail; with parent or parents present and helped to help the child for a change. My father always says that—in ambitiousness and incomprehension, he means—the child's worst enemy is the parent. I quite agree with him.

If all our children were let enter into life like this, I believe, of such indeed would be the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>5</sup>LIFE OF THE SPIRIT, February 1961.