

Teaching Children to Pray

Laurence Freeman OSB
(from *Coming Home*, p. 10-11)

"Then he took a child and set him in front of them and put his arms round him and said 'whoever receives a child like this in my name receives me and whoever receives me receives not me but the One who sent me.'" (Mk 9: 36-37)

"I thank you Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for hiding these things from the learned and wise and for revealing them to the simple. " (Lk 10:21)

In his attitude to children, as in many things, Jesus anticipates much later evolution of human consciousness. He welcomed children and told the disciples to learn important spiritual truths from them.

What does it mean to teach children to pray? Why do we often feel when we pray with them that they still know something that we have forgotten? Because of this, and in an important educational sense, by teaching them to pray we ourselves are learning what praying means. Today the question of the spiritual life of children and how we teach them to pray is significant at the deepest theological and sociological levels. It is a measure of our current crisis. It suggests the danger we face if we continue to abuse children as we are doing but it also suggests the great opportunity of changing direction and controlling our own cultural destiny.

Christian education aims to introduce children to a world of faith that is transcultural and trans-historical and yet incarnates in their own very present and real particular worlds. The faith-education of a child will therefore introduce them to tradition, Church, community, scripture, and worship as well as to personal spiritual experience that is given meaning by these contexts which are also ways of self-interpretation.

This means the child will be introduced both to the Name of Jesus and to the Mind of Christ. These are two distinct but related goals. The Name of Jesus implies informed knowledge about the faith - scripture, sacraments and tradition - as the beginning of a theological life, and the ability to use this language in the contemporary world without embarrassment and with self-assurance.

Learning to 'put on the Mind of Christ' is an even deeper and more subtle work. *The secret is this; Christ in you.* This is not the secrecy of The Da Vinci Code kind of Christianity but the personal experience of mystery. Mystery is the wholeness of reality present at a level of consciousness into which reason and imagination cannot penetrate - and yet it is not an experience that betrays

reason or cannot be expressed symbolically. We enter the Mind of Christ in 'pure prayer': the *oratio pura* that Cassian taught calls for the 'renunciation of all the riches of thought and imagination' and which Julian of Norwich says comes as a 'condition of complete simplicity that demands not less than everything'. In Christian faith we know God in the Mind of Christ. We can never know God, as *The Cloud of Unknowing* reminds us, by thought but only by love. It is the heart of Christian theology that contemplation is the work of love - the pure self-giving of loving attention.

The Name of Jesus has to be taught and the knowledge associated with it has to be acquired. The Mind of Christ is already present to and in us. Knowing it is therefore a different kind of knowledge. It is apophatic rather than kataphatic knowledge - that is, knowing not through language, thoughts, words and images, but through silence which is the language of the Spirit and the true communion of love. Meister Eckhart said that there is nothing so much like God as silence.

And, before him, St Irenaeus told us that we will never understand the words of Jesus if we do not first understand his silence.

This contemplative dimension of prayer is therefore also an essential element of faith and indeed of all human existence. To be ignorant of it, not to be trained to retain it after childhood, is a failure in education of the first magnitude. Children, as Jesus indicated, have an innate capacity for this kind of knowing. They can be present here and now with extraordinary intensity and naturalness. They can be simple with a disarming power of truth. They can - when this capacity has not been culturally damaged - pay attention with real power. A child's capacity for the experience of God - in the Mind of Christ - is not to be measured by his knowledge of the Name of Jesus. The adult idea that contemplation is a later stage reserved for the specialist reflects only the confusion of the adult who has forgotten what it was like to be a child. Of course, the acquisition of religious and scriptural knowledge is essential to the formation of Christian identity. Of course, there are other ways of prayer that should be taught and learned. But the capacity for contemplation is foundational and precedes these. It therefore needs to be integrated into all the ways in which the Name of Jesus is learned. Indeed contemplation in religious education is the necessary basis for retaining that knowledge in ways that can adapt to the challenge every modern child will one day face of confronting a non-believing secular world.