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The Child as a Theologian

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THE SAINT PAUL SEMINARY SCHOOL OF DIVINITY
UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS

The Child as a Theologian

A THESIS

Submitted to the Faculty of the School of Divinity

Of the University of St. Thomas

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree

Master of Arts in Theology

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St. Paul, MN

2022

On October 9, 1997, St. Thérèse of Lisieux was named a Doctor of the Church. While this honor was greeted by many with great joy, the process by which Thérèse reached this moment revealed a new way of viewing what is entailed in the term “Doctor” as a teacher and theologian. Servais Pinckaers, O.P., a well-known moral theologian who was one of seven tasked with examining Therese’s written work during the doctorate bestowal process, spoke about theology as follows:

‘Theology...is, in effect, a work of wisdom,’ wherein we can distinguish two levels: (1) ‘the wisdom of the Spirit, which gives understanding of the mystery of Christ and the experience of charity,’ and which is ‘the first element in theology’; and (2) ‘the elaboration of this wisdom through theological reflection and a discerning use of available philosophical and cultural contributions, and the application of various methods and techniques of thought and expression.’¹

Such a weighty title as “Doctor” given to one who espoused and elevated “littleness” in her teaching returns the understanding of theology to its core of union with God through the grace given in the sacrament of baptism, a sacrament given even to the youngest of children. If Thérèse is qualified to receive the title of “Doctor,” could young children – those lifted up by Christ himself – also be seen as “teacher” and even “theologian?” To provide an adequate foundation for exploring this question, time will first be taken to provide the historical background of the role of children in society and the Church as well as the specific context of Jesus’ experience of and interaction with children. After looking more closely at the role of theology and the term “theologian” as well as the title of “Doctor of the Church,” Thérèse’s “Way of Spiritual Childhood” will be examined. The core of her proposed and lived spiritual path aligns, rightly, with the truth which children reveal to the Church, the truth that Jesus lifted up through his interaction with them. Children receive, without merit, gifts of life and love, open and enjoy

¹ Steven Payne, OCD, *Saint Thérèse of Lisieux: Doctor of the Universal Church* (New York: Alba House, 2002), 122. *Positio*, 902 and Pinckaers, “Thérèse of the Child Jesus,” 32.

them, and respond to these gifts. This receptivity and response is articulated by Thérèse and recognized by the Church as worthy of emulation. Although children have rarely been seen in the light of being able to convey truth through their example, recently the Church has begun to consider even children who have not yet reached the age of reason in the canonization process. These children, and all children, witness to the receptivity, enjoyment, and gratitude toward God which provides insight into the ideal lifted up by Christ in proclaiming that “unless you turn and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 18:3 *NABRE*).

The History of Children

“Children should be seen and not heard.” “They are just acting like children.” “What do you want to be when you grow up?” “Don’t ever tell a child no.” “Children should learn from and obey adults.”² Phrases as contrary as these have permeated the culture. What is the value of childhood? In the history of the world and, thus, in the Church as well, the understanding of the role of childhood has grown and changed over the centuries. At times children seem to be viewed as commodities to be developed or burdens to be placed on someone else’s shoulders. However, the alternative understanding of children as gift is as ancient as the Old Testament, even if it is there balanced by the need to develop these same children through, at times, harsh discipline. Here the history of how children have been perceived will be examined as well as how Jesus’ taking on the flesh of a child and his relations with children during his lifetime stands in contrast to the prevailing sentiments of the time. This contrast is still strikingly relevant today.

² Marcia J. Bunge, “Biblical and Theological Perspectives and Best Practices” in *Understanding Children’s Spirituality*, ed. Kevin E. Lawson (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), 11.

Children in the Ancient World through the Time of Jesus

Throughout the history of humanity, the role of the child has shifted and changed. This was brought to light in a particular way through a 1960 book, *Centuries of Childhood*, by Philippe Ariès. While his idea that it was only after the Renaissance that childhood was looked at as a significant and impactful stage of human development has been rightly challenged, “a lasting value of Ariès’ study is its contribution to shaping awareness of the fact that historical periods of the past could have had totally different presuppositions about childhood than our own.”³ In fact, in the ancient world, children were often overlooked in their significance as individuals to civilization, even as they were considered necessary for the survival of the family and the community as shown in the phraseology, nomenclature, and writings of the time. The phrase “not counting women and children,” used repeatedly throughout the Old and New Testaments, “was a good summary of a widespread attitude”⁴ as Strange says in *Children in the Early Church*. Likewise, the Greek word *paidion*, one of the words translated as “little child” in the New Testament, is a diminutive of *pais*, which “can indicate either a young person (see Matt. 2:16) or a slave (see Luke 7:1-10, where *doulos* [or servant] is used interchangeably with *pais*)... This semantic overlap indicates the shared low status of children and slaves in antiquity.”⁵ The dearth of writings in the ancient world on children excepting a few manuscripts on child-rearing (*Education of an Orator* by Quintilian from the late 1st century and *On the Vainglory of the World and on the Education of Children* by John Chrysostom in the late 4th or early 5th century) further underscores the insignificance of the child in society while limiting the

³ O.M. Bakke, *When Children Became People: The Birth of Childhood in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 2.

⁴ W.A. Strange, *Children in the Early Church* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 1996), 38.

⁵ Elkins and Parker, “Children in Biblical Narrative,” 4.

sources about the understanding of child development in this time period to comments within larger works on other topics.

Multiple factors contributed to the child's low place in society. In particular, low survival rates influenced the perception of children from their birth. "Some conservative estimates place the rate at about twenty-eight infant deaths per hundred births."⁶ In addition, in the Greco-Roman world, child abandonment was not a crime; until around the 8th or 9th day, the child could be left to die on the city garbage pile as it was not yet part of the social community.⁷ While Julius Caesar (50 BC) had put laws in place which encouraged large families, it was only in 374 AD that infant abandonment was labeled a crime through legislation.⁸ While a number of early deaths was largely unavoidable at the time, Mark Golden notes that "it is noteworthy that children under the age of two are never (or hardly ever) said to have died *ahoros*, 'untimely', on extant epitaphs, though the term is so widely used that it can be applied to a woman of 73."⁹ For those children who survived the early weeks and months after birth, the weakness and helplessness of the infant determined how they were perceived. Young children had the task of gaining skills like walking and speaking and because of this the adult's view of the child primarily focused on what they lacked instead of what they possessed. These societal attitudes might best be exemplified by Cicero's observation that "it is difficult to find any reason to praise a child for its inherent qualities. It deserves praise only on account of the potential it has to become something in the *future*."¹⁰ To the utilitarian mind, the young child had no value in and of himself until he was not able to prove himself of worth in the future.

⁶ Cornelia B. Horn and John W. Martens, *Let the Little Children Come to Me: Childhood and Children in Early Christianity* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 21.

⁷ Bakke, *When Children Became People*, 20.

⁸ Bakke, *When Children Became People*, 51.

⁹ Mark Golden, "Did the Ancients Care When Their Children Died?" in *Greece & Rome*, vol. 35, no. 2 (October 1988), 155.

¹⁰ Bakke, *When Children Became People*, 19.

Although there are some generalizations which can be made about the ancient understanding of the child, it is difficult to propose a common understanding of how children were raised during that time period because of the number of factors involved. Similar to today, boys and girls were treated differently, Jewish and Gentile children had different paths, and urban and rural areas provided a variety of differing circumstances and traditions. In any case, children were both considered a great blessing and also, quite often, a cause of distress. Their birth, health, safety, and education were areas of concern both financially and in terms of their individual longevity, while their existence was simultaneously vital to the family's subsistence.

Because spoken language was seen as a sign of rationality, Plato and Aristotle saw the pre-speaking child as existing on the level of animals and thus in need of taming, by whatever means necessary. "Gentiles in the Greek world argued that because a child could not speak, it was lacking in reason: the Greek word '*logos*' having the double meaning of 'word' or 'speech' and 'reason'."¹¹ However, the Jewish people, instead of pursuing truth through reason, saw truth as a gift from God himself.

The people of Israel take a listening stance toward God, completely attentive to whatever God reveals of himself through history and the words of the prophets. In Israel it is not the philosopher who is great, but the prophet, the one who can say, 'The Lord of hosts has sworn in my hearing...' (Is 5:9).¹²

This meant that the young child's lack of reasoning power was overshadowed by the truth that God had revealed in the Old Testament that it was God alone who gives life in creating each individual in his image (Gen 1:26-27). In fact, God himself commands Adam and Eve as well as Noah to "be fertile and multiply; fill the earth" (Gen 1:28; 9:1) and thus abortion and most

¹¹ Strange, *Children in the Early Church*, 9.

¹² Sofia Cavalletti, *The History of the Kingdom of God: From Creation to Parousia* (Chicago, IL: Liturgy Training Publications), 9.

contraceptive practices were not seen in Jewish society.¹³ Even more, at least from the time of Abraham, children were seen as the primary sign of God’s blessing and were, thus, greatly valued. It is God’s promise of descendants as many as the stars in the sky which leads to the moment in which “Abram put his faith in the Lord” (Gen 15:6). While all peoples have valued children as hope for the future, for the Jewish people, “the young carried the hope, not only for a particular family, but for a covenant faith community.”¹⁴

As children in both the Greco-Roman and Jewish societies began to grow, education took on a role of importance particularly in regard to household tasks for girls and trade-related skills for boys. Around the time of Jesus, some Gentile boys from larger cities attended school from seven to fourteen or so where they would learn reading, writing, and math to prepare them to be productive members of society. Throughout their education, physical punishment was often employed, as it had been in the home since the child’s earliest years.¹⁵ While some Jewish children received a similar secular education, the primary end of specifically Jewish education was obedience to the Law, a Law which had been received by Moses and practiced by the People of God since its inception. The central tenant in the Jewish understanding of the role of the child, then, was the significance that their community placed on covenant. “Children, as inheritors of the covenant, did not grow into God’s promises for the community, but were from birth participants in them.”¹⁶ Thus, as members of the covenant, they assumed covenantal responsibilities from birth and needed to know what those responsibilities were in order to live the covenant in fullness. “Jewish education, therefore, aimed not just to develop knowledge or

¹³ Strange, *Children in the Early Church*, 4.

¹⁴ Catherine Stonehouse and Scottie May, *Listening to Children on the Spiritual Journey* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 13.

¹⁵ Strange, *Children in the Early Church*, 26.

¹⁶ David H. Jensen, *Graced Vulnerability: a Theology of Childhood* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2005), 2.

even understanding, but knowledge and understanding applied to daily living.”¹⁷ This daily living included practices of worship even though

children were exempt from fulfilling some commandments, e.g., to assemble to hear the law (Dt 3:12), or to appear at the Temple (*m. Hagigah* 1:1). A young child was not to recite the *shema*, but a child could read from the Torah or the prophets at the synagogue service (*m. Megillah* 4:5-6).¹⁸

In order to both learn and practice what God had commanded, it was considered essential that Jewish boys be able to read both Scripture and commentary on it. At the same time, education in the faith relied heavily on the practice of memorization¹⁹ and often included disciplinary measures similar to those employed by the Greeks and Romans.

Jesus as a child

Jesus was not aloof from the prevailing attitudes of his time towards the child as he no doubt encountered many of them in his own childhood. It is interesting to note that in the Gospel of Matthew, “half of the texts in which the term ‘child’ occurs relate to Jesus himself.”²⁰ Jesus was born into the Jewish society at the time of the Roman occupation and those around him were influenced by both cultures. As has been shown, the Jewish culture honored the child as gift; however, there are no “Jewish texts in which children are examples or models to be imitated. Further, for those who took knowledge of and obedience to the law to be the essence of piety, the unlearned child would scarcely have been a natural illustration of religious greatness.”²¹ In contrast, the Son of God became man and took on flesh within the womb of his virgin mother,

¹⁷ Strange, *Children in the Early Church*, 13.

¹⁸ Horn and Martens, *Let the Little Children Come to Me*, 28.

¹⁹ Strange, *Children in the Early Church*, 13.

²⁰ Wim J.C. Weren, “Studies in Matthew’s Gospel,” in *Biblical Interpretation Series*, Volume 130 (Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill, 2014), 51.

²¹ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, vol 2 from *International Critical Commentary Series* (New York: T&T Clark Ltd, 1991), 759.

Mary. By God's choice to humble himself in this way, the potential for a child to be seen as an example and teacher reaches a new stage. Even before his own birth, Jesus is revealed as the one who fulfills prophecies in Matthew and as the "Son of God" by the angel Gabriel in Luke. Even before birth, Jesus is said to be the one who both lives the will of God and who witnesses to a life lived in communion with God. Jesus testifies to the example of the child long before he takes a little one in his arms and speaks of the necessity of becoming like him.

In the New Testament, the first child encountered is Jesus himself. Matthew begins his Gospel with "the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham" (Mt 1:1). After laying out the lineage of Jesus from Abraham to David to Joseph, the husband of Mary, the birth of Jesus Christ is recounted. By verse 25 of chapter 1, when "she bore a son, and [Joseph] named him Jesus," the word "child" has already been used three times, two of which include references to the work of the Holy Spirit (Mt 1:18 and 1:20) and one of which recognizes Jesus as the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14: "Behold, the virgin shall be with child and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel" (Mt 1:23). All three occurrences use the Greek root *gaster*, which specifically connotes being pregnant or "with child." In Matthew 1:21, Joseph is told to name this son "Jesus" or "Yahweh saves." From the beginning, it is made clear that through this child will come salvation. In the second chapter of Matthew, "Jesus is constantly referred to as 'the child', nine times in all (2:8, 9, 11, 13, 14, 20, 21)."²² Of these, five use the reference "the child and his mother" (2:11, 13, 14, 20, 21), thus "the reader is reminded of the special origin of Jesus, which is described at length in Matt 1:18-25. What is special about Jesus is that he is born of Mary and of the Holy Spirit."²³ From this beginning "it is evident from Scripture that the child is the leader who comes from Bethlehem, the shepherd of Israel,

²² Weren, "Studies in Matthew's Gospel," 44.

²³ Weren, "Studies in Matthew's Gospel," 44.

modelled on David. Later in Matthew, it will become clear that leaders of the community must model themselves on children.”²⁴ Although Matthew could have started his Gospel (and the New Testament) with the adult Jesus, as Mark does, he highlights Jesus the child.

While Matthew wrote as his Jewish readers expected, showing Jesus as the fulfillment of prophecies, genealogical lineage, and dreams, Luke, writing for a Gentile audience, reaches back to Jesus’ conception in order to show that long before he spoke his first word, Jesus was acting as witness and example to the People of God. Luke proclaims, through the angel Gabriel, that this child “will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end” (Lk 1:32-33). It is important to note that in this moment the hope of all creation rested on Mary, likely still a child herself, although well above the age of reason as the age of betrothal at the time for women was as young as twelve.²⁵ It seems fitting that the child, the Christ, is conceived in the body of one so young. “It was so tremendous, yet so passive. She was not asked to do anything herself, but to let something be done to her. She was not asked to renounce anything, but to receive an incredible gift.”²⁶ Mary, as is so often the case with the youngest of children as well, received this gift with a whole-hearted “yes,” a response which would resound through the centuries. Almost immediately, this message from God through the angel is affirmed by a human witness when Mary visits Elizabeth. “Mary had been a mother for only a few days, and already she was so filled with the Lord that he revealed himself through her transparent being. Jesus was not yet visible, but the one who came in contact with

²⁴ Weren, “Studies in Matthew’s Gospel,” 44.

²⁵ Horn and Martens, *Let the Little Children Come to Me*, 35.

²⁶ Caryll Houselander, *The Reed of God* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2008), 33.

Mary was already influenced by him.”²⁷ Even as a child not yet born, Jesus’ impact on the world had clearly begun as his presence is first recognized by John, who “leaped for joy” (Lk 1:44) in his mother’s womb. “Elizabeth did not understand Mary’s silent language *directly*. It was through her child’s mediation that she received insight into the great honor that was happening in her.”²⁸ Both Jesus and John, these two children in the womb, witnessed on that day to the truth of Jesus’ identity. The first witness to Christ is John, not yet born, and John’s witness leads Elizabeth to proclaim a truth she could not have known except through her child and the working of the Holy Spirit. While this early encounter with Christ foretold John’s path as an adult in proclaiming the Messiah’s arrival, his eventual preaching and martyrdom does not diminish but only adds to the significance of his initial encounter with Jesus and his witness to him even before John’s birth. John, the infant-not-yet-born, both recognized and responded with joy to the great gift of the presence of Christ within the womb of his mother, Mary.

The birth of Jesus, as related by Luke, highlights another way in which Jesus revealed truth even as an infant. At his birth Jesus is laid in a manger, a food trough for animals (Lk 2:7). This child who had been proclaimed as “holy, the Son of God” (Lk 1:25) was born into humbleness and poverty, littleness and hiddenness. The angels who proclaimed his birth did so to shepherds, in many ways the least of the Jewish people, who, while they cared for the sheep necessary for temple sacrifice and authentic worship of God, struggled to obey the laws of worship themselves as they were tied to the care of their sheep at all times and in all circumstances. In addition, citing the “relatively slow change in agricultural practices in agrarian

²⁷ Fr. Wilfrid Stinissen, O.C.D., *Mary in the Bible and in Our Lives* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2018), 34.

²⁸ Stinissen, *Mary in the Bible and in Our Lives*, 35.

societies”²⁹ and the need for children to contribute to “the economic production of their household,”³⁰ Amy Lindeman Allen asserts that the presence of children amongst the shepherds at the angels’ announcement is more than likely. If so, even at his birth both adult outcasts from society and children were given a privileged place. Thus, from the beginning of his life, the greatness of Godhead hidden in the flesh of humanity gave another indication of the teaching Jesus would give much later about the significance of the child in the Kingdom of God. Luke continues to underscore the reality of greatness in hiddenness through his recounting of the Presentation in the Temple (Lk 2:22-38), the Holy Family’s return to Nazareth (Lk 2:39-40), and Jesus’ teaching in the Temple at the age of twelve (Lk 2:41-52). In each of these moments, Jesus both manifests God’s greatness and glory while also existing in humility and hiddenness.

Jesus and the children

In addition to revealing truth during his own childhood, Jesus turned to children as an example for the disciples in his time and those who follow him today. Although the Gospels recount a number of instances in which Jesus healed children and interacted with them, there are three principal moments in which he encounters children and immediately refers to them in a teaching: blessing children, speaking of them as the ones to whom the kingdom belongs, and recognizing their insight over that of the learned men of the time in fulfillment of the prophecy of Psalm 8. Each of these references to children occurs at a significant point in the life of Jesus. The first and second are framed by a series of teachings on a rule of discipleship while the third occurs as he enters Jerusalem in order to lay down his life. While these passages are well known and familiar as they are often quoted, they are simultaneously challenging to understand.

²⁹ Amy Lindeman Allen, “A Sign For You: A Child Savior Revealed to Child Shepherds,” in *Biblical Interpretation*, vol. 29, no. 2 (2020), 242.

³⁰ Allen, “A Sign For You,” 246.

A superficial reading of these passages can, of course, quickly lead to some general observations about the subject. Yet one risks being deaf and blind to the particular nuances which Mark, Matthew and Luke each attempted to transmit and interpret concerning what happened when Jesus was in the company of children. Moreover, a superficial reading will not reveal that the very heart of the Christian Gospel is expressed in Jesus' gestures and sayings in relation to children.³¹

It is of note that when Jesus encounters children, he consistently turns from them and speaks to his disciples, often with words of warning for the adults. While these Scripture passages are frequently referenced for their loving and gentle acknowledgement of the dignity of the child, this is not necessarily how they were originally intended. They are, in actuality, “radical challenges to adult Christians.”³² This is their metaphorical value. However, there is a literal truth underlying these encounters as well. It seems clear that Jesus knew and loved actual children, children who came close to him and spent time with him. This literal, physical, closeness of relationship is also of significance. In today's world, church leaders advocating for “child-centeredness” may at times have very little actual contact with real children, speaking theoretically instead of in light of practical knowledge and encounters with children as Jesus clearly did.

“Let the children come to me” (Mt 19:13-15; Mk 10:13-16; Lk 18:15-17)

And people were bringing children to him that he might touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he became indignant and said to them, “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.” Then he embraced them and blessed them, placing his hands on them. (Mk 10:13-16)

³¹ Hans-Ruedi Weber, *Jesus and the Children: Biblical Resources for Study and Preaching* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1979), viii.

³² Weber, *Jesus and the Children*, ix.

One of the debates regarding this passage from Mark revolves around whether he is speaking about childlike status (poor, without authority, dependent) or some unnamed childlike quality. The context of this passage may be of help. In Mark 10:1-12 Jesus answers the question of the Pharisees regarding the lawfulness of divorce which had been permitted by Moses. Jesus responds by elevating the role of marriage saying, "...what God has joined together, no human being must separate" (Mk 10:9). Immediately following the passage on the children, Mark relates the story of the rich man who desires to learn what he must do to receive eternal life. Jesus invites him to sell everything and follow him, at which point the man's "face fell, and he went away sad, for he had many possessions" (Mk 10:22). The parallel passage in Matthew (19:13-15) lies between similar teachings on marriage and selling all in order to follow Jesus. While Luke's account (18:15-17) is also followed by something similar to Mark and Matthew, it is preceded by the Parable of the Persistent Widow and the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, both of which emphasize the unexpected person (widow and tax collector) as being favorable (through persistence and humility) to God. The fact that in each of the synoptics this passage about children is immediately followed by the account of the rich young man is significant. "The man provides a contrast to the children who are not encumbered by property, possessions and power. So the two scenes – the children who receive Jesus' blessing and the rich man who cannot follow Jesus – serve to highlight and contrast each other."³³

While it was customary at the time of Jesus for children to be blessed not only by their father but also by well-known rabbis or teachers, it is significant that in this passage the children were brought "that he might touch them" (Mk 10:13). "In the four gospels, almost all of the more than 30 occurrences of the verb 'to touch' are found in stories where Jesus heals lepers, the blind

³³ Strange, *Children in the Early Church*, 52.

or the sick.”³⁴ However, this embrace of Christ speaks to a particular intention: “With this paternal, even ‘episcopal’ gesture, those who are last in the earthly order of being become first in the kingdom that is even now in our midst.”³⁵ The gesture of blessing is also of significance in the ministry of Jesus as does not employ such a gesture apart from regularly blessing and praising God the Father, blessing the bread and fish when they are multiplied (Mt 14:19; Mk 6:41, 8:7; Lk 9:16) and blessing the bread and wine of the Eucharist (Mt 26:26; Mk 14:22; Lk 24:30). In regard to humans, Jesus is only recorded as blessing the Apostles and those with them when he ascends into heaven (Lk 24:50-51) and the children. This passage from Mark 10 also includes

the only place in the whole New Testament where it is written that Jesus was indignant. Jesus could be deeply moved (Mk 1:41), he sometimes would sternly rebuke someone (Mk 1:43) or even be full of anger (Mk 3:5). But here, he is indignant, and in his indignation, Jesus addresses himself to quite another group than his disciples had expected.³⁶

Instead of rebuking the children, as the disciples had been doing, Jesus rebukes the disciples and embraces the children, surprising all who were present, even, perhaps, the children themselves.

Some scholars have attempted to take this passage apart and attribute only Mark 10:14b, “Let the children come to me; do not prevent them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these,” to Jesus while arguing that the rest of Mark 10:13-16 was created as a context for that particular teaching of Christ. “Contrary to the above understanding of how the story grew, it seems much more likely that the scene, the first saying of Jesus and his actions belonged together from the beginning. Jesus lived and taught in an oral culture, where actions and sayings went together.”³⁷ In the Old Testament this way of teaching through action was seen particularly

³⁴ Weber, *Jesus and the Children*, 15.

³⁵ Maas, “Christ as the Logos of Childhood,” 463.

³⁶ Weber, *Jesus and the Children*, 15-16.

³⁷ Weber, *Jesus and the Children*, 18.

through the prophets, and in the New Testament, Jesus employed this pattern most especially during the Last Supper. “In all these cases, the deeds are more than mere illustrations of the sayings, and the words much more than explanations of the deeds. In different, yet complementary ways, the two together communicate the message.”³⁸ As the passage continues, it seems Jesus is employing the assistance of the children to speak in metaphor. However, in the actual Scripture passage, Jesus is referring to the children who were right there with him.

At that very moment, the children received the greatest gift possible, the Kingdom of God, which is both a present and a future reality. Jesus immediately symbolized this gift by taking the children in his arms. The Greek term used for this occurs only twice in the New Testament, and both times with regard to children (Mark 10:16 and Mark 9:36). It recalls the scene in which Simeon took up the child, Jesus, in his arms (Luke 2:28) and when, in the parable of the two sons, the father embraced and kissed the prodigal son who had returned home. In the story about the children, this gesture of tenderness and protection becomes the counterpart to the indignation of Jesus.³⁹

Why is it that these children are blessed, embraced, and lifted up as inheritors of the kingdom? They have done nothing to merit such a gift; they are too young to have earned anything by their own effort. They know well that they cannot earn what is given to them freely. However, perhaps Jesus is teaching something not about children, but about God who desires to give the gift of his Kingdom to any who will receive it. “This gratuitous love of God, assured to the children in Jesus’ prophetic words and action, turns upside down both Greek and Jewish classifications. Children receive a place of preeminence, if human realities are considered from the point of view of God’s Kingdom.”⁴⁰ This life of receptivity also necessitates vulnerability. This is a great shift from the conventional understanding of living well in the Kingdom. However, “fundamentally, the attitude of the child is precisely the attitude suggested by the word

³⁸ Weber, *Jesus and the Children*, 18.

³⁹ Weber, *Jesus and the Children*, 19.

⁴⁰ Weber, *Jesus and the Children*, 19-20.

‘believer’: the natural attitude of a faith open to all that comes from God and ready to accept the consequences.”⁴¹

“Unless you become like a child” (Mt 18:3; Mk 10:15; Lk 18:17)

...Amen, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. (Mt 18:3)

Amen, I say to you, whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it. (Mk 10:15 and Lk 18:17).

This passage, perhaps more than any other, seems to be at the heart of Jesus’ teaching and also at the heart of this paper. What was meant by “accept...like a child” and “turn and become like children?” The range of ideas is cast, from humility and receptivity to dependence and powerlessness. It seems clear that Jesus is not speaking of being “childish,” but do we then have clarity in what he actually is referring to when he speaks of becoming like children? Again, the context might be helpful in answering this question. As the passages from Mark and Luke are the same as cited earlier, there is again the placement of it between questions regarding marriage and divorce and the passage about the rich young man in Mark and between the Persistent Widow, Pharisee and Tax Collector, and the rich young man in Luke. However, this is a different passage from Matthew and follows the Second Prediction of the Passion and Jesus’ command to Peter to catch a fish in order to pay the temple tax. Following this passage about children in Matthew comes the exhortation to beware of the millstone if one causes a little one to sin. This is followed by the Parable of the Lost Sheep and teaching on how to handle one who sins. Some scholars see the context of Luke, in particular, as offering insight into Jesus’ command to become like children. “...My claim is that there are sufficient reasons to see the accounts of the rich ruler

⁴¹ Romano Guardini, *The Lord* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, Inc, 1982), 314.

(Luke 18:18-30), of the disciples' response to this story (18:24-30), of the blind man near Jericho (18:35-43) and of Zacchaeus (19:1-10) as examples, both positive and negative, of receiving the kingdom of God as a child."⁴² Fowl continues,

As modern readers we need to be wary of lapsing into the very modern practice of sentimentalizing our views of children and then reading such views into Luke's account of Jesus' command to receive the kingdom of God as a child. Reducing this demand to an attitude of openness and trust seems to be unable to account for the particularities of this story and its connections to the paragraphs which follow.⁴³

Instead, Fowl advocates for seeing "Jesus' command as a call to single-minded, unrelenting pursuit of an object of desire."⁴⁴

In the passages from Mark and from Luke it is possible to hear a metaphorical interpretation: "Whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God as one receives a child...." In this passage, in fact, Jesus is receiving and embracing children. However, "Nowhere else in the New Testament does a child serve as a metaphor for the Kingdom. The wording of this saying in both Matthew's and John's gospels excludes the above understanding."⁴⁵ What did Jesus mean, then? "At least in Mark's and Luke's rendering of the saying, the metaphor does not evoke what a child *is*, but the way in which a child *receives* the Kingdom."⁴⁶ And how do children receive? They come with open, empty hands, without any claim or merit. This speaks, also, about God as the one who gives. Thus, once again the emphasis in Jesus' action and words is on receiving a gift, something children know so very well how to do, without equivocation or demerement. They simply accept the gift, even the gift of the Kingdom.

⁴² Stephen Fowl, "Receiving the Kingdom of God as a Child: Children and the Riches in Luke 18:15ff," in *New Testament Studies*, vol. 39 (1993), 153.

⁴³ Fowl, "Receiving the Kingdom of God as a Child," 158.

⁴⁴ Fowl, "Receiving the Kingdom of God as a Child," 158.

⁴⁵ Weber, *Jesus and the Children*, 28.

⁴⁶ Weber, *Jesus and the Children*, 29.

“A child in the midst of them” (Mt 18:1-5; Mk 9:33-37; Lk 9:46-48)

At that time the disciples* approached Jesus and said, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” He called a child over, placed it in their midst, and said, “Amen, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children,* you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever receives one child such as this in my name receives me. (Mt 18:1-5)

In Matthew 18, the disciples are found to be asking about their own place in the Kingdom of God. It seems clear that their understanding of the Kingdom does not align with the truth and that Jesus has every intention of clarifying his teaching. “In Jesus’ response, a child becomes central, not as the one who receives instruction, but as the one whose very presence becomes the clue to answering the disciples’ question.”⁴⁷ There is a reversal, of sorts, to the typical hierarchy. The greatest is the least, the last is first, and the one who is humble and receptive to the smallest will find his place, a very high place, in the Kingdom. This passage from Matthew comes just after the second prediction of the passion and the teaching on paying the temple tax and just before several passages on forgiveness and seeking the one who is lost. Some scholars have split chapter eighteen into two parts, verses one through fourteen which are about children and verses fifteen through thirty-five which are about one who sins. “The movement of the first part (18:1-14) is attached first to the word for ‘child’ (*paidion*) in 18:2-5 and then to ‘little ones’ (*mikroi*) in 18:6, 10, 14. The realistic use of the term ‘child’ in 18:2 soon yields to metaphorical applications as the text proceeds.”⁴⁸ While, as the verses continue, it is not easy to tell whether Jesus is referring to children or disciples as he speaks of “little ones,” in the five verses at the beginning of Matthew eighteen it is clear that it is an actual child who is brought into the midst of the

⁴⁷ Weber, *Jesus and the Children*, 43.

⁴⁸ Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., “The Gospel of Matthew,” in *Sacra Pagina*, Volume 1, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, S.J. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 265.

disciples. In addition, Jesus' statement in verse five gives an explicit interpretation to the actions which he has just lived: "Whoever receives one child such as this in my name receives me" (Mt 18:5).

Knowing the social status of children in both Roman and Judaic society of the time, it seems clear that Jesus' teaching here challenges the status quo. Not only is the child dependent on the adults around him but he is also without status, "a nobody" of sorts. In response to their question on status in the kingdom, then, "Jesus challenges his followers not to think in terms of social hierarchies. The 'humility' that he recommends involves putting aside such considerations and being willing to become a social 'nobody.'"⁴⁹ Where most moralists elevate heroes, Jesus invites his disciples to both receive or welcome and to imitate a dependent and status-less child. In the struggle to interpret what exactly Jesus is lifting up when he points the disciples to the child, there is a breadth of thought, all of which revolves around smallness, be it in status, dependence, lowliness or in complete receptivity to God's action and his gift. In a culture in which the child's responsibility was to listen and obey, tasks which seem small and meritless because in all practical senses they are, the placement of an unimportant, unnamed, undescribed and silent child in the midst of adults arguing about greatness makes an incredibly striking statement. The embodiment of this truth, which some scholars refer to as a parabolic action, makes the significance of Jesus' statement very difficult to ignore. "What seems at first to be valuable moral advice – humility or 'living little' – Jesus now makes a matter of life or death, being in the kingdom or out of it."⁵⁰ This should not be of surprise to those who have read the whole of the Gospel, even if it brought astonishment to the disciples in this moment. As was said

⁴⁹ Harrington, "The Gospel of Matthew," 266.

⁵⁰ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew A Commentary. Volume 2: The Churchbook Matthew 13-28* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 208.

by Pope Benedict XVI, “Jesus identifies himself with the child – he himself has become small. As Son he does nothing of himself, but he acts wholly from the Father and for the Father.”⁵¹ Humility was seen again and again in the life of Christ who, as St. Paul says, “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness, and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even on a cross.” (Phil 2:8). It should not be surprising that the one who himself embodied humility should bring focus to a child who lives littleness and is called by the same name as that of a slave.

Keith J. White, a theologian and founder of the Child Theology Movement, takes another approach to this passage and speaks of it in parallel with Matthew’s account of the infancy of Christ:

One way of reading this incident is as an echo of the birth narratives. The first two chapters of Matthew’s Gospel place Jesus at the center of God’s saving acts. Theology, history, and revelation; now Jesus places a child in the center of his followers and in the middle of a theological discussion about the kingdom of heaven.⁵²

The child, and becoming like the child, is central to one’s entering of the kingdom just as the Christ Child, through the Incarnation, is central to opening that same kingdom to all.

“Out of the mouths of infants” (Mt 21:12-16)

Jesus entered the temple area and drove out all those engaged in selling and buying there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who were selling doves. And he said to them, “It is written: ‘My house shall be a house of prayer,’ but you are making it a den of thieves.” The blind and the lame approached him in the temple area, and he cured them. When the chief priests and the scribes saw the wondrous things he was doing, and the children crying out in the temple area, “Hosanna to the Son of David,” they were indignant and said to him, “Do you hear what they are saying?” Jesus said to them, “Yes;

⁵¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth, Part Two: Holy Week from the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), 10.

⁵² Keith J. White, “‘He Placed a Little child in the Midst’: Jesus, the Kingdom, and Children” in *The Child in the Bible*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 367.

and have you never read the text, ‘Out of the mouths of infants and nurslings you have brought forth praise?’” (Mt 21:12-16)

One final statement by Jesus regarding children deserves attention. In Matthew 11:25, Jesus speaks very favorably about children when he says, “I give praise to you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for although you have hidden these things from the wise and the learned you have revealed them to the childlike.” Although it is here translated as “childlike,” *nēpiois* is the Greek word used in this passage and is typically rendered as “infants” or those who subsist on their mother’s milk (Heb 5:13). In this passage from Matthew 11 it is these smallest one, those who have not been formally educated in any way, who are highlighted in contrast to those who are wise through their studies. Instead of earning such wisdom, those who are childlike have received it from God, the Father. “The smallest...are called by Jesus, who is Wisdom incarnate, to come to him (see also 19:14: ‘Let the little children come to me’, and Sir 24:19-22) and learn from him. They are particularly suited for his interpretation of the Torah, while the wise and the intelligent are hampered by the knowledge that they already have.”⁵³

This passage in Matthew 11 becomes enfolded and is elaborated upon in Matthew 21:14-17 where, just after his entry into Jerusalem and journey to the temple, Jesus points out to the high priests and scribes the children who are shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David” (Mt 21:9). Here, the chief priests and the scribes are indignant and Jesus quotes Psalm 8:3, “Out of the mouths of infants and nurslings you have brought forth praise.” In many ways the irony of this moment parallels that of Matthew 18:1-5. This time, however, the deep truth is being spoken to the chief priests and scribes instead of the intimate followers of Christ and not only do the children stand as those who have insight into Jesus in contrast to the Jewish leaders but they leaders are indignant towards the children. “The Psalm claims that God has put praise in the

⁵³ Weren, “Studies in Matthew’s Gospel,” 45.

mouth of children to put his enemies to shame. Matthew's story accurately reflects the relations of the Psalm: small children adore Jesus through the agency of God, while the temple aristocracy are hostile to him."⁵⁴ Children without schooling, ignorant of the intricacies of the law, have been given true insight and prompted by God to vocalize true praise. "W.D. Davies and Dale L. Allison suggest that Matthew is alluding here to the tradition of the supernatural singing of Israelite children by the Red Sea when Moses led the people out of Egypt (see Wisdom 10:21)."⁵⁵ Thus, while the passage from Matthew 11 could rightly be seen as using children as a metaphor, Matthew 21:16 has Jesus referring to actual children to whom the mystery of his identity has been revealed. "Jesus' affirmation of the children's praise of him in this pericope is thus an affirmation that children who 'know nothing' can also 'know divine secrets' and believe in him."⁵⁶ Not only, then, are children models of kingdom living, but also examples of those who receive truth directly from God.

The presence of children in the Gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry is particularly striking when set against the preceding statements regarding the place of children even in Jewish society. The Gospels recount the healing of several children by Jesus, mention a child who provides the food necessary for the feeding of a great multitude, and emphasizes children as those to whom the Kingdom of God belongs.

The Greeks and Romans viewed children as raw material to be formed, or uninformed beings to be educated. Jews believed children needed teaching and discipline so that they would learn to live like their ancestors and the adults in the faith community. However, Jesus holds up children as teachers for adults.⁵⁷

The contrast of Jesus' teaching to the common view of children at the time was striking.

⁵⁴ Weren, "Studies in Matthew's Gospel," 46.

⁵⁵ Judith Gundry-Volf, "To Such as These Belongs the Reign of God," *Theology Today*, (Jan 1, 2000), 479.

⁵⁶ Gundry-Volf, "To Such as These Belongs the Reign of God," 479.

⁵⁷ Scottie May, Beth Posterski, Catherine Stonehouse, and Linda Cannell, *Children Matter* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 42.

Children in Patristic Writings

While it is clear from the Gospels that Jesus highlights the child as exemplifying what is necessary for life in the Kingdom of God, the contrast of his witness to the societal norms, even within Jewish society, caused difficulties in clarifying the Christian view of the child. In the remainder of the New Testament writings, St. Paul pays little attention to children except to advocate for their growth in obedience (Eph 6:1-3), to speak of how they need to leave childish ways behind in becoming a mature Christian (1 Cor 13:11), and to tie their holiness or uncleanness to their parent's belief and action (1 Cor 8:12-14). One modern theologian who has worked extensively with children, described St. Paul's view on children quite harshly, stating: "They do not even appear to have had, in Paul's view, the ability to trust, to hope, or to love. Paul had a low or at least a very narrow estimate of children. There was nothing they could teach adults except by way of a bad example."⁵⁸ This tension between the emphases of St. Paul and the teachings of Christ continued to be seen in the writings of the early Church into the fifth century. While patristic writers generally interpreted Jesus' presentation of small children as examples to mean that children exemplified innocence and purity, there was also a strong tendency to dismiss the value of children as children. Many of these ideas which the patristic writers developed came about because of the early Christian Church's need to wrestle with problems related to the frequent occurrences of suffering and death in infancy as well as anthropological problems regarding the nature of the human person within Christian thought. The difficulties of *logos* as mentioned above as problematic in Plato and Aristotle likewise plagued the Judeo-Christian

⁵⁸ Jerome W. Berryman, *Children and the Theologians* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2009), 43.

community's understanding although it recognized the human person as created by God from its earliest stage of life.

In patristic terms, the anthropological problem of childhood is that of defining the condition of childhood in terms of three interrelated factors: firstly, the development of a child's soul in terms of its possession, or lack, of faculties such as reason and desire which are among the components of the human soul as they were commonly understood; secondly, the extent to which a child's soul is open to the same temptations, desires, or passions as that of an adult; thirdly, the extent to which children are capable of understanding religious ideas and precepts or may be held to deserve reward or punishment for their actions.⁵⁹

These same challenges in articulating who the child is anthropologically continue into the modern era as does the necessary balance of these questions with Jesus' elevation of the child as model.

Through Scripture commentary on the Gospels, particularly passages from Matthew 18 and 19 as well as writings on the education of children, early writers within the Church did acknowledge and attempt to interpret Jesus' teaching on children. According to St. Irenaeus (d. 202) "this is the significance of Our Lord's infancy: 'in his own he sanctifies the infancy of all little ones and shows that every age is capable of the divine mystery'"⁶⁰ Clement of Alexandria (d. 215) interprets Matthew 18:3 as referring to real children who are elevated because of their simplicity (*Paedagogue*, 1.5.12), thus opposing "a spiritual interpretation of this logion, which would interpret it as referring to some kind of regeneration."⁶¹ However, Clement also refers to childhood as a symbol "of the beginning of a new religious life of discipleship,"⁶² as the New Testament does in other areas. "Another quality Clement attributes to children is their loyalty

⁵⁹ Graham Gould, "Childhood in Eastern Patristic Thought," *Studies in Church History, Volume 31: The Church and Childhood*, 1994, 39-40.

⁶⁰ John Saward, *Perfect Fools: Folly for Christ's Sake in Catholic and Orthodox Spirituality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 10.

⁶¹ Bakke, *When Children Became People*, 59.

⁶² Gould, "Childhood in Eastern Patristic Thought," 40.

and obedience to their fathers.”⁶³ Thus, skirting around the young child’s inability to reason, Clement focuses on innocence, simplicity, and receptivity to formation by those whom they love. Origen (d. 253), the Alexandrian successor of Clement, picks up on the former’s assertion that children are free from irrational desires and adds an emphasis that this lack of desire is why children are pointed out as examples for adults,⁶⁴ solidifying his argument based on his own observations of children. While real children were a potential hinderance to the holiness of adults by keeping them from prayer, they were also “instrumental as symbols for adults to find their way back to the kingdom of God, which is somewhat like what Jesus said in a parabolic rather than a philosophical way.”⁶⁵ John Chrysostom (d. 407) follows Origen in that when he “gives examples from his observation of children’s behavior, he emphasizes that they are uncorrupted by worldly values.”⁶⁶ Chrysostom also writes of how “children’s lack of passions mean that they are unconcerned about issues related to status and wealth; hence they are paradigms of the Christian life.”⁶⁷ However, most of his writings focus on what and how to teach children in the areas of discipline so that they might grow to live a virtuous life.

Cyprian of Carthage (d. 258) makes a significant contribution to the theological understanding of the value of childhood through his emphasis on the equality of all men before God, as noted in a letter on the baptism of infants where he emphasizes that the grace of baptism is given to infant and adult in fullness alike, not according to the size of each one’s body.

But in that is expressed the divine and spiritual equality, that all men are like and equal, since they have once been made by God; and our age may have a difference in the increase of our bodies, according to the world, but not according to God; unless that very grace also which is given to the baptized is given either

⁶³ Bakke, *When Children Became People*, 60.

⁶⁴ Origen, *Commentary on Matthew XIII.16* in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 9, ed Allan Menzies (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1906), 484.

⁶⁵ Berryman, *Children and the Theologians*, 48.

⁶⁶ Bakke, *When Children Became People*, 79.

⁶⁷ Bakke, *When Children Became People*, 79.

less or more, according to the age of the receivers, whereas the Holy Spirit is not given with measure, but by the love and mercy of the Father alike to all.⁶⁸

Thus, while it is clear that there is a difference in social standing between infant and adult, Cyprian's insight is noteworthy. "Rooted in the theology of creation, Cyprian depicts infants as complete human beings. His intention is to make clear that since the gifts of God – including baptism – are for all human beings, there is no reason for postponing the baptism of infants."⁶⁹ This practice of baptizing the youngest of children, has continued within the Catholic Church until today.

In the writing of Augustine (d. 430), too, there is, at times, a strikingly positive view of childhood, seeing the child as a gift worthy of praise. "This fundamentally positive evaluation is connected to Augustine's belief that God has created children in such a way that they can seek him and find him."⁷⁰ It is to be noted that Augustine is much more well known for his view that the sufferings of children give evidence of their having inherited original sin, even if they, until the age of reason, do not have the capacity for personal sin,⁷¹ although some theologians see in Augustine a tendency to even attribute personal sin to infants. However, Augustine's awareness of sin is balanced by the same theology of creation espoused by Cyprian and the Church through the ages. The significance of a theology of creation in the debates on the nature and value of children is great, as stated by Bakke in *When Children Became People*. From the beginning of his creation, the child, created in the image of God, was good and had the same dignity, even spiritually, as adults. Thus, there was a recognition within the early Christian writers that the child could receive God's salvation and walk in his ways.

⁶⁸ Cyprian, *Epistle LVIII.3* in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids, MI: WM.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1978), 354.

⁶⁹ Bakke, *When Children Became People*, 71.

⁷⁰ Bakke, *When Children Became People*, 108.

⁷¹ Gould, "Childhood in Eastern Patristic Thought," 51.

Whereas pagans thought that a newborn baby was not a human person in the full sense, patristic thinking implies that the newborn possesses the fullness of human dignity. I quote Cyprian's words once more: 'For what is lacking to him who has once been formed in the womb by the hands of God?' (*Ep.* 64.2). This means that the newborn has a soul and can receive the gifts of divine salvation, and that the church is the instrument that is to mediate these gifts even to the smallest children. The idea that babies are created in God's image, and hence are the recipients of divine salvation, thus leads to a focus on babies and an interest in them that was unknown in pagan antiquity.⁷²

The difficulty of balancing children as examples with the necessity to leave behind childish ways continued to provide theologians through the centuries with food for pondering and reflection.

Children in the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas

Within the Church, perspectives on the dignity of the human person in the Middle Ages and beyond continued to rely on the foundation of the goodness of all of God's creation. However, even St. Thomas Aquinas gives evidence to the difficulty of reconciling the young child's lack of reasoning power with his dignity as a human being much less his value as an example of kingdom living. In fact, some have commented that the child, as described by Aquinas "is incomplete, imperfect, and (because she is irrational) still growing into her humanity."⁷³ While this can come across as callous and harsh, Aquinas speaks of this when advocating for parents and the community to take on the important responsibility to provide care for children.

Because they do not have the capacity of reason, children are entrusted to parental and ecclesial care to guide them into fuller humanity. Having received this care, the child then develops free will and 'begins to be his own master and to provide for himself in matters of divine and natural rights' (*ST*, II-II.10.12).⁷⁴

⁷² Bakke, *When Children Became People*, 109.

⁷³ Cristina L. H. Traina, "A Person in the Making: Thomas Aquinas on Children and Childhood," in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 130.

⁷⁴ Jensen, *Graced Vulnerability*, 8.

Thus, in contrast to the Greeks and Romans who saw childhood as lacking in intrinsic value, St. Thomas recognizes the dignity of the child and his need for care. At the same time, because children do not remain as such but become adults, childhood, for Aquinas, is incomplete and the young child's lack of reason is a primary aspect of this incompleteness. As Jensen states above, there is a "fuller humanity" yet to be grown into. However, the Thomistic linking of the definition of a human being to the use of reason becomes problematic as "those who are not able to exhibit the full capacity of reason – not only infants and young children, but also the mentally ill, and persons with Alzheimer's disease – are accordingly, less than full human persons."⁷⁵ All of this, while a step up from contemporaries of Christ, does not take into account Jesus' clear message about children. The understanding of who the child is has undergone a clear development since the time of Christ; however, the statements of Jesus on children have not yet been fully incorporated.

Countering Thomas' position is the reality asserted by the Church Fathers that, having been created in "the image and likeness" (Gen 1:26) of God, each human person, from conception, has great dignity. In fact, through his creation, the child possesses the fullness of the *imago Dei*, no more and no less than the adult does.

Accepting human dignity is recognizing and honoring God the Creator and Redeemer, as well as Jesus Christ, who came as a child to save us. The incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ is proof of human dignity. He was born as a child and grew up with uniqueness as an individual person to do the will of his Father. Affirming and celebrating the uniqueness of individuals is acknowledging God's purpose and destiny for them, determined by God, for the praise of his name.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Jensen, *Graced Vulnerability*, 9.

⁷⁶ Douglas McConnell, Jennifer Orona, and Paul Stockley (eds), *Understanding God's Heart for Children: Toward a Biblical Framework* (Colorado Springs, CO: Authentic, 2007), 12. Alemu Beeftu, "Biblical Basis for Recognizing Uniqueness and Dignity" (Cirencester, UK: Cutting Edge V Conference, September 29-30, 2005).

Keeping this in mind, it is striking that there is no clear church teaching on who children are and how their status should affect their rights and care. In fact, Pius XI's *Rappresentanti in terra* (1929) contains the first official mention of 'the rights of the child' as he speaks of the child's right to education.

In similar fashion, Catholic teaching has since translated a number of concerns about the well-being of children into rights, including the rights to life, culture, and adequate material support. The contribution of the rights language is that it conveys that children are persons, and as such are owed the same protections as adults.⁷⁷

While the seeds for these rights have a long history, they have only recently been seen as in need of articulation.

Children in the Modern Church

The role of the child in today's society is different from that which he had in the time of Jesus and the modern Church continues to wrestle with how to both view and serve the child. Jesus had no doubt about the value of children as children. He recognized that infants give praise to God (Mt 21:16), he spoke of them as those to whom the Kingdom belongs (Mt 19:14; Mk 10:14; Lk 18:16), and he gave thanks to the Father for revealing deep truths to little ones (Mt 17:25; Lk 10:21). Just as the child Jesus in the temple asked questions and gave answers which would not have brought astonishment had he been older, Jesus' references to children makes clear that there is a contribution to Christianity and kingdom living which only children can provide. However, "like the notion that children are fully human and made in the image of God, the idea that children can be teachers, bearers of revelation, or models of faith has often been

⁷⁷ Todd David Whitmore (with Tobias Winright), "Children: An Undeveloped Theme in Catholic Teaching," in *The Challenge of Global Stewardship*, ed Maura A. Ryan and Todd David Whitmore (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 162.

neglected in Christian thought and practice.”⁷⁸ Excepting those on the fringes of theological disciplines and those who look seriously at the New Testament passages in which Jesus encounters children, the role of the child in theology has been seriously neglected.

One rare Catholic theologian of modern times who valued the witness of the young child was Hans Urs von Balthasar, whose reflections on his own childhood, personal observations of children, and friendship with Adrienne von Speyr (1902-1967) influenced his understanding of the child. “She kept the reality of children always in front of von Balthasar and he warmly appreciated her joy, childlike qualities, and wonder – as well as her strength and courage, which were often tested by poor health and in other ways.”⁷⁹ Balthasar’s small book, *Unless You Become Like This Child*, is one of the few prominent Catholic and, for that matter, Christian works on children in modern times. In it, “[Balthasar] stressed that [children’s] nature is one of gratitude for being permitted to be. It is from this source that our ethics emerges and our life and death is framed. The mother’s smile and our tendency to play are the accent notes in his theology of childhood.”⁸⁰ In *Unless You Become Like This Child*, Balthasar goes beyond an examination of Jesus’ attitude toward children in the Gospels by focusing primarily on the Christ child, proposing that it is in becoming like the child Jesus that the Kingdom of God is opened.

A number of theologians who have worked closely with children in recent history have attempted to articulate the history of the child in the Church. In *Children and the Theologians*, Jerome Berryman, an Episcopal priest of the modern era, looks at how theologians have viewed childhood throughout history by grouping them into those with either “low” or “high” views of children. According to Berryman, “The high view is respectful to, moves toward, and is open to

⁷⁸ Marcia J. Bunge, “The Child, Religion, and the Academy: Developing Robust Theological and Religious Understanding of Children and Childhood,” *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 86, No. 4 (October 2006), 567.

⁷⁹ Jerome W. Berryman, *Becoming Like a Child* (New York: Church Publishing, 2017), 44.

⁸⁰ Berryman, *Becoming Like a Child*, 48.

learning from children. The low view is dismissing of, moves away from, and only sees children in a narrow, closed way, as objects to be taught and purified.”⁸¹ Both of these views can be found throughout Scripture and the ensuing periods of history. The low view of childhood can be seen in several of St. Paul’s letters. In his first letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul refers to childhood metaphorically. “The logic behind using the metaphor is that (adult) believers are reprimanded for behaving childishly. With the childhood metaphor, adult believers are motivated not to be or become like children.”⁸² On the other hand, the Synoptic Gospels repeatedly use a high view of childhood. “Whilst Paul called on believers to stop being like children, the Gospels urged adults to change and become like children.”⁸³ This openness to children and recognition of their present value, not just their potential in the future, was unique and scandalous in the ministry of Jesus.⁸⁴

Today the low view of childhood continues to be espoused by the majority of theologians who emphasize the difference between children and adults, defining the child based on what is lacking.

This comparison approach implies that adulthood becomes the norm for being a human being and it leads to the view that children are incomplete or undeveloped versions of adulthood, not yet fully human, lacking the wholeness of adulthood, immature, incompetent, irrational and, therefore, an adult or human being in waiting, ‘a “not-yet-adult” or an “adult to be”’.⁸⁵

Berryman lists three ways this low view of childhood has been expressed throughout history: ambivalence, ambiguity, and indifference. His articulation regarding these three attitudes helps to explain the impact that such a low view has had in undermining Jesus’ teaching on the role of the

⁸¹ Berryman, *Children and the Theologians*, 205-215

⁸² Jan Grobbelaar, “Doing theology with children: A childist reading of the childhood metaphor in 1 Corinthians and the Synoptic Gospels,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 76(4), 2020. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i4.5637>, 2.

⁸³ Grobbelaar, “Doing theology with children: A childist reading of the childhood metaphor,” 2.

⁸⁴ Strange, *Children in the Early Church*, 50.

⁸⁵ Jan Grobbelaar, “Doing theology with children: Some challenges for adult theologians,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 75(1), 2019. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75i1.5636>, 4.

child. “Ambivalence toward children combines delight and aversion, attraction and repulsion, and a movement toward and away from them.”⁸⁶ Thus, in Berryman’s view, ambivalence consists in maintaining two conflicting feelings regarding children at the same time and such an attitude makes participating, mutually, in theology difficult if not impossible. The second way the low view of childhood has been expressed is through ambiguity, a term that describes the struggle to reconcile emotions or feelings about children with logical views of children. Both of these tendencies lead, almost inevitably, to the third, indifference. While indifference can be neutral, “this neutrality, or lack of interest or concern, or sometimes even adversity towards children, usually enhances the exclusion of children from any participation in doing theology together with adults. It is as if children become almost invisible in theology.”⁸⁷ Their contribution has no place.

The low view of childhood stands in contrast to Jesus’ recognition that God has, at times, revealed truths solely to children. It also creates a barrier to the growing number of men and women who work directly with children and have experience pondering Scripture and moments of liturgy with them, discovering that even children under the age of seven are capable of providing theological insights which enrich the adult understanding of God. One such approach in the modern era takes Matthew 18:1-5, where a child is placed by Jesus in the midst of the disciples as they debated about who was the greatest in the Kingdom of God as a starting point for, in their terms, “Child Theology.” This action of Christ is never defined or explained by him and, instead, acts as sign or parable even until today. Those who engage in Child Theology advocate for a willingness to listen to the child, to engage in play with him, and to set aside preconceived ideas of the child and Scripture alike. “To achieve this goal, we shall have to

⁸⁶ Berryman, *Children and the Theologians*, 203.

⁸⁷ Grobbelaar, “Doing theology with children: Some challenges for adult theologians,” 5.

acknowledge children as our guides, being agents of faith and sources of revelation for us, as illustrated in Matthew 21:12-17.”⁸⁸ The high view emphasizes setting aside academic or intellectual knowledge of the text in order to rely exclusively on how it is heard and interpreted by the child in the moment, guided by his or her own experience. However, in the Child Theology Movement, there is a general understanding that a real child is not always needed to listen to a child’s interpretation. “This part of the experiment does not require actual children in the midst: [I]t can involve acts of imagination, stories, and the sharing of the personal experiences of children and childhood in a particular culture.”⁸⁹ Thus, while the Child Theology Movement takes into account the needs and insights of the child, it rarely includes actually interactively doing theology with children.

Somehow, the opposites which Berryman speaks of as the “low view” and the “high view” of childhood must be held in tension in order to provide authentic discernment regarding the insights of children. Marcia J. Bunge, a devoted advocate for such an equilibrium, lists perspectives which, “when held together instead of in isolation, can help guide emerging Christian theologies of childhood and strengthen the Church’s commitment to children.”⁹⁰ In her article “The Child, Religion, and the Academy” Bunge lists these six as follows:

1. Gifts of God and Sources of Joy
2. Sinful Creatures and Moral Agents
3. Developing Beings who need Instruction and Guidance
4. Fully Human and Made in the Image of God
5. Models of Faith and Sources of Revelation
6. Orphans, Neighbors, and Strangers in Need of Justice and Compassion.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Grobbelaar, “Doing theology with children: Some challenges for adult theologians,” 7.

⁸⁹ White, Keith J., *Introducing child theology. Theological foundations for holistic child development* (Malaysia Baptist Theological Seminary, Penang, 2010), 159.

⁹⁰ Bunge, “The Child, Religion, and the Academy,” 563.

⁹¹ Bunge, “The Child, Religion, and the Academy,” 563-568.

Instead of looking at children as either principally innocent or primarily sinful, innately perceiving truth, or possessing a blank slate on which truth must be written by the adult, there must be a balance reached. While children can receive truth from God directly, they are also in need of instruction from those who have studied the faith. The tensions that each of Bunge's statements reveal are applicable to the human being in general. If the child and the adult can sit together, both in need of guidance and as sources of revelation, it is possible to think of the child as one who listens to God with the adult, a role that the theologian, in particular, takes on.

Definition of a Theologian

Having looked in detail at the history of how children have been viewed throughout history as well as taking time to look closely at Jesus' own interaction with children, the next question which must be examined relates to the meaning of "theology" in order to determine whether or not children can be rightly seen as "theologians." What does it mean to be a theologian? The etymology of the word can provide insight. At its most basic level, theology comes from the Greek *theologia*, which can be translated as "the study of God." While in common usage a theologian is often seen as an expert in theology, the word itself does not intimate this but rather speaks of one who studies or speaks of God. Translating *logia* as "speaks of" is fitting as well because the Greek *logos* from which *logia* comes is also translated as "word" or "reason." Thus, "theology is thinking and talking (*logos*) about, from, towards and with God (*theos*)."⁹² In early patristic Greek Christian sources, *theologia* had already taken on a very narrow meaning and referred to those who had knowledge of and taught about the nature of

⁹²Haddon Willmer, "What is 'Child Theology'?" ed. John Collier, *Toddling to the Kingdom* (London: The Child Theology Movement Limited, 2009) 23.

God.⁹³ St. Augustine (354-430), in *City of God*, defines *theologia* as “an account or explanation of the divine nature.”⁹⁴ Similarly and yet moving to a broader definition, St. Anselm of Canterbury, in the 11th century, wrote of theology as *fides quaerens intellectum* or “faith seeking understanding” and used this as the original title for his work, *The Proslogion*.⁹⁵ This understanding of theology’s basis of faith can be found in Augustine as well and ties theology to those who live their faith as opposed to the science of catechetics where faith is being passed on to others.

Although scholastics like Peter Abelard (1079-1142), Peter Lombard (1096-1160), and Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) firmly place theology in the realm of rational study, there is room even in their understanding of theology for the child theologian. Aquinas lists a three-fold dimension to theology: “Theology is taught by God, teaches of God, and leads to God” (*Theologia a Deo docetur, Deum docet, et ad Deum ducit*).⁹⁶ In some ways, the possibility that children could contribute to theology would not have been a consideration for St. Thomas. However, if it is God who teaches theology and, through it, brings one towards himself, it does seem possible, even with St. Thomas’s definition, to see how children below the age of reason could engage in theology. St. Thomas also answers the question “Can we know God by our natural reason in this life?” by saying, “Our understanding cannot reach to the divine essence.”⁹⁷ In this statement, even the greatest of professional theologians are included as being unable to

⁹³ John McGukin, *Saint Gregory of Nazianzus: An Intellectual Biography* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), 278.

⁹⁴ Augustine of Hippo, *City of God*, VIII, 1, trans. Marcus Dods (New York: The Modern Library, 1950), 243-244.

⁹⁵ Ian Logan, *Reading Anselm’s Proslogion: The History of Anselm’s Argument and its Significance Today* (Farnham: Routledge, 2009), 85.

⁹⁶ Kelly M. Kopic, *A Little book for New Theologians: Why and How to Study Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2021), 36.

⁹⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 12, a. 12, in *St. Thomas Aquinas Summa Theologica: Complete Edition in Five Volumes*, vol. 1, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Allen, TX: Christian Classics, 1948), 58.

grasp God in himself. Continuing on, Aquinas says, moreover, “by grace we have a more perfect knowledge of God than we have by natural reason.”⁹⁸ This acknowledgment seems to shift the focus away from the reasoning mind and toward the Spirit’s gift of knowledge, recalling Thomas’ aforementioned three-fold dimension of theology. Thus, both St. Thomas and the early meaning of theology as speaking of God provide a sense in which all the faithful do theology when they ponder the deep questions of life, death, creation, suffering, etc., and they do so, at least on the most important, core level, through grace. It is even possible to say that any time one is thinking of God or speaking to him, that person is acting as a theologian.

Evagrius on Theology

Around the time that St. Augustine defined *theologia* as “an account or explanation of the divine nature,” Evagrius of Pontus (345-399), an early practitioner of monastic life in the Egyptian desert, wrote, “If you are a theologian, you will pray truly. And if you pray truly, you are a theologian.”⁹⁹ In this it is clear, Evagrius is not speaking about a professional, academic theologian, but about one who practices true *theologia* or pondering, discussing, and speaking with and about God. The Faber edition of the *Philokalia*, a collection of texts that includes Evagrius’ thoughts on prayer, contains the following definition of theology in its glossary:

[Theology] denotes in these texts far more than the learning about God and religious doctrine acquired through academic study. It signifies active and conscious participation in or perception of the realities of the divine world — in other words, the realization of spiritual knowledge. To be a theologian in the full sense, therefore, presupposes the attainment of the state of stillness and dispassion, itself the concomitant of pure and undistracted prayer, and so requires gifts bestowed on but extremely few persons.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 12, a. 13, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 59.

⁹⁹ Evagrius, *The Philokalia*, 61 in *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*, vol. 1, trans. G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware (London: Faber, 1979), 62.

¹⁰⁰ Evagrius, *The Philokalia*, 366.

In this understanding of theology, stillness and dispassion are at the heart of *theologia*, which means that a theologian is not active but rather takes on the role of the recipient. One receives the gift of moving towards complete, intimate communication with God from God alone.

Such a definition of theology is very fitting with the early monastics who spent their religious lives working towards detachment, simplicity, and receiving whatever God had for them each and every day. This is expressed by Evagrius when speaking of the goal of the monastic life when he states: “The Kingdom of Heaven is *apatheia* of the soul along with true knowledge of existing things. The Kingdom of God is knowledge of the Holy Trinity coextensive with the capacity of the intelligence and giving it a surpassing incorruptibility.”¹⁰¹ In order to attain *apatheia* and knowledge of the Trinity, Evagrius continues by advocating for the *praktikē* (practice) of subduing all appetites or thoughts that lead the monk away from love of God and neighbor, of which he lists eight: gluttony, lust, love of money, sadness, anger, acedia, vanity, and pride. Through *praktikē*, the monk seeks to gain *apatheia* or freedom from these passions, which will allow the monk to love others, including God, without impediment. In addition to dispassion, Evagrius speaks of *gnostikē* as the gaining of insight into God through the contemplation of the natural world by which God reveals himself as well as through his divinely revealed Word in Scripture.

Thus, Evagrius gives a summary of the goal of monastic life and of all Christian living in the first sentence of *Praktikē*: “Christianity is the teaching of our Savior Christ consisting of ascetical practice, the [contemplation of] nature, and theology.” For Evagrius, the highest level of knowledge is *theologia* or an encounter with God which is pure gift from him. This type of encounter, according to Evagrius, can only come once the passions have been subdued and the

¹⁰¹ Evagrius, *The Praktikos*, 2-3 in *Cistercian Studies Series: Number Four*, trans. John Eudes Bamberger, OCSO (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1981), 15-16.

person has been emptied in a way that creates space for God to fill him. The emptying is not an end in itself but rather a means to create space within for God to unite himself to the person and thus transform him through this unity.

Mystical Theology

The Eastern Christian tradition has rarely distinguished between mysticism and theology, between the personal encounter with God and the writings of the Church on him. In Vladimir Lossky's book, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, he states:

Mysticism is accordingly treated in the present work as the perfecting and crown of all theology, as theology *par excellence*. Unlike Gnosticism, in which knowledge for its own sake constitutes the aim of the gnostic, Christian theology is always in the last resort a means: a unity of knowledge subserving an end which transcends all knowledge. This ultimate end is union with God or deification, the *Theosis* of the Greek Fathers.¹⁰²

It is this *telos* of union with God that enlightens the path to encounter and know him. At times, this proceeds in a *cataphatic* or positive way, by stating what is known about God, and at times in an *apophatic* or negative way, by expressing all that God is not. Because God created all things and is beyond all that exists, apophatic theology is seen, particularly in the Eastern Church, as the way to truly approach him. "It is by *unknowing* that one may know Him who is above every possible object of knowledge."¹⁰³ The logic of this approach, in some ways, defies the disparagement of the child-theologian below the age of reason.

¹⁰² Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976), 9.

¹⁰³ Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 25.

If we can neither comprehend the One by discursive reason nor by intellectual intuition, it is because the world, when it grasps an object by reason, falls away from unity and is not absolutely one. It is therefore necessary to have recourse to the way of ecstasy, to the union in which we are wholly at one with our subject, in which all multiplicity disappears and the distinction between subject and object no longer exists.¹⁰⁴

The child that Jesus placed in the midst of the disciples taught by presence, not by word. His closeness to Christ in that moment was all that was needed. Clearly, children under the age of reason cannot seek theological knowledge with the reasoning mind; however, their life of union with other persons is theological knowledge, in an even deeper way. This understanding of unity rests on the Jewish understanding of their existence as a people chosen by and led by God. “Whereas the Gentile people finds it necessary to search for God through philosophical speculation, the chosen people have only to be attentive to the dialogue that is concretized in the covenant, established by God’s election and the people’s response.”¹⁰⁵ The People of God exist in relationship with a living Person, and each child lives this reality in a unique and individual way. God, from the child’s conception, is the one for whom each child longs. *Gaudium et Spes* says, “the invitation to converse with God is addressed to men and women as soon as they are born,” and continues, “many, however, of our contemporaries either do not at all perceive, or else explicitly reject, this intimate and vital relationship with God.”¹⁰⁶ This bond which begins in the child’s physical creation extends also to spiritual union when they, through baptism, become united with Christ and with those in the Church in a new way.

Baptism

¹⁰⁴ Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 30.

¹⁰⁵ Sofia Cavalletti, *The History of the Kingdom of God: From Creation to Parousia*, 9.

¹⁰⁶ Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* (7 December 1965), §19, in *The Basic Sixteen Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Co, 1996), 180-181.

The gift of baptism unites each of the faithful to Christ, the Church, and one another. The image that is used repeatedly in *Christifideles laici* to illustrate this point is that of the vine, representing Christ or the Church, and the branches, representing all of the members of the church community. Both the interconnectedness of the vine and the essentiality of each branch's individual union with the plant for life provide assistance in pondering the necessity of the gift of baptism, by which one first becomes, according to this image, a branch on the vine. The sacrament of baptism ontologically changes the nature of the human person, a change that is irrevocable and creates an indelible mark on the soul of the baptized. It is because of this change that the baptized person becomes truly transformed in Christ and regenerated as a child of the Son.¹⁰⁷ Because of this fundamental change in the soul of the baptized, the dignity possessed by all such persons, including infants who are brought by their parents to the font, is evidenced. Thus baptism, in particular, is essential to a person's knowledge of God as it initiates union with God and through that union, God conveys his own divine life, the life of the Trinity, to the soul.

The sacrament of baptism is so important that it has been given to the youngest of children from the early ages of the Church. "The practice of infant baptism is well documented from the second and third centuries C.E. Origen of Alexandria (185-253) claims that this practice came from the apostles."¹⁰⁸ When contemporary authors objected to the ability of infants to receive baptism because of the immature *logos* or reasoning ability of such children, the majority of Church Fathers defended the practice as did the official teachings of the Church. "St. John Chrysostom claimed that baptism added to innocence by bestowing the gifts of sanctification,

¹⁰⁷ Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles laici* (December 30, 1988), §12 (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1988), 26-27.

¹⁰⁸ Adrian Gellel, "Saintly Children: Roman Catholicism and the Nurture of Children" in *Nurturing Child and Adolescent Spirituality*, (eds) Karen Marie Yust, Aostre N. Johnson, Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, Eugene C. Roehlkepartain (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006), 84,

divine adoption, justice, and inheritance. Most important, he stated that through baptism infants become members of Christ and dwelling places for the Holy Spirit.”¹⁰⁹ Through the sacrament of baptism, all Christians are called to follow Christ in holiness of life. John Paul II emphasized that the dignity of the faithful is most fully seen when it is realized that “the prime and fundamental vocation that the Father assigns to each of them in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit [is] the vocation to holiness, that is, the perfection of charity.”¹¹⁰ Previously the inability of the youngest of children to merit anything, but rather their role of receiving all as gift was mentioned. In baptism, this is exemplified in their receiving of divine life and a call to holiness, a holiness that is lived out through the child’s receptivity to union with God.

Divinization

One of the most astounding truths in Catholic theology is the Church’s consistent teaching that God desires the divinization of mankind. Called *theosis* in the Eastern Catholic Rites as well as in the Orthodox faith, the process of man’s journey to God through transformation into Him goes beyond what could be expected or even dreamed of by humanity. St. Athanasius of the 3rd century wrote: “For he was made man that we might be made God.”¹¹¹ The 1997 edition of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* supports Athanasius’ words with quotes from 2 Peter, Irenaeus, and Thomas Aquinas in offering an answer to “Why did the Word become flesh?”¹¹² in §460. Thus, it is clear that this belief of the early Church Fathers has not changed over the centuries.

¹⁰⁹ Gellel, “Saintly Children,” 85.

¹¹⁰ *Christifideles laici*, §16.

¹¹¹ Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 54, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: A Select Library of the Christian Church*, 2nd series, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Pubs, 1995), 4:65.

¹¹² *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican City: libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), §460.

The language of divinization, on the other hand, has shifted, at least in the Western Church, towards Peter's use of "partakers of the divine nature" (2Pt 1:4). These statements reveal the same truth, that God desires mankind, made from the beginning in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26), to share in His divinity. Through the death and resurrection of Christ, and one's participation in that mystery through baptism, the human person – even the youngest child – is able to be received into communion with the Holy Trinity and become filled with God's life. This reality of partaking in the divine nature is expressed in every Eucharistic liturgy through the gesture of the preparation of the chalice and the prayer which accompanies it. As the deacon or priest pours a small amount of water into the wine that will become the Blood of Christ, he prays: "By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity."¹¹³ God accomplishes this "marvelous exchange"¹¹⁴ primarily through the sacraments of initiation, beginning with baptism. As stated by Dionysius the Aeropagite, "The divinization of man, which is based on the incarnation and redemption of Christ, is effected in the sacraments of the Church (*de Andia 1996: 292*),"¹¹⁵ and it is baptism which begins this process.

Throughout the New Testament, there are signs of God's desire for man's divinization. Each time "children of God" or "sons of God" is used in Matthew, John, Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, 1 John, and James, unity with God is implied. Second Peter contains the language for divinization most commonly used in the West as is attested to by its six citations in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*; "He has bestowed on us the precious and very great

¹¹³ *Roman Missal*, 3rd typical ed. Translated by International Commission on English in the Liturgy (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2011), 529.

¹¹⁴ *The Liturgy of the Hours according to the Roman Rite*. Vol. 1 (Advent/Christmas), Antiphon I of Evening Prayer for January 1. Translated by the International Commission on English in the Liturgy (New York: Catholic Book Publishing, 1975),

¹¹⁵ Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2004), 255.

promises, so that through them you may come to share in the divine nature” (2Pet 1:4). But these are not the only terms which signify divinization. John 15:4 states: “Remain in me, as I remain in you. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit on its own unless it remains on the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in me.” This remaining, abiding, and indwelling is another aspect of divinization and deification. There is the restoration of likeness through the forgiveness of sin, and then there is the elevation through divinization. Both of these come only through Christ and are initiated through the sacrament of baptism. “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:19-20).

From the beginning of creation, mankind was called to share God’s life through bearing His image to the world, caring for His creation, and collaborating with Him in His Plan. “Salvation is the process by which we are redeemed, restored, and recreated to be and become the persons we were meant to be in the first place, in participatory union with God, reflecting what we will perfectly become on the day of God’s final and ultimate restoration of all things.”¹¹⁶ This participation is only possible because of Christ, the exemplar whom mankind can imitate. Fully God and fully man, Jesus lived his human life perfectly. Man is invited to do the same, participating in the divine nature. The process of *theosis* does not bring about a denial or destruction of one’s human nature. “As a grace-filled invitation from God, *theosis* involves a human response that willingly enters into this process of change and growth....*Theosis* is an end of our growth in divine likeness and becomes the means by which this growth happens as we see in 2 Pet 1:3-11.”¹¹⁷ There is a participation or *koinonia* offered to each individual man who must then accept the invitation to grow in likeness to God through His grace. “This fellowship,

¹¹⁶ Wyndy Corbin Reuschling, “The Means and End in 2 Peter 1:3-11: The Theological and Moral Significance of Theosis” in *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 8.2 (2014), 277.

¹¹⁷ Reuschling, “The Means and End in 2 Peter 1:3-11,” 278.

partnership, and oneness in purpose involve a sharing in God’s divine nature and attributes,”¹¹⁸ thereby becoming immortal and incorruptible like God.

In the time after the New Testament was written, Ignatius of Antioch was the first to use what is known as the “exchange formula” as a summation of salvation: “The Word of God was made man and he who was Son of God was made Son of Man united to the Word of God, in order that man should receive adoption and thereby become the Son of God.”¹¹⁹ This idea of exchange between God and man, man and God, is echoed by a large number of early Church Fathers from both the Greek and Latin heritage including the following: Athanasius, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Cyril of Jerusalem and Maximus the Confessor. There is a consistent avoidance of any relation to pantheism or of the loss of human nature in this participation in divinity. “Though deification raises us to a participation in God that is above our nature, it does not bring about a *change* in our nature. Rather, through deification our nature is exalted, glorified, and brought to the goal for which we were made.”¹²⁰ To communicate this truth, the early Fathers used a variety of terms in addition to deification, divinization, and *theosis*, including: “ascent, adoption, grace, contemplation, vision, knowledge, likeness to God, imitation, perfection, sanctification, participation, union, angelic life, immortality.”¹²¹ However, while the language changes, the truth does not. Divinization is God’s desire for man and “deification...is not a transcending of

¹¹⁸ Reuschling, “The Means and End in 2 Peter 1:3-11,” 279.

¹¹⁹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.18.5 in *Ancient Christian Writers series*, 1:486 (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1946).

¹²⁰ Daniel A. Keating, “Deification in the Greek Fathers,” in *Called to be Children of God*, eds. David Vincent Meconi and Carl E. Olson (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2016), 55.

¹²¹ Jared Ortiz, “Deification in the Latin Fathers” in *Called to be Children of God*, eds. David Vincent Meconi and Carl E. Olson (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2016), 60.

what it means to be human, but the fulfillment of what it is to be human,”¹²² the *telos* of what God has always intended man to become.

The indwelling of God allows for the intimate knowledge of him by the baptized person. This is why Augustine, in the 4th century, specified the Catholic Church as the “home” of deification. Only through the mystical union made possible by baptism which, eventually, will be nourished by the Eucharist, is such a reality possible. Therefore, Augustine can speak to his congregation:

Let us congratulate ourselves then and give thanks for having been made not only Christians but Christ. Do you understand, brothers and sisters, the grace of God upon us; do you grasp that? Be filled with wonder, rejoice and be glad; we have been made Christ. For, if he is the head, and we are the members, then he and we are the whole man.¹²³

It is the Church which provides the opportunity for believers to be “grafted onto Christ as branches onto the vine, watered through the graces of baptism”¹²⁴ so that even the child who has not yet reached the age of reason has become united with the One for whom and by whom he was created. God has poured out his love in creating each child and, through baptism, has united himself to that same child, bringing him into the life of the Trinity. The young child’s role is simply to receive from God all that he has been given, to be known by God, and to know God intimately through this union. This is not knowledge of doctrinal facts about God, but rather the knowledge of a sheep for his shepherd, as Jesus states in the parable of the Good Shepherd, “I know mine and mine know me” (Jn 10:14). In some ways,

¹²² Andrew Louth, “The Place of *Theosis* in Orthodox Theology”, in *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions*. Mihael J. Christensen and Jeffrey A. Wittung, (Teaneck, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson Press, 2007), 39.

¹²³ Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of John 21:8*, trans. Edmund Hill, vol. III/12 (Hyde Park: New City Press, 2009), 379.

¹²⁴ David Vincent Meconi, “No Longer a Christian but Christ: Saint Augustine on Becoming Divine,” in *Called to be Children of God*, (eds.) David Vincent Meconi and Carl E. Olson (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2016), 95.

it is much more like a direct sensory awareness. The distinction between ‘direct knowledge’ and ‘knowledge about’ a subject is a familiar one. Farmer notes that our care in separating these two kinds of knowledge (religious knowing and knowledge about religion) suggests that we must also allow the possibility that direct knowing may be independent of the growth of intellectual abilities and emotional capacities. What we *can* do, she says, is consider the functioning of the intellectual and emotional processes which we bring to bear on the contents of religious awareness. That means much more than being able to give a logically correct explanation of a passage from scripture, or solve a moral conundrum.¹²⁵

This deep knowledge of God is poured out through baptism as one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit and has a particular efficacy in the child who has already been cleansed of original sin but has not yet reached the age at which personal sin is possible.¹²⁶

Children as Saints

The great desire of God to be in intimate union with all men and to transform them through his grace into a full likeness of himself by the process of divinization is one way of describing the process of sanctification. The sharing of divine life is not exclusively for adults but clearly includes young children who are even seen as models of this union with God. “Christ indicates children as models for entering the kingdom of God (Matthew 19:14), and in their process of sanctification, adults are called to become as little children (Matthew 18:3).”¹²⁷ It seems, however, that the Church has only just begun to discover the rich way in which children have the potential to live spiritually while many continue to believe that children are incapable of receiving and enjoying deep spiritual truth.

59. ¹²⁵ David Hay and Rebecca Nye, *The Spirit of the Child* (Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publisher, 2006)

¹²⁶ Pauley, *Liturgical Catechesis in the 21st Century*, 115.

¹²⁷ Gellel, “Saintly Children,” 84.

For many centuries childhood has been seen as merely a time of waiting for adulthood and, in fact, this same perspective continues to infiltrate discussions of children's spirituality and religious formation today. Thus, instead of focusing on creating space for the child's baptismal unity with God to flourish, religious formation for children primarily emphasizes the preparation for the sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist. While these sacraments are indeed essential for living a spiritual life in a full, mature way, it is interesting to note that even with such a lengthy history of acknowledging the child's ability to receive the incompressible gift of baptism, it was not until 1910, with the promulgation of *Quam singulari* by Pope St. Pius X that children were allowed to receive the Eucharist at the age of seven (the age of reason). There was great protest when this decision was made as many dioceses had well-established formation programs. "Since for the previous two centuries, the ritual of the First Holy Communion had also become an established social rite of passage to adulthood, it was feared that all the structure of Christian initiation would be shaken and children would no longer attend the catechetical program."¹²⁸ However, St. Pius X persisted in his decision to lower the age of First Eucharist and maintained, "There will be saints amongst children."¹²⁹ Just over twenty-five years later, however, in 1937, Pius XI refused to consider Francisco and Jacinta Marto for canonization because he did not think that children could understand nor repeatedly practice heroic virtue.

In 1954, another step in recognizing the child's path to God was taken by the Church when Pius XII renewed the recommendation to bring children frequently to receive Holy Communion as he "reiterated the theology of Thomas Aquinas that childhood is not an obstacle to sanctity."¹³⁰ In a further move to solidify this truth, while Dominic Savio, who died at age

¹²⁸ Gellel, "Saintly Children," 86.

¹²⁹ Gellel, "Saintly Children," 87.

¹³⁰ Gellel, "Saintly Children," 87.

fourteen, was technically too young at the time to be considered for sainthood, Pius XII began the steps for him to be beatified and declared him a saint in 1954 as the first non-martyred child to receive such a designation. Almost thirty years later, in 1981, the Congregation for Saints began to consider children aged seven and above for the process of canonization, stating, “It is possible to speak of a human being being precocious in their sense of good and evil.”¹³¹ In 2017, Jacinta and Francisco Marto, who died at the ages of nine and ten, joined the ranks of those who had been canonized by the Church.

While the recognition that children have the capacity for sanctity has shifted in the past century, at this moment in history, all who have been canonized have been above the age of reason. However, there are currently children who died before the age of seven whose causes have been brought before the Congregation for Saints. One example is that of Antonietta Meo who died at age six in 1937. “Nennolina” was referred to by

the future Pope Paul VI, then substitute secretary of state [who] wrote, ‘Truly the Lord *laudit in orbe terrarum* and, working through souls in the most mysterious ways, he grants to many, through the life of this child, not yet seven years old, the chance of penetrating the knowledge that is hidden from the proud and revealed to little ones.’¹³²

Nennolina was approved as venerable by Pope Benedict XVI in 2007 and currently has one miracle toward beatification. In an audience to boys and girls of Catholic Action on December 20, 2007, just three days after signing the decree which recognized that Antonietta Meo had lived with heroic virtue, Pope Benedict XVI said, “In just a few years, Nennolina reached the peak of Christian perfection that we are all called to scale; she sped down the ‘highway’ that leads to

¹³¹ Catholic News Agency, “Italian six-year-old takes next step towards sainthood,” *Catholic News Agency* (2007). Retrieved May 6, 2021.

¹³² Austin Ruse, *Littlest Suffering Souls* (Charlotte, NC: TAN Books, 2017), 12.

Jesus.”¹³³ If Nennolina is declared a saint, she would be the youngest non-martyred saint ever recognized by the Catholic Church.

The movement of the Church to recognize children for their holiness of life corresponds to the movement of the Second Vatican Council to remind the laity of their baptismal call to sanctity, particularly as laid out in chapter five of *Lumen Gentium*.

[The followers of Christ] are justified in the Lord Jesus, because in the baptism of faith they truly become sons of God and sharers in the divine nature. In this way they are really made holy. Then too, by God's gift, they must hold on to and complete in their lives this holiness they have received. They are warned by the Apostle to live "as becomes saints", and to put on "as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved a heart of mercy, kindness, humility, meekness, patience", and to possess the fruit of the Spirit in holiness.

This understanding of the universal call to holiness and of sanctity as a gift from God provide a basis for beginning to consider the canonization of children below the age of reason. Jesus recognized the child's ability to receive God's wisdom in Matthew 11:25 and this truth has been witnessed to by many parents and educators. "Whereas Bernadette, Francesco, and Jacinta were directly admitted to the wisdom of God through visions and instructions from Our Lady, the life of Nennolina shows how children can intuit and assimilate God's wisdom through an intimate relationship with God and through a virtuous life."¹³⁴ The gift of divine life through baptism and its resulting process of divinization is the basis for understanding how "normal" young children can articulate deep truth through their living of it. However, this capacity is not limited to the few children who have been mentioned or who are currently being brought before the Congregation for Saints. It is clear that the young child, particularly one who has received the gift of baptism, has the potential for living out the receiving of this gift in a deeply profound way.

¹³³ Pope Benedict XVI, "Address to the Children of Catholic Action," (20 December 2007).

¹³⁴ Gellel, "Saintly Children," 88.

Thérèse as “Doctor of the Church” and Theologian

While Anselm and Evagrius provide a broader understanding of what it means to be a theologian in history, the Church has provided a much more modern example of the capacity of one with little formal learning to be placed among the ranks of the theologians, based on her articulation of how to “become like a child.” St. Thérèse of Lisieux, known for her “Little Way of Spiritual Childhood,” has gifted the Church with a new pathway to holiness for many throughout the world. In addition, Thérèse has been proclaimed a “Doctor of the Church,” a title which has traditionally been reserved for those saints who have contributed in a significant way to theology or doctrine and are known as great teachers in the Church. An examination of the purpose and process of one being named a “Doctor of the Church” will provide insight into this modern return to the early understanding of what it means to be a theologian.

The use of the Greek διδάσκαλος (*didaskalos*) or “doctor” as aligned with “teacher” appears to have been common practice from at least the time of Homer.¹³⁵ For the Jewish community, it is God who most perfectly holds this title as the one who gives the Torah and provides teaching on how to live as his people. Not only does he provide wisdom for life in the natural world but, most particularly, he reveals truth about himself through the Scriptures. In the New Testament, Jesus takes on this same role and he teaches at length and with authority, as seen in Matthew 23:8-10 where he says, “You have but one teacher.” In the Gospels alone, διδάσκαλος is used in reference to Jesus forty-one times. “Thus ‘teacher’ is one of the titles most frequently given to Jesus in the Gospels, especially when one adds to this the number of times he

¹³⁵ Karl Heinrich Rengstorf, “διδάσκαλος,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, Vol. II: (Δ) – H (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1968), 135.

is addressed as ‘rabbi,’ which John 1:38 equates with διδάσκαλος.”¹³⁶ St. Paul takes this same word, διδάσκαλος, and speaks of how God has appointed such to help in building up the Church (see 1 Cor 12:28 and Eph 4:11-13). It is this use of διδάσκαλος by Paul, translated as *doctores* in the Vulgate, which is perhaps the foundation for the title “Doctor of the Church” as a designation for a prominent teacher in patristic, medieval, and modern times. “[Subsequent Christian ‘teachers’ and ‘doctors’] assist the ‘magisterium’ in expounding the faith and are authenticated by it. ‘Doctors and teachers’ help to deepen the church’s grasp of what has already been given in Christ, at least implicitly, and to spell out its implications for Christian thought and action.”¹³⁷

After the first official proclamation of four Doctors of the Latin Church (Ambrose, Augustine, Gregory, and Jerome) by Boniface VIII in 1298, it took 250 years for Pius V to add Thomas Aquinas in 1567 and four Eastern doctors (Basil, Gregory Nazianzen, John Chrysostom, and Athanasius) in 1568. The addition of Aquinas at that time and then Bonaventure in 1588 expanded the category of Doctors of the Church beyond the patristic era into more recent times. As of 2021 the Church has named thirty-two men and four women as Doctors. An examination of the list chronologically reveals a shift in the nature of those saints who have been elevated to this title. “Those declared ‘doctors of the church’ before the 19th century were typically renowned for their contributions to a vast array of theological issues, whereas the most recent choices are primarily known for their contributions to spirituality and spiritual theology.”¹³⁸ Think, for instance, of John of the Cross, John of Avila, Alphonsus Liguori, and Francis de Sales and their contributions to this field.

¹³⁶ Payne, *Saint Thérèse of Lisieux: Doctor of the Universal Church*, 7.

¹³⁷ Payne, *Saint Thérèse of Lisieux: Doctor of the Universal Church*, 26.

¹³⁸ Payne, *Saint Thérèse of Lisieux: Doctor of the Universal Church*, 15.

One final development which has significance to this summary includes Paul VI's decision in 1970 to confer this title on both Teresa of Avila and Catherine of Siena, the first women to receive such a bestowal. In Paul VI's homily on the occasion of their doctorate he made it clear that "the title of doctor is not connected to the hierarchical function of the magisterium. Through baptism, women participate in the common priesthood of all the faithful."¹³⁹ These new bestowals of the title "Doctor" led to many petitions for other bestowals by the faithful, but in 1972 Paul VI paused the consideration of any such petitions until the requirement of "eminent doctrine" could be further studied. Following this, "John Paul II's directives to the Congregation of the Causes of Saints in May 1979 and August 1980 stressed that in considering the criteria for the doctorate, they avoid too restrictive an approach to new causes, while at the same time safeguarding the prestige of the title."¹⁴⁰ St. Thérèse's cause for the title of "Doctor" was the first to utilize the new criteria subsequently issued in 1981 when her petition was formally accepted for consideration in 1997.

The requirements for recognition as a Doctor were first spelled out (although these same principles had guided previous choices) by Cardinal Prospero Lambertini (later Benedict XIV) in *De servorum Dei beatificatione et beatorum canonizatione* (1734-1738) and include the following: *eminens doctrina* (eminent learning), *insignis vitae sanctitas* (a high degree of sanctity), and *Ecclesiae declaratio* (proclamation by the Church).¹⁴¹ While the requirements of exceptional holiness and recognition by the Church are simple enough, the condition of "eminent learning" has resulted in much discussion, particularly in modern times. Steven Payne, OCD, in writing about Thérèse's process in becoming a Doctor of the Church, quotes an article from

¹³⁹ Bernard McGinn, *The Doctors of the Church: Thirty-Three Men and Women Who Shaped Christianity* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999), 18.

¹⁴⁰ Payne, *Saint Thérèse of Lisieux: Doctor of the Universal Church*, 17.

¹⁴¹ Payne, *Saint Thérèse of Lisieux: Doctor of the Universal Church*, 18.

L'Osservatore Romano from 1981 in which Agostino Trape questions the qualifications even of those already named as Doctors of the Church:

It is necessary to distinguish between a man of action, a sacred speaker, a promoter of a particular devotion, a pious writer, and a theologian. In the first cases a saint may acquire enormous merits in the Church and with regard to her, but he does not for this reason deserve, in my judgment, the title of doctor. Only in the last case (theologian) does this title come into question.¹⁴²

It is not sufficient to be a saint, even a beloved one. A doctorate signifies that one has deep understanding of doctrine and has expressed it in such a way as to reveal a particular insight through the work of the Holy Spirit. Even an eloquent repetition of another's teaching is insufficient to merit this title but only a truly original contribution and expression qualifies one. The question of whether or not St. Thérèse's teaching showed forth this particular requirement was essential to the debate among those considering the petition that she be named a Doctor of the Church. However, from the beginning of Thérèse's cause for canonization there had been a particular message which had been acknowledged and praised. In 1914, Pius X had called Thérèse "the greatest saint of modern times," and "Benedict XV characterized her 'way...of spiritual childhood' as 'the secret of sanctity,' and praised her 'ample treasure of doctrine.'"¹⁴³ During the process for her beatification Pius XI also referred to "her message and described her as the 'star' of his pontificate, a 'teacher' (*Maitre*), and even 'a word of God'!"¹⁴⁴ Taking all of this into account, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Congregation for the Causes of Saints gathered opinions from a selected group of seven theological experts who examined the written work of Thérèse and provided their independent thoughts regarding her

¹⁴² Payne, *Saint Thérèse of Lisieux: Doctor of the Universal Church*, 24. Agostino Trape, "Community and Peculiarity," *L'Osservatore Romano*, English language edition, 29 June 1981, 2.

¹⁴³ Payne, *Saint Thérèse of Lisieux: Doctor of the Universal Church*, 72.

¹⁴⁴ Payne, *Saint Thérèse of Lisieux: Doctor of the Universal Church*, 72-73.

candidacy. The insights of one, Servais Pinckaers, stand out in their relation to the title of “theologian.” As was quoted in the introduction,

‘Theology,’ Pinckaers says, ‘is, in effect, a work of wisdom,’ wherein we can distinguish two levels: (1) ‘the wisdom of the Spirit, which gives understanding of the mystery of Christ and the experience of charity,’ and which is ‘the first element in theology’; and (2) ‘the elaboration of this wisdom through theological reflection and a discerning use of available philosophical and cultural contributions, and the application of various methods and techniques of thought and expression.’¹⁴⁵

While Thérèse does not meet the criteria of being a theologian in the latter way, she qualifies clearly in the former as she provides and expresses new insight into Scripture in a way that manifests the working of the Holy Spirit. “Theology, in its profound sense of the term, is the knowledge of God, depending in effect on love, since ‘love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God’ for God is love’ (1 Jn. 4:7-8).”¹⁴⁶ In this understanding of theology, Thérèse excels as a theologian. As was stated by John Paul II in a homily on St. Thérèse, “the insights of faith expressed in her writings are so vast and profound that they deserve a place among the great spiritual masters.”¹⁴⁷ However, Thérèse also stands as an anomaly among the Doctors. How does she exemplify “eminent learning?” John Paul II began his proclamation of Thérèse as a Doctor of the Universal Church, *Divini amoris scientia*, by addressing this exact question:

In the writings of Therese of Lisieux we do not find perhaps, as in other Doctors, a scholarly presentation of the things of God, but we can discern an enlightened witness of faith which, while accepting with trusting love God's merciful condescension and salvation in Christ, reveals the mystery and holiness of the Church. Thus we can rightly recognize in the Saint of Lisieux the charism of a

¹⁴⁵ Payne, *Saint Thérèse of Lisieux: Doctor of the Universal Church*, 122. *Positio*, 902 and Pinckaers, “Thérèse of the Child Jesus,” 32.

¹⁴⁶ Sunny Peackal, “An Attempt at Theologizing the Doctrine of the Little Way of Saint Thérèse of the Infant Jesus” *Teresianum* 54 (2003/1) 118.

¹⁴⁷ John Paul II, “St. Thérèse of Lisieux Proclaimed a Doctor of the Church: Homily,” (19 October 1997).

Doctor of the Church, because of the gift of the Holy Spirit she received for living and expressing her experience of faith, and because of her particular understanding of the mystery of Christ.¹⁴⁸

It seems clear that while John Paul II insists that Thérèse is “qualified” to receive the title of “Doctor of the Church,” he also acknowledges that her reception of this title marks a change from its traditional use. The “Little Way” of St. Thérèse comes not through visions or locutions but through the very basic (but habitual) process of meditating on Scripture and then reflecting on personal experience in light of Scripture. *Divini amoris scientia* continues by acknowledging that while Thérèse had little formal learning she spent copious time immersed in reading and meditating on Scripture and listened deeply to the divine Teacher, the one she herself called her spiritual director.¹⁴⁹

During her life Therese discovered “new lights, hidden and mysterious meanings” and received from the divine Teacher that “science of love” which she then expressed with particular originality in her writings. This science is the luminous expression of her knowledge of the mystery of the kingdom and of her personal experience of grace. It can be considered a special charism of Gospel wisdom which Therese, like other saints and teachers of faith, attained in prayer (cf. Ms C, 36r).¹⁵⁰

This “Gospel wisdom” which Thérèse expresses provides particular insight into becoming a child in the way Jesus spoke of as essential to entering the Kingdom of God.¹⁵¹

Spiritual Childhood: To Receive, Enjoy, and Respond

St. Thérèse of Lisieux’s “Little Way of Spiritual Childhood,” entails humility, self-surrender, confidence in God’s providence, an ongoing recognition of the value of little things,

¹⁴⁸ John Paul II, Apostolic Letter Proclaiming St. Thérèse a Doctor of the Church *Divini amoris scientia*, (19 October 1997), 1.

¹⁴⁹ Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*. trans. John Clarke, OCD (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1996), 82.

¹⁵⁰ *Divini amoris scientia*, 1.

¹⁵¹ Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*. trans. John Clarke, OCD (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1996), 82.

and a profound reliance on God's Merciful Love. These themes are emphasized clearly and repeatedly through in her writing. Thérèse, in a sense, never left the state of childlike interactions with God and simply remained in that particular relationship with him throughout her life.

"Thérèse construed her way towards holiness based on her existential insufficiency, of weakness and of littleness, naturally pertinent to a little child."¹⁵² She seems to have lived out, more and more perfectly as she grew in intimacy with God, the essence of Jesus' command when he said, "Amen, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 18:3). Having found her pathway to sanctity in this Little Way, Thérèse manifested in herself the nucleus of all pathways to sanctity. As von Balthasar states,

Since neither the gospel nor the great saints themselves reckon [extraordinary penances and extraordinary mystical graces] as essential to Christian love but recognize that love of God and one's neighbor contains the whole of the law, and all mysticism and asceticism, Thérèse's way, which makes this love absolutely central, can be described as *the way*.¹⁵³

If, then, Thérèse's way is *the way*, it must be found in the Scriptures and in the liturgical practices of the Church. Also, if this is the way of spiritual childhood, it would be fitting to find this Little Way evidenced in the lives of young children. An examination of the essentials of Scripture, liturgy, and the prayer of the young child reveals that the simplicity of Thérèse's Little Way of Spiritual Childhood can be distilled to receiving all as God's gifts, opening and enjoying them, and responding in love. Sofia Cavalletti, an Italian Scripture scholar who spent her life observing and guiding the spiritual lives of young children proposed a method known as the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. In Cavalletti's observations of the children with whom she

¹⁵² Peackal, "An Attempt at Theologizing the Doctrine of the Little Way," 162.

¹⁵³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Two Sisters in the Spirit: Thérèse of Lisieux and Elizabeth of the Trinity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press: 1992), 298.

worked, as well as the observations which were gathered by countless practitioners of her method, the Little Way of Thérèse and the way of the child are parallel.

God the Father

Throughout her life, Thérèse saw that she was surrounded by gifts from God the Father, and she recognized each moment as an opportunity for receiving the fruits of his great love. From her youngest days, she spent time soaking up the beauty of creation, surrounded by the care and protection of her family, and immersed in an environment woven through with deep, rich experiences of faith. As she herself relates in *Story of a Soul*, “God was pleased all through my life to surround me with love, and the first memories I have are stamped with smiles and the most tender caresses. But although He placed so much love near me, He also sent much love into my little heart, making it warm and affectionate.”¹⁵⁴ Thérèse’s relationship with her father, Louis Martin, was particularly filled with love. She continues, “How could I possibly express the tenderness which “Papa” showered upon his little queen? There are things the heart feels but which the tongue and even the mind cannot express.”¹⁵⁵

While Thérèse saw God’s goodness and love surrounding her, she also recognized that God alone perfected the fatherly example of her own parent, Louis Martin, who called her his little queen. The depth to which she treasured her relationship with God the Father is beautifully witnessed to through a moment of her life in Carmel:

One of the Sisters, wishing to speak with her, knocked at the door of her cell and, on entering, found St. Thérèse sewing, with a rapt expression on her face. ‘What are you thinking of?’ asked the Sister. St. Thérèse replied: “I was meditating on

¹⁵⁴ Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, 17.

¹⁵⁵ Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, 37.

the Our Father. It is so wonderful to be able to call God ‘Our Father.’” As she said it, tears came into her eyes.¹⁵⁶

Knowing God as Father became the cornerstone of the Little Way; approaching God as a little child approaches her father on earth, with confidence and trust, became the hallmark of Thérèse’s spiritual life. She saw that “all things work for good for those who love God” (Rom 8:28), and that “we love because he first loved us” (1Jn 4:19). Every experience of her life, then, and each encounter, was seen in light of this all-encompassing love of God as Father.

However, Thérèse recognized an even deeper truth to God’s love. Because he is Father, his love leads him to bend down to his creatures. Thus,

Thérèse seems to combine something of the negativities of childhood (children are, after all, weak, untutored, etc.) with a somewhat modern-sounding appreciation of the dignity of childhood: littleness becomes strength, smallness is dignity, and so on. Not surprisingly for Thérèse, we meet the Gospel theme of kenosis: emptiness as fullness, weakness as strength, etc.¹⁵⁷

In this, “Thérèse’s insights are close to Eastern theology’s description of the ‘condescension of God.’”¹⁵⁸ She sees God’s loving mercy as the source of his continual offering of grace and help, healing and sustenance. An earthly father gives gifts to his children out of his great love in a way that a child can never repay. God the Father does the same to an incomprehensible degree. Sofia Cavalletti articulates this understanding of the Father’s Love when she states: “A plan has always existed in the mind of God, the aim of which is to bring humankind to the full enjoyment of God.”¹⁵⁹ This plan of the Father, including the intention to reestablish right order and even to raise humanity to a fullness of participation in Trinitarian life, a life of great joy, spans all of

¹⁵⁶ Vernon Johnson, *Spiritual Childhood: The Spirituality of St. Thérèse of Lisieux*, 3rd ed (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2001), 12.

¹⁵⁷ William M. Thompson, “Thérèse of Lisieux: A Challenge for Doctrine and Theology – Forerunner of Vatican III,” *Experiencing St. Thérèse Today*, John Sullivan, OCD (ed) (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1990), 179.

¹⁵⁸ Redemptus Valabek, “Thérèse’s Approach to Gospel Living,” in *Experiencing Saint Thérèse Today* (ed.) John Sullivan, OCD (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1990), 66.

¹⁵⁹ Cavalletti, *The History of the Kingdom of God: From Creation to Parousia*, 1.

created history and yet also is offered with great intimacy to the individual. God desires, out of love, that we might each say “Our Father” in a fullness of truth,

a thing we had been unable to do ever since the Fall; and so to restore to us everything that through the Fall we had lost, bestowing upon us sanctifying grace, a life of supernatural love, a partaking of the Divine Nature, a place in the family of our Father, in a word the ability to become again the children of God.¹⁶⁰

It is hard to imagine a greater gift and, in some ways, a more audacious claim. However, this pattern of condescension, of reaching to the depths to communicate love, is seen through the myriad of gifts present in creation throughout history and, in a particular way, through the greatest gift of Jesus. Truly, the Son of God born as a tiny baby shows forth the self-emptying nature of the Father’s Love. As Thérèse states, “In order that Love be fully satisfied, it is necessary that It lower Itself, and that It lower Itself to nothingness and transform this nothingness into *fire*.”¹⁶¹ While the goal is transformation, the gift comes through the lowering of oneself through love. Why such action? The Gospel of John takes on this theology of gift in a particular way.

The theological richness of the theme of gift is great, although it is hardly taken into consideration...It has been observed that ‘the theme of the gift is used by John to express the whole theology of the Word incarnate in its three principal aspects: the mission, the person, the saving activity. Everything is gift in the history of salvation worked by God, through Christ and in Christ.’¹⁶²

Thus, while the Father is constantly giving out of love, the “the breadth and length and height and depth” (Eph 3:18b) of this love shows forth in a particular way when he sends his only Son to earth as his greatest gift to humanity. From the Incarnation to Jesus’ passion, death, and resurrection, the Father’s merciful love is the driving force. In perhaps the most famous line from

¹⁶⁰ Vernon Johnson, *Spiritual Childhood*, 20.

¹⁶¹ Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, 195.

¹⁶² Sofia Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1992),

John's Gospel we hear, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (Jn 3:16). The extreme love of the Father is seen as he gives of himself in such an incomprehensible way.

Receiving the Gift

Because it is in the nature of God the Father to give out of love, humanity has always been surrounded by gifts. However, it is not enough for the gift simply to exist, sitting on the shelf, as one might say. For a gift to reach the fullness for which it was given, it must be recognized as such and be received by the one for whom it was intended. Throughout her life, Thérèse was offered many gifts. As stated above, she found herself surrounded by beauty, goodness, and love from an early age. However, Thérèse also understood, from her childhood, that all that God gave was of immeasurable value. She relates a story from her early youth when she was offered the opportunity to choose an object from a basket of items and she chose all, taking the whole basket as her own. As she states,

This little incident of my childhood is a summary of my whole life; later on when perfection was set before me, I understood that to become a saint one had to suffer much, seek out always the most perfect thing to do, and forget self. I understood, too, there were many degrees of perfection and each soul was free to respond to the advances of Our Lord, to do little or much for Him, in a word, to choose among the sacrifices He was asking. Then, as in the days of my childhood, I cried out: "My God 'I choose all!' I don't want to be a saint by halves, I'm not afraid to suffer for You, I fear only one thing: to keep my own will; so take it, for 'I choose all' that You will!"¹⁶³

For Thérèse, then, the first response to any gift from God was simply to choose to receive it! She lived this practice in a particular way during her journey to enter Carmel, a goal she desired to reach by her fifteenth birthday. Because her reception at such a young age needed to be sanctioned by authority, Thérèse approached the bishop and then, later, Pope Leo XIII.

¹⁶³ Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, 27.

Neither meeting ended in success. However, even these events were received as gifts, by Thérèse, from God the Father. After meeting with the bishop Thérèse remarked, “Ah! how painful it was! It seemed my future was ruined forever. The more I approached the goal, the more I saw my affairs all mixed up. My soul was plunged into bitterness but into peace too, for I was seeking God’s will.”¹⁶⁴ Here is evidenced not just her receptivity to a momentary setback but to all that God gives along the journey of life. This receiving of the gifts of God shows forth a maxim Thérèse proclaims at the beginning of *Story of a Soul*, “Perfection consists in doing His will, in being what He wills us to be.”¹⁶⁵ To receive authentically is to receive all that is given.

Opening and Enjoying the Gift

Thérèse not only received the gifts of God the Father in her daily life, but she opened and enjoyed them. The wonder and awe characteristic of enjoyment is evidenced on one hand in her reaction to the fruits of creation. In speaking about time spent with Céline, her sister, she said, “With enraptured gaze we beheld the white moon rising quietly behind the tall trees, the silvery rays it was casting upon sleeping nature, the bright stars twinkling in the deep skies, the light breath of the evening breeze making the snowy clouds float easily along.”¹⁶⁶ This delight in God’s gifts did not stop with creation nor did it reach only to what might be considered as “good” gifts. In speaking of the trials her father faced during the final years of his life, Thérèse reflected,

One day, in heaven, we shall love talking to one another about our glorious trials; don’t we already feel happy for having suffered them? Yes, Papa’s three years of martyrdom appear to me as the most lovable, the most fruitful of my life; I wouldn’t exchange them for all the ecstasies and revelations of the saints. My heart overflows with gratitude when I think of this inestimable treasure...My soul

¹⁶⁴ Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, 118.

¹⁶⁵ Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, 14.

¹⁶⁶ Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, 103.

soon shared in the sufferings of my heart. Spiritual aridity was my daily bread and, deprived of all consolation, I was still the happiest of creatures since all my desires had been satisfied.¹⁶⁷

Even while experiencing her dark night of faith in which it seemed impossible to hold to the reality of heaven, there is an opening and enjoying to be seen in Thérèse. She says, “Never have I felt before this, dear Mother, how sweet and merciful the Lord really is, for He did not send me this trial until the moment I was capable of bearing it.”¹⁶⁸ As always, her desire to receive and enjoy all that God had for her extended to every one of his gifts, even the gift of suffering. In fact, she saw that this is, perhaps, the greatest gift. “Is there a *joy* greater than that of suffering out of love for You? The more interior the suffering is and the less apparent to the eyes of creatures, the more it rejoices You, O my God!”¹⁶⁹ Even suffering, for Thérèse, was to be opened and enjoyed as it came from the One who gives all things, at the perfect time, in love.

Responding to the Gift

Having received, opened, and enjoyed God’s gifts was not enough for Thérèse, and in reflecting on her young life, she gives many examples of how she had often looked for small gifts which she could offer to God. Each day produced many opportunities for the giving of such treasures. Thérèse, in speaking of her childhood says, “I loved God very much and offered my heart to Him very often.”¹⁷⁰ She mentions, as well, having offered herself “to the Child Jesus as His *little plaything*.”¹⁷¹ But the small gifts and small responses of Thérèse led to greater and greater desires, leading her to respond more and more fully to God. As these desires grew, the

¹⁶⁷ Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, 157.

¹⁶⁸ Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, 214.

¹⁶⁹ Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, 214.

¹⁷⁰ Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, 38.

¹⁷¹ Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, 136.

realization that she did not have the ability to make a commensurate response grew as well. “But who can produce such a love? Thérèse knew that she could not do so alone.”¹⁷² At the same time, she came to recognize that God, in his goodness, would not give such desires if they could not be fulfilled. For Thérèse, it was clear that she was “too little” to give the greatness of response on her own. Where would the ability to return love for love come from? Thérèse looked to Scripture and her spiritual Director, Jesus, for an answer which would provide a shortcut to the fulfillment of her desires.

I read these words coming from the mouth of Eternal Wisdom: “Whoever is a LITTLE ONE, let him come to me.” And so I succeeded. I felt I had found what I was looking for. But wanting to know, O my God, what You would do to the very little one who answered Your call, I continued my search and this is what I discovered: “As one whom a mother caresses, so will I comfort you; you shall be carried at the breasts, and upon the knees they shall caress you.” Ah! never did words more tender and more melodious come to give joy to my soul. The elevator which must raise me to heaven is Your arms, O Jesus! And for this I had no need to grow up, but rather I had to remain little and become this more and more.¹⁷³

It was God’s own strength and power which would provide her with the ability to respond to his gifts. His own love would be the love with which she would love him. Not only was she to approach God as a little child, but she was to allow him to carry her and provide her with his own strength which would be her response. “God as love was not only real, pre-eminent and faithful but stooped down to his creatures. His was a love that sought out the lowly in order to fill them to the brim precisely because they were lowly.”¹⁷⁴ His love was one which, once received, overflowed in response.

Jesus, as always, was Thérèse’s model, and he had given the preeminent example of a wholehearted response to the Father. “Of the many attempts of people throughout history to

¹⁷² Conrad de Meester, OCD, *With Empty Hands: the Message of St. Thérèse of Lisieux* (New York: Burns & Oates, 2002), 58.

¹⁷³ Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, 208.

¹⁷⁴ de Meester, *With Empty Hands*, 56.

respond to the repeated and constant gift of God, [in Christ] the divine gift is finally met with the fullest and most worthy response possible.”¹⁷⁵ Jesus’ whole life was a life of gift. His very presence on earth was the greatest gift, sent from the Father out of love. While his whole life was gift, he also lived a life of response to the Father. For, “when he came into the world, he said: ‘Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me.’... Then I said, ‘As is written of me in the scroll, Behold, I come to do your will, O God’” (Heb 10:5, 7). The response of Christ to the Father provided not only a witness to love but an example for humanity to follow. Not only had Jesus given the example, but he had also provided the means, through the gift of the Church, to allow each member to respond to God’s love as Jesus himself did. “To [Thérèse], the Church exists for one purpose only, to convey to each individual soul the life of Christ and his power to love. It was this life that the Church bestowed upon her at her baptism, making her a child of God, a partaker in the Divine Nature, and heir to heaven.”¹⁷⁶ How can one love God who is infinite? First, one must receive from him the love by which one can then respond in love.

It is the life of God in the souls of those who love him. God has sent his Son. God gives God to men, and he gives himself twice. He has given his Son, but the Son and the Father send their Spirit to make their dwelling in us. The Church calls this most profound aspect of our life ‘divine missions.’ God became man so that we could become God... For the Christian, it is proposed that he ‘become god’ through a ‘supernatural’ growth of knowledge and of love that God himself offers man on the condition that he disarm himself.¹⁷⁷

This process of *theosis* then allows man to both receive and respond as God himself has.

Receiving from God this great gift of one’s own life is witnessed to in Scripture as well.

In the first chapter of John’s Gospel is found: “But to those who did accept him he gave power to

¹⁷⁵ Cavalletti, *The History of the Kingdom of God: From Creation to Parousia*, 138.

¹⁷⁶ Johnson, *Spiritual Childhood*, 29.

¹⁷⁷ Bernard Bro, *Saint Thérèse of Lisieux: Her Family, Her God, Her Message*. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), 86.

become children of God, to those who believe in his name, who were born not by natural generation nor by human choice nor by a man's decision but of God" (Jn 1:12-13). Here again is found that profound giving of all that is good by God to man, through the Father's own choice and not by any merit on the part of a particular man. This gift of grace, of God's own life to man, must first be received, and it is only through God's own help that man becomes who he was always intended to be both collectively and individually. "What, indeed, is perfect in [God's] eyes? Thérèse offers a masterly definition: 'Perfection' consists 'in *being* what he wants us to be' – and eventually in *becoming*, with the help of his mercy, what he wants us to become."¹⁷⁸ This comes about first by receiving all from him, including opening and enjoying the gifts of his love, and then by returning all to him through his own gift of love. Thérèse loved as she had been loved, receiving and then responding in imitation of Christ who came as gift in the Incarnation and then poured himself out even to death. She knew that "what the Father said of Christ: 'He is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased,' he want[ed] to repeat about [Thérèse]: 'As my Father has loved me, so I have loved you.'"¹⁷⁹ Her acceptance of this truth of God's individual, personal, unmerited love, stands as a clear witness to the Gospel wisdom of her Little Way.

Thérèse had such a great desire to respond to God that she felt moved to be warrior, priest, apostle, prophet, doctor, and martyr. Her resolution of the conflict between the gift of these desires from God and the gift of a vocation of cloistered nun is expressed in one of her most famous quotes:

Charity gave me the key to my vocation. I understood that if the Church had a body composed of different members, the most necessary and most noble of all could not be lacking to it, and so I understood that the Church had a Heart and that this Heart was burning with love. I understood that it was Love alone that made the Church's members act, that if love were ever extinguished, apostles would not proclaim the Gospel and martyrs would refuse to shed their blood. I

¹⁷⁸ de Meester, *With Empty Hands*, 68.

¹⁷⁹ Bro, *Saint Thérèse of Lisieux*, 94.

understood that love includes all vocations.... Then in the excess of my delirious joy, I cried out: 'O Jesus, my Love...my *vocation*, at last I have found it...my vocation is Love!¹⁸⁰

Thérèse's response was so all-encompassing that it could only be fulfilled through loving at each moment, in each circumstance, through loving God and through pouring out her love on those around her, experiencing, with intention, each moment as an offering to his Merciful Love. This became her vocation and, through her articulation of the Little Way of Spiritual Childhood, it became a path for many others as well.

The Witness of the Eucharist

The self-emptying of God in the person of Jesus was not the farthest to which the Father's love would extend. It was not enough to come among men as one of them, but he desired to remain, always, with them. In the Eucharist, the Son empties himself still further, hiding both divinity and humanity under the signs of bread and wine. "The word *to hide*, in relation to God and Thérèse, appears 212 times in the writings of the Carmelite nun! This is mentioned in order to emphasize the wealth of quotations concerning the Redemptive Incarnation, the Eucharist and Thérèse's attitude."¹⁸¹ Remaining with the Church, hidden under the signs of bread and wine, became, for Thérèse, an image of how she desired her life to unfold.

From the world's point of view there is nothing but the appearance of bread, as simple and ordinary as the simplest and most ordinary things in life: yet it is God. Day after day Christ is there to remind us that it is through the simplest and most ordinary things that he comes to us and desires that we should go to him. From the Blessed Sacrament St. Thérèse learned the reality and condescension of Our Lord's love.¹⁸²

¹⁸⁰ Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, 194.

¹⁸¹ Guy Gaucher, *John and Thérèse: Flames of Love* (New York: Alba House, 1999), 115.

¹⁸² Johnson, *Spiritual Childhood*, 32.

It was her understanding of not just Christ's example and witness in remaining with his people under the signs of bread and wine,¹⁸³ but also the reality that those who received the Eucharist were on a path of continual transformation and furthered communion with him. This was her greatest desire, and she had full confidence in the Father's ability to bring her desire to fruition. The gift of the Mass as the continued offering of the Son to the Father was the living, ongoing witness for Thérèse of her Little Way. "To St. Thérèse, Our Lord's sacrifice, and its continuation in the Mass, was, above all, the heavenly Father's merciful love stooping down from heaven to earth and gathering his children once again into his arms. This indeed is the whole purpose of the Mass."¹⁸⁴ It is this intimate closeness with God which following the Little Way provides guidance for both within the celebration of the Eucharistic Liturgy and in every moment of every day.

Is it too simplistic to see the Eucharist as an example *par excellence* of gift and response?

Sofia Cavalletti, in her work with children from the ages of three to six, realized that

The aspect of the Mass that has been demonstrated to respond to the young child's capacities is that of the 'sacrament of the gift.' That is, the Mass is presented as the most particular concretization of the continuous gift the Father sends us in the person of his Son, incarnate, dead and risen, and of the gift with which man endeavors to respond to the Father. The Mass is this wonderful exchange of gifts between heaven and earth; or, better, it is the culmination of the many ways in which man tries to respond as fully as possible to the gift received.¹⁸⁵

To bear witness to this claim, Cavalletti points to the two primary gestures which frame the Eucharistic prayer as showing forth the essential form of the Mass. In the prayer of invocation or Epiclesis, God the Father is asked to send the Holy Spirit in order that the bread and wine might be transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ. After repeating the command and words of

¹⁸³ Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, 199.

¹⁸⁴ Johnson, *Spiritual Childhood*, 20.

¹⁸⁵ Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child*, 83.

Jesus himself at the Last Supper, the Eucharistic Prayer concludes with a second gesture, that of offering the now consecrated and transformed Eucharistic species back to the Father, “Through him, and with him, and in him.”¹⁸⁶

These are two complementary gestures that express in an evident manner the gift that comes from above at the divine initiative, and the response offered from earth to heaven. They result in a global and essential presentation of the reality of the Mass; they are an efficacious and immediate means of initiating children to a fundamental point of biblical theology: the theology of the covenant.¹⁸⁷

What is covenant theology but the meeting of God, who invites, and man, who responds? And yet in this most essential summary of the relationship between God and man, with what does man respond to God? Mankind responds by offering the gift he has received, the true presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, through, with, and in whom all of creation is offered back to God. Here, again, we see Thérèse’s insight manifested in the liturgy. “The very life of Christ in her soul was the source of all her power to love the Father with a love worthy of him.”¹⁸⁸ She lived out, in practice, what Cavalletti recognized as the essence of liturgy:

Worship, like breathing, comprises two moments: the first when everything is given to us from on high, the second when everything returns from humanity to God. This is the dynamism by which the Mystical Body lives. Accordingly, liturgy can be understood as an exchange between heaven and earth and between earth and heaven, with heaven sending its gifts to earth and earth, as far as it is able, responding and reciprocating the gifts from heaven through Christ and the Spirit’s operative and animating presence.¹⁸⁹

Liturgical worship, then, consists in gifts given, received, and offered back in response, paralleling the life of Thérèse.

¹⁸⁶ *Roman Missal* (2011), 643.

¹⁸⁷ Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child*, 84.

¹⁸⁸ Johnson, *Spiritual Childhood*, 28.

¹⁸⁹ Sofia Cavalletti, *The History of the Kingdom of God: Liturgy and the Building of the Kingdom* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2013), 19.

It was through Thérèse's recognition that receiving God's love formed the foundation for any ability to respond with love that she moves deeper into the Little Way of Spiritual Childhood to its worthy partnership in the offering of herself to his Merciful Love. In the period in which Thérèse lived, many religious were offering themselves to God's Justice and so Thérèse's focus on God's Merciful Love was particularly striking. Her Little Way of Spiritual Childhood, in which she receives all from God and enjoys all that he has given leads, most perfectly, to the response of offering herself to him. "The latter is like the heart of the 'little way' expressed in the form of a prayer. In line with this offering, we can speak of progress and of growth in depth in the sense that Thérèse lives and understands God's merciful love 'better than ever,' and abandons herself to it more effectively until this abandonment becomes second nature."¹⁹⁰ Not only did she desire to receive, open and enjoy, and respond to the gifts of God, but she wanted to live every moment in this posture of receptivity and offering before the one who had so much love to give. As she says:

It seems to me, too, that You would be happy not to hold back the waves of infinite tenderness within You. If Your Justice loves to release itself, this Justice which extends only over the earth, how much more does Your Merciful Love desire to set souls on fire since Your Mercy reaches to the heavens. O my Jesus, let me be this happy victim; consume Your holocaust with the fire of Your Divine Love!¹⁹¹

Through such an offering, Thérèse concretized what she lived in each moment of her life, her vocation of Love.¹⁹²

The Child's Response to Love

¹⁹⁰ de Meester, *With Empty Hands*, 74.

¹⁹¹ Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, 180-181

¹⁹² Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, 194.

From her early childhood, Thérèse's life rested on the foundation of gift and response as modeled by Jesus. "Life was a gift *from* him and must be spent *for* him. She knew that she had been summoned by creative love and wanted to respond to the challenge of that unique love by assenting to it wholly and completely, with all her being."¹⁹³ What response was needed in the face of such a great gift? "For Thérèse 'love' and 'receive' are synonymous....To love is, first of all, the harder thing – to allow oneself to be loved by Jesus, just as he wills, with no reservations or restrictions or dispensations asked for."¹⁹⁴ It is this receiving of love that comes before anything else. To receive, open, and enjoy is the first desire of the lover for the beloved. Thus, "for Thérèse, love is above all 'to receive' from Jesus' heart his undying affection and concern. Holiness is to allow Jesus to give to and to take from, just as he wills."¹⁹⁵ For Thérèse, then, prayer was a response to His many gifts: "For me, *prayer* is an aspiration of the heart, it is a simple glance directed to heaven, it is a cry of gratitude and love in the midst of trial as well as joy; finally, it is something great, supernatural, which expands my soul and unites me to Jesus."¹⁹⁶ Whatever was experienced in life, be it sorrow or joy, her response was to receive from his love and respond in love.

In her study of children at prayer, Cavalletti parallels Thérèse, placing the "human part of prayer" second. "Prayer is the response to the One who speaks to us first. Prayer is listening to the One who has spoken before we do, to the One who calls each of us by name. Above all, prayer is receiving God's gift. The psalmist says: 'O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise' (Psalm 51:15)."¹⁹⁷ This is the essence of Thérèse's Little Way. One first

¹⁹³ de Meester, OCD, *With Empty Hands*, 4.

¹⁹⁴ Valabek, "Thérèse's Approach to Gospel Living," 67.

¹⁹⁵ Valabek, "Thérèse's Approach to Gospel Living," 63.

¹⁹⁶ Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, 242.

¹⁹⁷ Cavalletti, *The History of the Kingdom of God: Liturgy and the Building of the Kingdom*, 23.

receives all from above and then, as far as one is able, responds “through him, with him, and in him.”¹⁹⁸

This receptivity of Thérèse also brought with it a desire to return, in kind, what she had been given, “not allowing one little sacrifice to escape, not one look, one word, profiting by all the smallest things and doing them through love.”¹⁹⁹ But how does sacrifice fit with a theology of gift and response? “Offering something to the giver of the gift is a spontaneous gesture when the child is very happy; in such an instance, offering is an expression of *joy*.”²⁰⁰ For Thérèse, as for the young child, all that God does and is comes back to gift. Recognizing, receiving, and enjoying him and his gifts results in a great desire to respond in kind. Thus, “there is generated within the child a desire to express in some way the enchantment he experiences. The hands that are lifted up are a manifestation of the child’s joy and not as yet of his moral commitment. They are offering, not sacrificing: sacrifice, as we said, requires effort and pain; offering flows spontaneously from a joyful heart.”²⁰¹ This description resonates with the way in which Thérèse spoke about her sacrifices, particularly as she reached the end of her life.

“For a long time I have not belonged to myself since I delivered myself totally to Jesus, and He is therefore free to do with me as He pleases. He has given me the attraction for a complete exile and He has made me *understand all the sufferings* I would meet with, asking me if I would want to drink this chalice to the dregs; I wanted to seize this cup immediately when Jesus presented it...”²⁰²

The sacrifices which Thérèse often described were not large penances she sought out but rather the small acts of love that she found moment by moment, which she would consistently offer to God with joy, as a child gives all that he has to the one that he loves with smiles and laughter.

¹⁹⁸ *Roman Missal* (2011), 643.

¹⁹⁹ Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, 196.

²⁰⁰ Sofia Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child*, 88.

²⁰¹ Sofia Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child*, 88.

²⁰² Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, 218.

“‘Sacrifice’ stresses the painful dimension every offering involves, whereas ‘gift’ emphasizes the gratifying aspect that is not less present in every offering that has love as its origin.”²⁰³ The young child lives the act of sacrifice of which Thérèse so often speaks by giving freely and completely as an expression of his love.

Thérèse lived a life of simplicity before God, receiving all from him and responding with his own love to him. From the beginning of her religious life, this simplicity was evident and, in many ways, hid her profound relationship with God. Thérèse relates an interaction with an older sister that occurred not long after her entrance into Carmel:

She said laughingly during recreation: “My child, it seems to me you don’t have very much to tell your Superiors.” “Why do you say that, Mother?” “Because your soul is extremely *simple*, but when you will be perfect, you will be even *more simple*; the closer one approaches to God, the simpler one becomes.”²⁰⁴

This anecdote fits well with the profound depth of the Little Way of Spiritual Childhood that Thérèse became more and more able to articulate near the end of her life. She had spent twenty-four years walking the path of receptivity and response, breathing in his many gifts, opening and enjoying them, and then breathing out her gratitude, on the strength of his love. In the words of John Paul II, her path of spiritual childhood provides a pathway for all as “Through spiritual childhood one experiences that everything comes from God, returns to him and abides in him, for the salvation of all, in a mystery of merciful love. Such is the doctrinal message taught and lived by this Saint.”²⁰⁵ This Little Way is the pathway of Christ, of the liturgy, and of the young child. It is, as von Balthasar said, “*The way*.”²⁰⁶

The Child as a Theologian

²⁰³ Sofia Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child*, 86.

²⁰⁴ Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, 151.

²⁰⁵ *Divini amoris scientia*, 2.

²⁰⁶ von Balthasar. *Two Sisters in the Spirit*, 298.

It seems clear that individual children can be elevated, through God's grace, to a life of holiness and that Thérèse's "Little Way of Spiritual Childhood" has a profound resonance with the emphasis Jesus placed on even the adult's need to "become like a child." However, a general attention to children and what they have to offer the adult as a model for sanctity has yet to impact the majority of theological discussions and studies. Despite the clear statements of Jesus regarding children, there has been little attention paid by theologians to what insights children might bring to theological conversations. This lack is not without precedent as even the disciples struggled to grasp and accept the values Jesus proposed regarding children and accept them. Instead, they continued to debate "who was the greatest" even up until and into the Last Supper (Lk 22:24-26). Typically, children are relegated into one of two opposing categories. In some cases, they are seen as innocent and close to God, without need of guidance in developing that relationship into a life of moral virtue and spiritual acuity. On the other hand, children are often seen as sinful, willful, and in need of clear discipline and instruction. Neither of these polarizing views gives credence to the complexity of the relationship between the child and adult in terms of theological insight and growth. "The need to deal with problems will, of course, be pressing in the case of every child, but if this need dominates the thoughts and actions of those who provide care, much of the wonder and joy of relating to children will be shrouded or even lost."²⁰⁷ That being said, not once in the verses mentioned earlier where Jesus interacts with children is the child shown as a problem. Instead, "Jesus challenges us to observe, listen, and learn from them how to be great disciples, living out kingdom values. Jesus challenged his disciples to demonstrate another sign of greatness, welcoming children (Matthew 18:5; Mark 9:37; Luke

²⁰⁷ Martin E. Marty, *The Mystery of the Child* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 1.

9:48)... Listening to children is a crucial part of welcoming them in the name of Jesus, as Jesus would.”²⁰⁸ Judaic-Christian tradition has recognized children as sources of joy and as gifts of God who come from and belong to him. While children can be seen as gifts in potential – able to grow into valuable citizens of service to the community and the world – can they also be seen as gifts in this moment of their childhood? Jesus clearly did, and, stemming from his teaching, there are several aspects of childhood which are worth noting as examples of how children teach what it is to “become like a child.”

Most theological expositions of children treat what children are in need of, what they can be or must be taught, and how to do so. But what if that question were turned around and, instead, the child were pondered for what he can and must teach adults, even theologically? This would not be a new idea; Jesus Himself said you must become like children. In some ways, then,

children are in a real sense God’s language in and through which he reveals his true nature and therefore the nature of his kingdom. It is not just that children are signs whose message has to be read and interpreted (though they are also that); rather, as children *qua* children they are God’s language.²⁰⁹

Keith White, of the Child Theology Movement, argues this because of the child’s receptivity to God. Through them, God speaks. Yet, the Child Theology Movement and the broader focus on the study of the child continues to be a relatively new area of emphasis in the Church with very few proponents. Those engaging in this theological field have approached the child in a variety of ways, but few have examined what the child, the actual, physical child who occupies our daily lives, can teach the adult and the Church, theologically. If children live Thérèse’s “Way of Spiritual Childhood,” they will live out in action, in word, and even through their artistic responses to truth this same pattern of receiving gift, opening and enjoying it, and responding.

²⁰⁸ Stonehouse and May, *Listening to Children on the Spiritual Journey*, 15.

²⁰⁹ White, “He Placed a Little child in the Midst,” 373.

Dr. Sofia Cavalletti (a Hebrew Scripture scholar) and her predecessor Dr. Maria Montessori (a medical doctor with training in anthropology and child development), through their observation of and experience with children, emphasize, paralleling the statements Jesus made regarding children, that it was the adult who needed to prepare himself to see the truth which the child was constantly living through his life.

Receiving the Gift

In Matthew 18:1-5, Jesus specifically points to the humility of the child as an aspect for emulation. There are mixed views about the voluntariness of this supposed virtue, however, because children in the time of Christ really had no other choice. As shown above, some of the youngest ones were unnamed, the slightly older were to listen and obey, and none of them had any status or rank in civil society although many had a beloved place in their own families. However, whether the humility of the child in Jesus' time referred to social standing or virtue, the littleness and simplicity of the young child cannot be denied. For the vast majority of children, basic physical needs suffice to bring contentment and even joy. Food, shelter, warmth, and safety go a long way in satisfying the needs of a very young child, as long as these provisions are accompanied by a love experienced by the senses: eye-contact, sound, touch, etc. The role of the child in all of this is a very humble one. He receives.

Because the child is natural, open, without intentions or fear of failing to assert itself, it is receptive to the great, revolutionary ideas in Christ's teaching of the kingdom. The same teaching is met with reserve by the mature listener. His cleverness condemns it as impossible; his caution warns him of the consequences; his self-esteem is soon up in arms; his hard grasp cannot let go. He has encysted himself in artificialities, and fearful for his brittle little world, he prefers not to understand. Fear has made his eyes blind, his ears deaf, his heart dull; as Jesus would say, he is over-mature.²¹⁰

²¹⁰ Guardini, *The Lord*, 313.

While Matthew speaks of “humbling” oneself, in all other passages where Jesus is found interacting with children (including, in some ways, Mt 18), it is the receptivity of the child and his willingness to accept what has been given which is accented. Thus, “the same words show up in many summaries: children are unself-conscious, receptive, trusting, dependent, flexible, open to learning new ideas, evidencing trust and freshness, unsophisticated, and – this word may tell the most – responsive.”²¹¹ It is the balance between these two qualities – receptivity and responsiveness – which bring back Thérèse’s “Way of Spiritual Childhood” in which it is the receiving of gift, enjoying of it, and the responding to it which stand out. “The child accepts life or is taught to accept life and all that goes with it as a graced endowment. The postures and gestures of response mean that the initiative remains with the giver, and the child responds by accepting what the Other offers.”²¹² As von Balthasar states,

For the child it is natural to receive good gifts, and so docility, obedience, trust and sweet surrender are not for him virtues to be expressly achieved but the most unreflected natural things in the world. This is so to such an extent that the child adopts the mother’s giving attitude unquestioningly as the right one, and he gives spontaneously when he has something to give.²¹³

Receiving and responding are natural for the child who has no ability to earn even what is necessary for the most basic level of existence.

For most in these modern times, humility is seen to be unimportant and even detrimental to living a full life. However, recognition of the gifts in one’s life necessitates humility. “The pagan gods were ‘mystic, capricious, and even indifferent.’ The Christian God, on the other hand, made men feel secure in admitting that they were what they are, not gods.”²¹⁴ This recognizing and receiving of gift is then to be followed by the enjoyment of it. “The ‘great

²¹¹ Marty, *The Mystery of the Child*, 85.

²¹² Marty, *The Mystery of the Child*, 87.

²¹³ von Balthasar, *Unless You Become Like This Child*, 22.

²¹⁴ James V. Schall, *A Line Through the Human Heart* (Tacoma, WA: Angelico Press, 2016) 19.

collapse of joy' in literature and philosophy, then, is no accident. If humility is the virtue that enables us to accept what is not ourselves as a gift to ourselves, we can anticipate being filled by the love of what is not ourselves...The humble man has all else *that is* and only then knows the joy for which he exists."²¹⁵ The joy here mentioned moves the conversation into the next aspect of opening and enjoying the gift.

Opening and Enjoying the Gift

The greatness of the receptivity of children enables an attention to detail that often astounds adults. It seems clear that "the sheep of the Good Shepherd do not require a fancy education, or a lengthy period of initiation, or a course in a foreign language to recognize his voice! They only need to *pay attention*."²¹⁶ Thus, children point out the differences between two beautiful rocks which must both be brought home for further study. They notice aspects of a photograph as significant which an adult overlooks. They are attuned to gestures and movements occurring around them and ponder the meaning. As they take in life experiences for the first time, they enjoy each one's beauty, frequently evidencing great wonder and awe, with a fullness often long set aside by adults. "Children may open their eyes with wonder to see beauty in the gift of life, but for many adults a *conscious* choice is needed to open older eyes with wonder to see God's gifts."²¹⁷ When this laser focus is turned toward Scripture and the Sacraments, the child breathes in through his senses the sights and sounds, movements and smells, in order to enjoy them. In an incarnational liturgy like that through which the Catholic Church worships God, there are a plethora of sensorial stimuli to take in and enjoy. Sofia Cavalletti observed the

²¹⁵ Schall, *A Line Through the Human Heart*, 20-21.

²¹⁶ Suzanne Lewis, *Living in Joyful Hope* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2005), 112.

²¹⁷ Berryman, *Becoming Like a Child*, 153.

young child's ability to receive truth particularly as it is revealed through parables (from Scripture) and sacramental signs (from the liturgy). She writes, "It is a fact that the child seems more capable of seeing the Invisible, almost as if it were more tangible and real than the immediate reality.... [C]hildren penetrate effortlessly beyond the veil of signs and 'see' with utmost facility their transcendent meaning, as if there were no barrier between the visible and the Invisible."²¹⁸ This observation of the child's ease and enjoyment with the language of sign is seen through their desire to linger over particular gestures, often repeating them bodily as they take them into themselves. It is of note that Cyprian Vagaggini, OSB, a liturgical scholar of great influence during Cavalletti's life, recognized the importance of what the children were revealing about liturgy and the impact it was having in their lives.

Vagaggini had such an appreciation for the pioneering catechetical work that Cavalletti was carrying out with children that he wrote the preface to an early book she coauthored on the topic of the liturgy's influence in the catechesis of children (Sofia Cavalletti and Gianna Gobbi, *Teaching Doctrine and Liturgy*, with a preface by Cyprian Vagaggini, OSB [Staten Island, NY: Society of St. Paul, 1964]).²¹⁹

His example is one of a great theologian appreciating what the child (as observed and articulated by Cavalletti) revealed in regard to liturgical truth particularly because Cavalletti repeatedly stated that she had learned her work from the children.

Beside Cavalletti stands Blessed Marie-Eugene of the Child Jesus, OCD, the founder of the Notre Dame de Vie secular institute in Venasque, France, who was also convinced, through his experience, of the young child's capacity for opening and enjoying deep realities of the Church, particularly those which are signified through liturgical sign.

His conviction arose from his theological understanding of the baptismal gifts of faith, hope, and charity as well as the gifts of the Holy Spirit, graciously entrusted

²¹⁸ Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child*, 43.

²¹⁹ James C. Pauley, *Liturgical Catechesis in the 21st Century* (Chicago, IL: Liturgical Training Publications, 2017), 115.

to the baptized person by God. What happens, he wonders, when these supernatural gifts are engaged by the baptized child, unobstructed by sin – original or personal? This is precisely the graced state of the baptized child who has not yet reached the age of reason.²²⁰

Thus, while the effects of original sin remain, the lack of original and personal sin in the baptized child who has yet reached the age of reason provide a unique period of receptivity and enjoyment of truth. In one example, Blessed Marie-Eugene describes the child's enjoyment of the liturgical sign as follows:

Here is a little child who is carried to church in his mother's arms. He has been baptized; he is already two or three years old. His intelligence is awakening. His mother shows him the tabernacle and tells him, 'Jesus is there.' Or, she leads him to the creche. What does this little one do? He uses his senses. He opens his eyes; his mind is at work. He believes what his mother has told him, he believes that Jesus is there. What will he do? He will put his faith in action. He will blow a kiss to the tabernacle, he will smile at the infant Jesus in the manger. Do you think that his prayer is somehow inferior? He may never pray better in his entire life. He has the grace of baptism and the theological virtues. More than that, he has the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The use of his theological virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit is not hampered by all the layers that will come later caused by selfishness and all the rest, all the sins.²²¹

This child is not only receiving and enjoying but is also responding to the beauty of the truth that he sees before him. Thus, while there is a tendency to think that weighty theological concepts are "too much" for young children, "even from a very young age, the child has the capacity to see the invisible within the visible (or the transcendent within the perceivable). The young child has a capacity for living in profound rapport with God which expresses itself in prayer."²²² Their prayer, that of praise and thanks, is lived not just momentarily but "always and everywhere"²²³ in their lives, as the Preface of the Mass calls for. In the words of Blessed Marie-Eugene, "Let us

²²⁰ Pauley, *Liturgical Catechesis in the 21st Century*, 115.

²²¹ Marie-Eugene of the Child Jesus, OCD, "La Priere: Contact avec Dieu," (public lecture given to the Religious Sisters of the Cenacle, Bordeaux, France, January 10, 1959), trans. Teresa Hawes. Published in *the Sower* 35, no. 3 (July 2014): 32.

²²² Gianna Gobbi, *Listening to God with Children* (Loveland, OH: Treehaus Communications, Inc, 2002), 68-69.

²²³ *Roman Missal* (2011), 205.

not say that this little one's prayer is inferior. His human activity may be limited, for he is doing what he can at his age, but the activity of the life of grace in his soul is already very elevated..."²²⁴ It is this attentiveness to the child and awareness of the effects of baptismal grace which is often lacking in theological conversations today. However, when attentiveness and awareness are practiced and remembered, the child's awe and wonder, repetition and joy in pondering both gifts of the natural world and spiritual realities begin to stand out constantly and consistently in their lives and also in the lives of those who take the time to observe them.

Responding to the Gift

The first and, in many ways, greatest response to a gift is gratitude. At times this thankfulness is shown in word or gesture or even through returning a gift with a gift. The child responds in all of these ways quite naturally. Jesus also lived a life filled with thanksgiving. In fact, "thanksgiving, in Greek *eucharistia*, is the quintessence of Jesus' stance toward the Father. 'Father, I thank you for having heard me,' he says at Lazarus' grave, conscious that the Father has given him the power to raise the dead (Jn 11:41)."²²⁵ Balthazar continues, turning to the child because "in everything the human child is dependent on free acts of giving by others: in him, plea and thanks are still indistinguishably one. Because he is needy he is also thankful in his deepest being, before making any free, moral decision to be so."²²⁶ Gratitude is intuitive for the child, an immediate and heartfelt response.

Children also provide concrete models of response through their collective and individual ways of offering thanks. The intensity of focus on the light of the candle in the darkness of the

²²⁴ Marie-Eugene of the Child Jesus, "La Priere: Contact avec Dieu," 32.

²²⁵ von Balthasar, *Unless You Become Like This Child*, 47-48.

²²⁶ von Balthasar, *Unless You Become Like This Child*, 48-49.

church at the Easter Vigil, the sigh of contentment after looking closely at the gesture of a cruet of wine and a drop of water being mingled in the chalice, and the repeated return to particular materials or Scripture passages in a Catechesis of the Good Shepherd Atrium show, in action, the child's response to the gifts of theological truth that have been received and enjoyed. They also respond in word, with an essentiality which can repeatedly astound the adult and an encompassing of a greater truth than, perhaps, they could possibly know.

Edward Bouverie Pusey, the nineteenth-century Tractarian, thought that the words of a child spoke greater truth than they (the child) knew; they had a glimmering of the truth though they could not grasp it. 'And yet they hear it will rightly wonder at it, and they who understand it better than the child itself, will yet confess that they could not have uttered it so simply and so forcibly... It comes not from the child itself, but from a power within it; they are in truth the words of God, in the mouth of the little one, so lately come from its Maker's hand.'²²⁷

These expressions of truth from the child are often related to and come forth when their artwork is being shared. "Drawing a picture of God often seems to facilitate such thinking and makes sharing these thoughts possible. Some of the most profound comments from the children in our research came as they talked about their pictures."²²⁸ As is related by Nora Maria Bonilla Paris, a catechist following the practices of Sofia Cavalletti, "In the children's work, we observe a theology, as that of the great mystics, and an exegesis in the style of 'spiritual theology' found in the writings of the Fathers of the Church."²²⁹ As the child speaks about his drawing it is often quickly made clear that his expression of truth comes as a response to what has been seen and heard (1Jn 1:1). "When we think of theology in our time, we think of long, complicated reflection, of high-level abstraction, reasoning, and speculation that are impossible for most

²²⁷ Fiona Gardner, *The Only Mind Worth Having: Thomas Merton and the Child Mind*, (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015), 6. A. M. Allchin, *The Joy of all Creation* (Scottish Journal of Theology, 1986-05, Vol.39 (2), 275-276).

²²⁸ Stonehouse and May, *Listening to Children on the Spiritual Journey*, 3.

²²⁹ Nora Maria Bonilla Paris, "The Little Child as Theologian," *Journals of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd: 2014-2018*, (Chicago, IL: Catechesis of the Good Shepherd Publications, 2020), 105.

people to understand.”²³⁰ However, Bonilla Paris contends, through her experience with the children and in unity with the early Church Fathers, “Theology is not a luxury. It is for all those who seek a relationship with God.”²³¹ Having encountered God through the natural world, through Scripture, and through Liturgy, the youngest of children “are able to express, through shapes and colors in their particular way of art, or with their few words, a remarkable understanding of the importance of the covenant relationship with God.”²³²

The Adult as the Student

As the child has been acknowledged by Jesus as a model for Kingdom living, it is necessary for the adult to approach the child, in this way, as teacher and interpreter of God’s truth. Jesus has indicated that the child has the potential and necessary task of forming the adult so that one who is grown can become, once again, like a child. The renewal of humanity has come through Jesus, God himself, born as a tiny infant. It is thus fitting that the child in the midst of the family and the world would have the potential to do the same. “[Children] can...be moral witnesses, models of faith for adults, sources or vehicles of revelation and inspiration, and representatives of Jesus. They can nurture, deepen, and challenge the faith of adults.”²³³ The child receives all from God and from those around him, with no need to merit such gifts as there is no way that he can do so. As adults, there is an overwhelming tendency to act in the opposite way, adapting a Pelagian attitude toward salvation, working to earn what God desires to freely give. However,

when, as adults, we reflect about the fact that we did not create ourselves or the world around us, and that as created beings dependent on a Creator we receive all

²³⁰ Bonilla Paris, “The Little Child as Theologian,” 105.

²³¹ Bonilla Paris, “The Little Child as Theologian,” 105.

²³² Bonilla Paris, “The Little Child as Theologian,” 106.

²³³ Bunge, “Biblical and Theological Perspectives and Best Practices,” 11.

that we have and are from His hands, we realize that we are in the same position as the child who receives all he needs from ‘the other.’”²³⁴

This receptivity is practiced each time Scripture is approached with an open heart, one which is ready to receive truth from the voice of the Good Shepherd. “The word of God is living and effective” (Heb 4:13) and inexhaustible in meaning. A lack of academic knowledge, even if it is great, is not an obstacle to the Holy Spirit who has been poured out through the gift of baptism and, in the adult, strengthened through confirmation and frequent reception of the Eucharist. The Holy Spirit teaches from within, especially when coupled with the guide rails the Church provides for our pondering and enjoyment of the Word of God. “We must remember this also with regard to the Church’s pastoral office: the biblical image of the sheep that are led to pasture does not indicate immaturity, but rather the docility of even mature Christians.”²³⁵ Similarly, the liturgy, this work of God in which we are invited to participate, provides us with the opportunity to practice receiving with empty hands. “Anyone acceding to a sacrament is a pure childlike receiver, even if he must contribute something of his own, but this something is nothing other than the perfect readiness of a child.”²³⁶ The gifts given through the sacraments cannot be earned but can only be received with an open heart.

Just as children receive and then open and enjoy God’s gifts, the adult has the task of taking time for wonder and awe at the gifts which have been given. Christ lived this amazement and joy in God’s goodness.

We can be sure that the human Child Jesus was in amazement over everything: beginning with the existence of his loving Mother, then passing on to his own

²³⁴ Kathleen Curran Sweeney, “A Little Child Shall Lead Us: The Theology of the Child” in *Linacre Quarterly*, vol 73(2) (May 1, 2006), 179-180.

²³⁵ von Balthasar, *Unless You Become Like This Child*, 52.

²³⁶ von Balthasar, *Unless You Become Like This Child*, 52.

existence, finally going from both to all the forms offered by the surrounding world, from the tiniest flower to the boundless skies.²³⁷

Again, the key to this is “taking time” for such a response. How often people walk past the beautiful gifts God has laid out before them, gifts that the child would be rushing to explore. Budding trees, flowers in bloom, worms crawling up from rain-soaked ground, ants moving in and out of their hill in orderly yet frenetic movements, grasshoppers leaping high into the air, the sunrise or sunset filling the sky with unrepeatabe beauty are all priceless moments of gift, moments which are ripe to be received and enjoyed with wonder and awe, and yet are often missed by the adult rushing to the next task or duty. What would be the change in one’s life if such moments were received and enjoyed in a way that is similar to the young child who would delight in such an opportunity?

Finally, the adult is also invited to respond, particularly through praise and thanks, having “receive[ed] with gratitude the full cup that is handed to us.”²³⁸ Participation in the movement of the Eucharistic liturgy can provide the template and the practice for this response. In the moment of having received Jesus as gift from God the Father through the power of the Holy Spirit and with him truly present, Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity, the priest responds to this greatest of gifts by offering Christ to the Father and “through him, with him, and in him” offering “all praise and glory”²³⁹ on behalf of the world. In this moment, “the hands of the Church hold the eternal Child up toward the eternal Father, in order that, at first, the Father may see only him, but so that then, in this one Child, he may see all the other children which the Child takes with him so as not to appear alone before the Father.”²⁴⁰ In becoming like the child, the adult brought up into this

²³⁷ von Balthasar, *Unless You Become Like This Child*, 45-46.

²³⁸ von Balthasar, *Unless You Become Like This Child*, 54.

²³⁹ *Roman Missal* (2011), 643.

²⁴⁰ von Balthasar, *Unless You Become Like This Child*, 63.

response of Christ and is invited to join in the praise and thanks which Christ and the children model as a full, complete response to God's many gifts. While this response is most perfectly made through the Doxology of the Mass, it is also a template for the praise and thanks which can be offered to God moment after moment, day after day, much as the child does.

Conclusion

St. Thomas Aquinas laid a foundation for understanding the child as a theologian, proposing that "by grace we have a more perfect knowledge of God than we have by natural reason."²⁴¹ Servais Pinckaers provided further support by distinguishing two levels of theology and defining the first as 'the wisdom of the Spirit, which gives understanding of the mystery of Christ and the experience of charity.'²⁴² From this,

It seems clear that a theological anthropology in which the child holds a constitutive place, though a modern phenomenon, is far from incompatible with orthodox Christian doctrine. In fact, as the grammar of classical doctrine is respected, so the child is neither idealized nor demonized, but acknowledged as sharing in the unobjectifiable openness to God that is the hallmark of redeemed humanity."²⁴³

The child who lives in unity with God has the potential for theological work through the process of receiving, opening and enjoying, and responding. "Some children ask many of the questions that senior philosophers ponder and that their own elders try to explicate all their lives. Children also come up with some answers of their own to conundrums. These will serve them better than many answers given by academics who so rarely listen to children."²⁴⁴ While professional theologians are often those to whom the task of systematization and articulation of doctrine is

²⁴¹ *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 12, a. 13, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 59.

²⁴² Payne, *Saint Thérèse of Lisieux: Doctor of the Universal Church*, 122. *Positio*, 902 and Pinckaers, "Thérèse of the Child Jesus," 32.

²⁴³ Edmund Newey, *Children of God: The Child as Source of Theological Anthropology* (Surrey, England: Jessica Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2012) 5.

²⁴⁴ Marty, *The Mystery of the Child*, 10.

given, “they depend on the perspectives and insight of the whole community for that understanding. The very limitations that prohibit children from addressing historical, systematic and practical theology, allow them to embody and proclaim the wonder and joy of humankind’s encounter with God.”²⁴⁵ Thus, without the voice of the child who ponders and enjoys the goodness, beauty, and truth of God, the Church has the potential to miss out on the witness that only the child can provide in receptivity, enjoyment, and response. All of this, of course, takes the willingness of the adult to receive Christ’s maxim to “become like a child” by, first of all, seeing each child as capable of being gift, theologically, to the adult and the world. Thérèse of Lisieux has provided her “Little Way of Spiritual Childhood” with its pattern of receiving, opening and enjoying, and responding. In many ways, this path articulates what has been modeled throughout history, again and again, by children. Dr. Montessori and Dr. Cavalletti have provided an example of observing children and being guided by them. Their role, and the role of the adult in general, is to allow the child’s modeling to transform one’s encounter with God, the giver of every good gift, by listening to and learning from the child’s example. It is by receiving, opening and enjoying, and responding as the child theologian does that one is able to “turn and become like children,” in order to “enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 18:3).

²⁴⁵ Catherine Maresca, “Children and Theology.” *Sewanee Theological Review*. (Christmas 2004, 48:1): 15.

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