

PASTORAL LETTER 6
MARY, CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Reversal of roles

It is significant that in many of the recorded apparitions, children or the youth, were the ones favoured with the encounter of Mary, the Mother of God. They were the privileged communicators of her message to the people. Custom in hierarchically structured communities would have accorded this face to face encounter with the supernatural to the seniors, the elderly of society. Ritual matters, mediation and communication are religious activities generally reserved for the elderly. But in the case of the apparitions, we find a remarkable reversal of roles. The youth are the recipients of the heavenly message. They assume a leadership role in matters of faith, ethical behavior, invitations to conversion and in the spread of popular devotions to Mary, Mother of the Redeemer. Within the Church, the pioneering child missionaries have ensured that Mary is called blessed from generation to generation, and in so doing, they have enriched the faith of all those who yearn for God's mercy through Mary's intercession (Lk.1:48).

Children, heirs of the Kingdom

The position and the role the youth in the phenomena of the apparitions is consistent with the perspective on children found in the Gospels. In the eyes of Jesus, children occupy a special position. The reign of God belongs to children who are generally described as dependent, vulnerable, ignorant, immature and socially inferior. The Kingdom of God belongs to them because they are in need and are dependent on God. Jesus rebuked his disciples who prevented people from bringing little children to him so that he might touch and bless them: "Let the little children come to me for to such as these belongs the Kingdom of God" (Mk.10:15). The condition for entry into the Kingdom of God is to be "like a little child". Becoming "like a little child" means "taking a humble place", embracing a low status (Gundry, 170).

"The last shall be first"

When the disciples of Jesus were embroiled in an argument about their status in God's reign, Jesus took a little child and placed it next to himself and said: "Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me ... for the least among all of you is the greatest" (Mk.9:48). Honoring children by welcoming them, receiving them and granting them hospitality, will be like honoring Jesus himself. The virtue of humility, fully associated with children, goes hand-in-hand with greatness. Besides, "many who are first will be last, and the last first" (Mk.10:31). The lowly status of children has been catapulted into a status of honour and a pride of place. This is reminiscent of Mary's Magnificat: "He has pulled down the princes from their thrones and exalted the lowly" (Lk.1:48) (Gundry, 189).

The above-cited Gospel passages that deal with children are deliberately subversive. Jesus turns the hierarchical order of society up- side- down. The young are put before the elders. The lowly status of children and the marginalised has become the status of honour. Positions of power and privilege have been disrupted in order to give way to the power of weakness and vulnerability, which are the characteristics of children. In this inversion of societal expectations, children who are traditionally and culturally the last on the value chain, now emerge as the first, and occupy the pride of position, but so too all those who are at the margins of society. All those who meet the requirement of childlikeness qualify to enter the Kingdom of God. Jesus' counter-

cultural teaching, his subversion of the hierarchical order of values, has made it possible for anyone to enter the reign of God (Gundry, 172).

Children are heirs to the Kingdom of God: “for it is to such as these that the Kingdom of God belongs” (Mk.10:15). They are also exemplary recipients of the reign of God. “Whoever does not receive the reign of God as a little child, will never receive it” (Mk.10:15). The act of hugging and blessing of children is interpreted as an act of adoption. Jesus adopted children as members of his family, the new household and as co-heirs of the gift of the Kingdom of God (Mk.10. 13-16), (Gundry, 156-157).

Revelation to children

It is clear that in the eyes of Jesus, children enjoy the pride of position. It is therefore not surprising that the youth shepherds also enjoyed a privileged position with regard to the apparitions of Mary. “I thank you Father for hiding these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them to mere children” (Lk.10:22). Thus children, and not necessarily the elderly, found favour with God. They became special conduits of heavenly messages. The shepherd children meet the criteria of being preferred by virtue of being children. They are weak, vulnerable, ignorant and totally dependent. They come from poor circumstances, at times even disreputable. They are of a low status even though pious and well behaved. Catherine Labouré (aged 15) of Rue du Bac, in Paris; Bernadette Soubirous (aged 14) of Lourdes; Eugene Barbette (aged 12) of Pontmain; Mary Beirne (aged 16) of Knock; Lucia Santos (aged 10), Francesco (aged 9) and Jacinta Mortos (aged 7) of Fatima; Ivanka Ivankovic of Medjugorje. These and a few others were the choice confidants of Mary.

Role and influence of the child visionaries

The faith, piety and credibility of the young seers had a strong impact on those who accompanied the shepherds to the scenes of the apparitions. The convictions of the witnesses rubbed off on a multitude of pilgrims in spite of a growing number of cynics and skeptics who were aided and abetted by a flurry of false visionaries. The experience of the apparitions did not go to the heads of the child seers. They remained consistent in their stories, unafraid, simple and humble in their behavior. The self-effacing Bernadette once accused Sister Superior of wanting to show her off “like a fattened cow (Harris, p137). The seers were under all sorts of pressure from their communities, municipal officials, clergy, skeptics etc. But they were able to show their mettle.

Founders of pre-eminent sanctuaries

One cannot speak of Lourdes, Fatima, Medjugorje and Knock without mentioning Bernadette, Lucy and co. Ivanka and Mary Beirne respectively. Their life stories are told and retold many times. Their names are on the lips of millions of pilgrims who visit these shrines. They continue to inspire generations of pilgrims. The shrines have an enduring attraction and a massive appeal to the countless pilgrims who ardently anticipate the intercession of Mary to her merciful Son.

The teenager seers have affirmed and perpetuated the widespread tradition of popular devotions to Our Lady. This practice has spread to most of the Catholic world. A religious atmosphere of silence, of prayer and penitence characterize the devotions. There are also Stations of the Cross where pilgrims not only call to mind the painful crucifixion of Jesus, but also bring forward their own pain and suffering as a sacrifice.

The prayer of the Rosary, punctuated with the mysteries of Jesus Christ, are an appeal to Mary's maternal intercession. Candle light and Eucharistic processions culminate with the celebration of the Eucharist. The Liturgy is the climax of the Marian devotions at all Marian Shrines.

Shrines that are inspired by the visions of teenage founders are choice places of religious conversions and moral transformation. At these places, many pilgrims encounter genuine faith in the company of so many devotees. The enduring attractions of the shrines bring people from the different strata of society together. The rich and the poor worship together. Pilgrimages generate a strong sense of solidarity amongst pilgrims. They are an amazing display of believers affirming each other in their commonly shared faith. Shrines reinvigorate the faith. Harris observed that "the more physical the pilgrimage became with its emphasis on disease and dying, the more spiritual it became as well". While many miraculous cures through the maternal intercession of Mary have been recorded, many pilgrims are nevertheless "convinced of the therapeutic efficacy of the shrines" (Harris, p.22, p.19).

Dogma of the Immaculate Conception

The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception announced by Pope Pius IX in 1854, was proclaimed against the background of the aggressive rise of secularism. The proclamation of this new article of faith was "a defiant assertion of belief in the miraculous" (Harris, p.14). This dogma declared Mary to be the only woman to be freed from the blemish and burden of the Original Sin inherited from Eve. This declaration restored woman's bodily dignity. But this dogma was not only considered as a firm response towards the anti-religious stance of modernism, it was also considered to be the culmination of the rich and stable tradition of Marian devotions that stretched back to the early years of Christianity (Shoemaker, p.1-29, Harris, p.81). The dogma of the Immaculate Conception was "the people's deep intuition in faith, worship and practice" (Gebara and Bingemer, p.109).

It has often been pointed out that the vision of Mary seen by Catherine Labouré in 1830 and that of Bernadette in 1858 confirmed the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception. The proclamation of the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception appears to have forged a bond between the Holy See and popular piety. This bond has equally been affirmed by the canonization of Bernadette of Lourdes and Francisco and Jacinta Marto of Fatima, the last two being the youngest persons ever to be declared saints (13 May 2017 by Pope Francis). Their lowly status as children has indeed earned them the Kingdom of God (Mk.10:15). With honesty, conviction and courage they showed determination, single-mindedness and strength of character. In the end they triumphed. They were exemplars of faith for the multitudes of pilgrims of their time. Today they have become saints of the Universal Church, models of faith for successive generations of believers.

Youth today

For the youth of today, these are the virtues to be gleaned from the amazing lives of the teenager seers. It is just as important for the youth of today to be open to the promptings of the Spirit – even to the point of becoming strong witnesses of the faith. It is also within the reach of young people to dream dreams, to have goals to aspire to and sufficient energy to realize their potential. Young people can triumph in spite of poverty, broken homes or the scourge of drugs. Such challenges call for a strength of character, conviction, courage and humbleness. The class of 1976 proved that young

people can be powerful agents of change in society. Their concerted efforts brought the apartheid regime to a crisis point. The class of 2016 with their relentless campaign for a free education unlocked more funding for students and firmly placed the item of “free education” on the Government and Nation’s agenda. For every young person, education should remain a non-negotiable right, a “sine qua non”, “a pearl of great price” that deserves every sacrifice. Education demands self-mastery. It promises those who are ambitious, focused and disciplined, a certain exit out of abject poverty.

Mother Mary favoured children with her apparitions and indeed blessings. Jesus offered children a pride of place and considered them heirs of the reign of God. This is a permanently available source of spiritual strength for all young people. It is up to young people to harness this energy in order to enhance their well-being and success in life.

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Regina Mundi Parish**

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