

Religious Formation and Later Childhood SOFIA CAVALLETTI

It is known that the child after the age of six shows himself/herself to be very different from the pre-school child. Maria Montessori, in speaking of the planes of development, regarded the closure of the first to occur around six years of age and that, therefore, this age signals the beginning of the second developmental stage.

It may be said even if such a simplification is perhaps exaggerated, but which may be considered indicative nevertheless that the young child is intent on probing the Mystery of the universe in its vertical dimension, that is, in its depths and heights, in a metaphysical relationship with God; whereas the older child fixes his gaze on the reflection of this Mystery, in the dimension of its vastness. The world expands before the older child, displaying new horizons and new elements. From this comes that great thirst for knowledge found in later childhood. It is not a question of knowledge which is academic in character, but of an existential need to know the world which opens up for the child, in order to become capable of orienting oneself in it. The thirst for knowledge is such that it is not limited to the immediate environment in which the child lives; rather it extends so far that a new instrument is given to the child which enables him to know reality in its farthest reaches: the imagination. The imagination is not new, but there are new dimensions in this capacity, so as to be able to reach the universe.

The vital need to know has also a moral aspect, which is the reflection of the former. The older child wants to know what his/her place is in the world that he/she is in the process of discovering, and what his/her task is in it. Thus a new incentive is born to establish social relationships and a new interest on the level of behavior, of things to do. Work is the means by which the child comes to explore the world and at the same time, the means with which the child takes possession of it.

At this point we ask ourselves: Is the religious reality capable of satisfying the older child's deep needs, as it satisfies those of the younger child? Experience has demonstrated that an affirmative answer can be given to such a question, because the older children, no less than the younger children, although in a different form, have received with naturalness and a profound and meditative joy, the new elements of the Christian message which are presented to them. They showed that they knew these with a knowledge that is not scholastic but vital, in such a way that these elements become a part of their very person.

The Christian doctrinal deposit opens the older child to the boundless horizons of that history we call sacred; it is sacred because it is the realization of a plan which God is in the process of unfolding, and it is history because it is accomplished with mankind throughout time. It is a history that goes back to the beginning of time at creation, reaches its culmination at the Incarnation, and stretches forward, waiting for that moment in which God will be all in all, and which we call the Parousia, comprising therefore the past, present, and future. It is a history which is not only exceedingly vast, but also extremely complex, and as such it may be presented from various points of view.

It may be regarded as the history of many gifts which God is giving to His creatures: the good things of nature and the world which man discovers, works with, and in doing so, makes his own; the persons with whom to create relationships of mutual enrichment; and finally, the gift of Himself in the person of the Son, who died and rose for us, the gift of a life stronger than death because it is the life of God Himself. From the resurrection to the Parousia, this gift is continually given sacramentally in the Eucharist, in particular, which we can view as the sacrament of the gift, for in it are found all the gifts of God as if concentrated and carried to their greatest level. At the Parousia, the gift of God's life will have reached all persons and filled all things. Gift, precisely because it is such, is not a unilateral action but, by its very gratuitousness, elicits a response, in such a way as to become a bilateral act, which aspires above all, to establish a relationship. It is the theme of covenant, fundamental in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

In the immensity of history we can perceive a plan for communion: from the time when man began to work, he has left the results of his labor to others and we, today, still enjoy the products of the work of persons so far distant from us in time. Who thinks, getting into a car, that we owe the discovery of the wheel to an unknown someone who, centuries and millennia ago, had in some manner worked for us? And yet a certain bond exists between that person and us and among the many people who, before us, have taken the goods God prepared for us in the world and worked with them. Thus we can imagine a whole system of relationships established between person and person, almost as if invisible bridges were constructed and linked together those of ages past and we who are living today. This occurs as well between one people and another: how many nations seem to us to have disappeared from history and yet their inheritance has passed on to others, and in some manner it lives on even now. Invisible bridges also exist between one people and another.

But if we scrutinize history more attentively we become aware that the project for communion, which we can discover between person and person and people and people, does not have solely a horizontal dimension; it has a much vaster range, because it tends to unite Heaven and Earth. When God came among men in the person of the Son, we may say that the tension towards communion goes beyond the barriers of the human world and unites together the world of God with the human world. The impetus towards communion acquires another dimension and hence becomes truly cosmic. It is the completion of a communion such as this that we, in the conflict and in the fragmentation of our present time, are awaiting in the future, at the Parousia.

The cosmic communion which is being established has a vital character; it is not a matter of a common sharing of goods and values, but it is really a fusion of life. In what sense? It is in this context that the great Christological parable of the True Vine finds its place, which is aligned with that parable fundamental to early childhood: the Good Shepherd. The parable of the True Vine lets us penetrate the mystery of the communion of life, which unites man and God together, through the mediation of Christ, and person with person, in Christ. The text speaks of Christ, who is the Vine, about people who are the branches, and of the Father who is the Vine grower. Just as the same sap runs through every part of the plant, so too in the True Vine is there one, vital principle, which is the same in Christ and in each branch of the Vine: the life of the Risen Christ, the fullness of the life of God.

With this background, another aspect of the Eucharist can be put into focus: that of the sacrament of unity, of the sacramental action in which communion is created and expressed. That unique sap which gives life to each branch of the True Vine is nourished by the one Eucharistic bread, which comes to be broken and offered as food to each person. In the Eucharist, the tending of history towards communion finds its highest expression.

The unfolding of events, viewed from a perspective of profound meaning, allows us to see, sustained throughout the whole arc of history, a movement which is directed towards reuniting people among themselves, in an exchange of material, cultural, and spiritual goods, and attains in the communion with God, cosmic dimensions. If such a movement is visible in history's deep currents up to the day in which we are living, we can believe that it will continue to come about in the future on an increasingly vaster scale until it fills the entire universe. It is in this sense that we encourage ourselves to hope in the words of our prophets, thereby educating ourselves in hope.

It is the theology of history, that theology which is the basis of hope, and which permits us to hold ourselves immersed in the flow of history which transcends us and of which we are, however, a part. The Christian proclamation offered in later childhood thus is built around the fundamental theme of communion, seen in the general framework of the unfolding of history. In early childhood we tell the child: "Listen, there is someone who is calling you by your name and is giving you his light, his life without end." To the older child we say: "Look around you and see, there is someone who is directing the history in which we live, and is guiding it towards communion."

Looking at history from a closer range, we also perceive ambiguity and conflict which makes us aware that this marvelous plan for communion is not accomplished without difficulty and opposition. Actually, we are dealing with a project in process of becoming, and it is not without, in attaining its fulfillment, contradiction and opposition. At this point the kerygma becomes moral exhortation paranesis. It is the nature of gift to elicit a response; whereas a commercial transaction is terminated upon payment since it involves the exchange of things, gift, which involves persons instead, tends to establish a relationship between persons, one which is, wherever possible, lasting. In such a relationship, the person receives and gives: creation is a gift given to man, yet it is a gift which needs man in order to reach its fulfillment, so that the force of communion which drives history may grow stronger and spread. The True Vine needs people in order to bear those fruits which give glory to the Father. The broken bread is offered to each person, but each must be ready to extend one's hand to everyone, without distinction, in the gesture of peace. In this manner the action of man is inserted into the vast design of history, which is in the process of being built, resonance of man's action is cosmic as well. There is an immediate continuity between kerygma and paranesis: there is no break in continuity between them because it is the proclamation itself which, by its very nature becomes moral exhortation.

In relation to the greatness of the proclamation, the insufficiency, incapacity, and resistance within each of us becomes apparent. And it also becomes evident that help from above is needed so that we can gradually manage to fill the gaps, to strengthen weakness, to overcome obstacles.

The invitation addressed to the older child to look around at the surrounding world so as to discern there the signs of communion, that God is creating with us and within us in our relationships with one another, is completed with the exhortation not to overlook the negative signs of separation and division between nations, between one person and another, and in the heart of each individual person.

We must teach older children to open their eyes to the reality of the negative aspects of history, but not before helping them to grasp its positive aspects. Never talk about the darkness before speaking about the light. The Christian message is a message of resurrection, and as such it proclaims to us that life is stronger than death and light is stronger than darkness. Only when our eyes are captivated by the beauty of light can we then look, without excessive disquietude, at the negativity of darkness. Only if our eyes have contemplated the beauty of the light will we be able to turn, from the struggle of the existence of darkness within us and around us, again towards the light with a call of entreaty full of trust. This call is the sacrament of Reconciliation.

This sacrament is the instrument of the victory of good over evil, and as well as focusing upon God's power in this struggle, it highlights another aspect of His love: that of the fidelity of a love which does not cease in the face of any opposition or any refusal whatsoever, precisely because it is a love which is gratuitous to its very depths. In the context of the Christian message, the aspect of God's faithfulness in love has the same importance for older children as the protectiveness of His love holds for little children. It is this childhood, in which the older child finds that same serene peace, that enchantment which the younger child finds in the loving protection of the Good Shepherd. In this way, the face of God is gradually revealed in all its richness for the older child in his/her process of growing.

Departing from the kerygma we arrived at the paranesis, in order to return again to the kerygma. The religious attitude of life is response to an overwhelming proclamation and religious formation should consist above all in this proclamation. The religious attitude of life is relationship with God, and, in God, with one's brothers and sisters, and inasmuch as it is relationship, it is moral life constitutive of the person in a certain mode of being. The level of being affects the level of actions. But religious formation is intended to serve life at the deepest level of being, before the level of doing. In no sense different from early childhood, the individual's moral life relative to behavior in later childhood does not spring forth except from that being in love which takes place at the most profound level of the person and which cannot be brought to life from moral exhortation but rather by the proclamation of a love without limits.

Obviously, this does not mean to exclude a certain quality of teaching which is explicitly moral in character, as for instance with some parables and maxims of this nature. However, we should not treat such subjects by themselves, nor should they predominate; they should fall, as it were, on a field previously prepared, and the instrument which will have enabled the earth to receive and make them fruitful is the proclamation which leads to being in love: the proclamation given in early childhood, which forms the foundation for the structuring of the person, and the proclamation offered in later childhood.

The altered existential situation of the older child as regards the younger child

calls for new content and also a didactic method that corresponds to the new capacities arising within the older child. We have mentioned the imagination which allows the child to soar beyond the limited world which appears to the senses. If the adult knows how to offer the imagination an adequate stimulus, the older child will be able to initiate a process of knowing which will carry him a great distance, drawing him to ever broadening horizons, towards which the child will walk filled with wonder, and into which he will plunge himself with the whole of his being.

The material for children six years of age and over should be prepared in a way that takes all this into consideration, and it should therefore aim at striking the imagination. This is how to satisfy that vital need for totality, which is proper to all true knowledge. The moment of reflective, objective thought follows the moment when reality is taken as a whole. Paul Ricoeur says: If the development of thought... never consists in going from the simple to the complex, but always moves within the totality itself, this can only be a development in the philosophical elucidation of the global view. Capturing the imagination we help the older child to catch hold of the global vision, which is the departure point for all knowledge. We help the child to establish a relationship with what is being presented so that it can be grasped with the whole of one's being.

We should not forget however that the older child is also beginning to think in a reflective and objective manner that type of thinking which in a certain sense stands at a distance from the object known, creating "a fundamental cleavage" between the object and the subject. In teaching, it is generally this second way of knowing that is favored with serious harm to the process of learning, which in this way loses its anchorage in the depths of the person and becomes a purely intellectual fact. Philosophy, says Ricoeur again, does not start anything independently: supported by the non-philosophical, it derives its existence from the substance of what has already been understood prior to reflection. It is obvious how fundamentally important the non-philosophical that is the non-reflective moment is for religious formation. Nonetheless, the other moment has its importance as well and requires attention. To strike the child's imagination without aiding him in the subsequent elucidation of what has been received would mean helping to give rise to magma in the child, without contributing to bring it to order. It is clear however that the elucidation cannot be the point of departure because it needs material to elucidate.

The adult, in helping the child, should keep the two moments of learning in mind: the child needs to be helped to discover the vastness of reality, receiving it by means of the imagination and intuitively abandoning oneself to it; and also the child needs to reflect on it through a form of thinking which tends rather to objectify it and in some manner to dominate it. It is unnecessary to underline the damage which can result from a religious formation in which the second moment of knowing is privileged; this latter moment on its own, due to its objective character can distort the religious reality and can make God an object to be known from afar, and not a Person with whom to enter into relationship.

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