Reflections for our Discerners at the DeSales University’s Center for Discernment
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11.21.08: The Human Pillar and the Character of a Child before God

In the many years that I have listened attentively to sermons lovingly prepared and presented, I have yet to hear a satisfying explanation of Matthew 18:1-6:

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and said, “Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” And He called a child to Himself and set him before them, and said, “Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me; but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.

Admittedly, this passage is one of the most difficult of Scriptures to understand and implement, as it strikes at the very heart of the Christian character we are called to assume. This difficulty is compounded further by the fact that we have been raised in a culture that militates viciously against the condition of childhood itself, resulting not just in the sacrifice of our children to our gods, but also by inducing a forgetfulness not only of the nature of childhood but also of the responsibilities that we, as adults, have in its preservation and promotion, something which, when properly done, aids us in fulfilling what the Gospel asks of us here, namely to preserve our childhood and that of others as we mature in age, wisdom and grace. This latter aspect constitutes a third difficulty, that of transposing the condition of childhood into the areas and times of our lives which are marked in distinction from childhood itself. And so, in light of these three difficulties, how do we describe what it is for each of us, now and as our lives mature, to be a child before God?

In these reflections, you have seen that many questions pertaining to discernment require a decent grasp of our human nature, a grasp that accommodates the issue under discussion. The situation before us now is no different. One of the most common ways of describing our nature is to focus upon the fact that in all that we are and do, we are beings that are both cognitive and appetitive, which is to say that we are beings that are capable of a reception of and union with things external to us without actually becoming them, and of enjoying a real directionality with respect to them consequent upon us seeing them as suitable (or not) to us in some fashion. In short, we are beings that are capable of the true and the good, and of their perfection respectively in wisdom and charity (caritas/agape to use a more specific language).

How does this come to bear upon our being children before God? Simply in the way by which we compose ourselves before wisdom and charity.

Being created in the image and likeness of God reveals many things about our nature unknown to the people of the pagan world. Not only are we unique among the animals in our reasoning and freely choosing, but our nobility is revealed insofar as, being rational and volitional, we bear the mark of the sons and daughters of God. By our reason, we know where we are going and what we are doing, we know not only why we do the things we do, but we also understand the essences and purposes of things — in this, we are of like mind to our Creator.

1 the practice of abortion, the encouragement of sexual promiscuity, and the ready availability of pornography are a few examples that spring to mind in this regard.
By our will, we engage in all these activities freely — we are the King’s own agents, entrusted with His gold, and are asked to invest it wisely on His behalf for the sake of His Kingdom. All of this, taken together with and transformed by the revelation effected by Christ in word and deed, allow us to be called friends of God and suitors of wisdom, and not in some metaphorical fashion, but in an authentic way appropriate to our status as the apex of God’s creative activity on the sixth day, on the third, on the fiftieth, and on the last.

In the revelation of our nobility, there arise many and diverse responsibilities, responsibilities that can only be recognized and embraced in taking on the bearing of the child before both wisdom and charity. With respect to wisdom, we, desiring to be children before God, best accomplish this as we take up the most appropriate initial regard of the whole of creation, namely that of the wonder so characteristic of the child’s experience. Immediately, in the voicing of this word “wonder,” we are threatened with losing the point that is about to be made, threatened by the platitudinous use of this word, and the consequent simplification and emptying of the phenomenon to which the word points (never underestimate the deficit under which we suffer in our approach to the things of childhood). Wonder is not something that is nice, carefree, and innocent, of butterflies, puppies, and flowers, of lazy afternoons by a stream, soaring flights of imaginary intrigues, or never-ending journeys on foot or wheel. Rather, wonder speaks to our primal intellectual regard of the being and the beauty of all things, wherein our eyes are most wide, our minds wholly awake and our very being buzzing in the face of the sheer immensity of the other as other. In wonder, we become enchanted, alive to the deep magic that surrounds us, and thus ever ready to behold the ideal, ready to spring to the aid of the possible, and never shy of our capacities in the face of the complexity and radiance of all things. All of this is contained in the experience of wonder, and is something best described as a form of fear.

Our initial reaction to this last description speaks volumes about the degree to which we suffer under the modern view of childhood and its manifestation in our adult lives. We are taught from a very early age that all things displeasing or discomforting are intrinsically evil and must be eradicated from our lives. Thus, fear, together with hatred, disgust, sadness, shame, despair, and pain, are to be avoided at all costs. And while there is some truth to this, such a view neither represents properly the nature and purpose of our affective life, nor gives us guidance with respect to our management of it. This point is simply made when we consider that just as we are called to experience mature and moral forms of love, desire, and joy, never being contented with their natural manifestations, so too are we called to experience mature and moral forms of our hatred, disgust, sadness, shame, despair, pain...and fear. In short, the emotional life is not something from which we seek to be delivered at all costs, is not something to be destroyed or compartmentalized, picking the best and discarding the rest. Instead, our affectivity is something that must be embraced, taken under our wing, so to speak, schooled properly through the moral virtues so that it might flower in the full beauty of the realization of both our nature and our purpose.2

When we consider the Patristic tradition on this point, especially as it comes to rest in Aquinas’s writings, wonder is described as a mature form of fear, indicating that beautiful reaction of one who, in the face of that which has overwhelmed his sensibilities by its sensual and intellectual beauty, treads ever so carefully both in his investigations of it and in the descriptions that he offers, careful that he might not do injustice to the very thing that has reduced him to wonder in the first place. Note well that his apprehension does not have himself as its primary target, that his fear is not of looking foolish in the description that he seeks to offer, that his anxiety

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2 The most accessible text on this point is Books IX and XIV of Augustine’s de Civitate Dei (Concerning the City of God against the Pagans).
does not rest in his possible failure and how such will be perceived by others. Rather, his reverence is for the thing itself, an awe born out of a deep love not to do “predicational violence” to the wondrous thing, but rather to honor it with the best that he can offer. Herein lies true humility: we do not stand above things, nor are we inordinately subjected to them. We are in communion with God’s creation, we are gifted with the beauty and integrity of all being, and we awaken to God and to ourselves in the honor and dignity we accord to those things that have brought us to wonder. We thus honor wondrous things by trying to know them better, but careful all the while not to harm them by misrepresenting their natures and their purposes. We fear this maturely, just as we maturely fear our parents and our God, wishing, at the heart of this fear, never to do anything that would bring them harm, sadden them, or make them disappointed with us. This is a true filial fear and not a craven one. The latter, indeed, is to be avoided, but the former is to be sought after and embraced. The doubt that is at the heart of much of the intellectual life today, the fear of being duped by others and the world, the ready skepticism that is so highly praised in the academy today, the myopia caused by a decided disillusionment with the world and its inhabitants, the tyranny of the specialist, the sway of the learned ignoramus, and finally the cynicism and pessimism that pervades the life of the common man, are anathema to being a child before God, and it would be better for a millstone to be tied round our necks and our persons thrown into the sea than to be the cause of any of these things in the heart of the child that all are called to be. For the deformation and ultimate death of the child is found in the turn from the wonder and reverence of the beauty, goodness and truth of all things, to the self-centered and craven fear of being duped by another, and all that inevitably flow from the dishonor, disrespect and disenchantment that arise from a love turned from the Being of all things to the being of oneself.

What of our appetitive aspect? It is a far more difficult matter to describe and effect the stance of a child before God in our hearts and our wills. Examples fortunately abound in literature, two of which spring to mind. First, there are the children in the Narnia series of C. S. Lewis, especially as one compares the beauty, purity, and valiant nature of Lucy with that of the other children throughout the seven books, particularly in the last where Susan ceases to be a queen, citizen, and lover of Narnia, having thrown aside her childhood, and having placed her nobility, beauty and love in the hands of the forces of this world, and is left behind in the end to work out her salvation in these shadow-lands. Secondly, one cannot help but think of Francis Hodgson Burnett’s The Secret Garden and its description of the beauty and the reality of the reclamation of a childhood seemingly lost under the tragedies that had befallen the book’s children, a reclamation celebrated wonderfully and movingly in the second to last chapter where we see the natural act of celebration and the depths of their gratitude in their freedom from the imprisonment caused by their unlooked for pain. In both of these works, and many more, we find that joy which is ever ready to burst forth, those characters that are ever fresh, ever pure, as old as time and yet ever new in their love. These are not people who are jaded, world-weary, or burdened beyond their years or desserts. They are not sullen or suspicious. Nor are they blunted in their affect, or violated in the inner regions of their souls. They are intact, undefiled, and untouched even though they are assaulted by the evils of this

3 Even Christ is said to experience this fear, this reverence of the Father, that He ever contemplates Him in an eternal act of love, thus offering us an example of how to fear all things rightly and beautifully. It is this gift that is sought as one of the seven bestowed by the Holy Spirit, the fear of the Lord, that beginning of all wisdom, something which Aquinas and many others places at the very heart of the courting of wisdom.

4 Herein lies one of the dangers of the Christian scholar, namely the situation where one’s search for wisdom is strong that one might neglect this equally necessary conformation of one’s heart and will to God. The opposite problem (the emphasis upon the heart and will to the detriment of the reason) is far more common and equally dangerous.
world. They remain pristine, unblemished and untainted by the sins that are visited upon them. They are
innocent, light and ever ready to play, even amidst the corruption, darkness and seriousness of this fallen world.
They are in the world, but not of the world. They walk as children of the light, and not as creatures of the night.
They speak the truth openly in the noon day sun, and do not whisper, murmur or complain in the darkness and
secrecy of their rooms. They are the adopted sons and daughters of our Lord, kings and queens of Narnia,
partakers of that deep and abiding magic that existed before the world was new. They exhibit, in short, that most
natural of stances of the child, and yet most difficult of things to maintain as we age, namely the ability to trust
another, which ability to those who have abandoned their childhood appears as nothing more than a naivete or
simplicity in the life of one who is no longer physically a child, and is among the first of those things that they
ridicule, abuse and seek to destroy. In this is found the “joy,” if you will, that the evil pursue in their
destruction of the very image of God in His little ones. The millstone here becomes the righteous casting of such
people into the eternity of hell.

And so, we return to the exhortation of our Savior. Turn yourself from the nothingness that the evil wish you to
embrace. Become a child in both mind and heart. Humble yourself before the immensity of the gift that creation
is, and the Love that established it, sustains it, and draws it to its perfection. Be sure to take up the bearing of
the child that has been gifted to you and for which you are now responsible. Be careful to receive everyone that
you meet in this fashion. Remember, the degree to which you put on the bearing of a child is the degree to which
you honor both the gift and the Giver, is the way that you yourself can begin to prepare a home for the Giver,
and the way by which you can receive the person of Christ in others. In doing these things, in becoming a child
before God, we become a target, a person most readily and easily recognized by those who have lost that child-
like bearing, who hate all those who have maintained this very gift that they have lost, who blames the Giver as
that gold coin or single talent is taken from him, and hates irrationally and powerfully the one to whom the gold
or talent is then given. Christ knows what he asks of us in becoming like children. He warns us that the world
will hate us, and that even some of those with God’s name upon their lips will persecute us, try with all their
effort and talent to corrupt the child that we are. “See, I send you out as sheep among wolves. Be then as wise
as serpents, and as gentle as doves” (Matthew 10:16) knowing that Christ is always with us and will not let any
corruption touch the very child that we are before Him. Look to the lives of the saints, especially as they mature
and approach death, if you wish to have examples of these points. Look also to the Beatitudes as they describe
the character of the mature child. In sum, take Matthew 18:1-6 seriously. The battle for the Christian soul is
waged on the very field of our childhood. Be wise, then, in your daily engagements with the world, ever careful
to preserve the child that you are, both in nature and in grace, the child that has been gifted to you, the child for
whom you are ultimately responsible, the child that is that gold talent handed over to you by the King to
nurture and invest wisely so that you might be found worthy of citizenship in His Holy City.

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5 It was said of Aquinas by his confessor that the saint’s final confession, made upon his death-bed, was like listening to the
confession of a small child.