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Rediscovering a Spirit of Childlikeness

With the Synod on Youth taking place, we offer three articles on the Church and young people written by Fr Joseph Evans and published in the "Catholic Universe." This first article was published on Friday 28 September 2018.

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When the synod fathers meet with Pope Francis to discuss the Church's

outreach to young people, they should examine how to help all Catholics – starting with bishops and priests – respond better to Christ’s call to become like children.

“Let the little children come to me,” our Lord insisted, and he was indignant when his disciples tried to stop them. And instead of doing this, priests have abused them! Not every priest, of course, indeed only a tiny minority but too many of them, as the events in Pennsylvania have shown. And if this sad story is not to be repeated, the Church urgently needs to re-discover her innocence and with it the spirit of childlikeness which Jesus called us to.

It’s not a minor matter. Indeed, the Lord made heaven itself dependent on spiritual childhood: “unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” The message is clear. But

too many of our policies and practices mitigate against this.

First of all, there is the deeply ingrained contraceptive mentality in Catholics and even their pastors. The first safeguarding policy we have to implement is to let children exist. Pastors generally oppose abortion but too many connive with contraception. But at this rate – at least in the West – we'll have no children to safeguard!

We pride ourselves in this country on ever more rigorous safeguarding policies – and they are certainly needed and must be stringently complied with, while not cutting us off from children altogether – but our parishes are becoming ever greyer, more lifeless and bureaucratic. Children involve life, chaos and disorder and we pastors have to be the first to accept this.

Indeed, part of this conversion to spiritual childhood requires us priests – and older members of the congregation – creating a parish culture in which young and large families are encouraged and welcomed, with all their noisiness. This might require from us the struggle to become younger at heart to overcome structures and customs – or simply grumpy looks – which make young children and their parents feel unwelcome.

As priests we often live alone but we must resist adopting a bachelor mentality. It is a beautiful apparent paradox – or perhaps a mystery of faith – that spiritual childhood and paternity flow into and nourish each other.

In his powerful book *The Way of the Lamb*– which I encourage everyone, and particularly the synod fathers, to read – John Saward argues

convincingly that “the characteristic sin of the modern world is hostility to childhood.” Drawing on ideas from and the example of great Catholic authors and saints like Thérèse of Lisieux, G. K. Chesterton, Charles Péguy and Georges Bernanos, Seward says the Church must help the world re-discover the value and greatness of childhood. Yet all too often this “hostility to childhood” has entered the Church itself, and the abuse crisis is only the latest and most shocking expression of this.

I remember hearing about a wonderful Catholic father. In the many beautiful things said about this man by his children, the one that most stood out was how concerned he was to preserve their innocence. There was nothing repressive about this, but he simply wanted his children to enjoy their childhood and took practical steps to ensure this.

There has to be a general society-wide effort to defend and promote the innocence of children, and the Church must take the lead in this. My experience of having visited various poor communities in less developed countries is that the children there are so much more like children. They don't seem to suffer from the psychological senescence which affects too many youths in the Western world. This certainly involves stricter control (by society in general, and we must campaign for this) of the internet to save children from exposure to both violence and pornography which are destroying the childhood of so many youngsters. But it's not just this. Many other factors too – such as consumerism, a selfish individualistic culture, and family breakdown – are suffocating their youthful spirit and turning them far too early into disillusioned cynics.

It is not, however, a question of ever more draconian parenting. Parents must assume their responsibility as shepherds of their children but with the gentleness of Christ the shepherd. Christian parents must raise their game, learning how to be good parents, truly friends of their children and respecting their freedom while exercising the necessary authority, with the (usually discreet) controls, limits and legitimate surveillance this requires.

Perhaps the synod should focus as much on parenting as on youths. There are various wonderful initiatives to help parents develop the art and science of parenting, among which the Family Development Foundation is, in my view, a particularly good example. Amateur parenting is no longer an option. It needs as much expertise as any professional field. Nowadays, you either give it your best or you

fail miserably. St Josemaría Escrivá, the founder of Opus Dei, would remind dads in particular that their family was their “first business”.

Better safeguarding measures are most certainly necessary – we can never fully express or even appreciate the deep wounds suffered by those abused – but as always the best safeguarding is internal: it a question of virtue and grace more than mere procedures. It also means seeing and loving children as Christ himself did, and one only achieves this through prayerful union with him.

Spiritual childhood requires learning those deep attitudes which make children so delightful and attractive: their simplicity and honesty, their absolute trust in their parents, their natural poverty of spirit and light-heartedness, and so on. When our Lord called on us to “turn and

become like children,” he was telling us to apply those attitudes to our relationship with God. For this we need a real prayer-life and living relationship with God, talking with him as naturally as children chattering to mummy or daddy. And for all this the habit of regular confession is absolutely essential.

Going regularly to confession is without doubt the best safeguarding. It stops bad habits and desires growing and helps us overcome the falsehood and double life which are an all too common accompaniment to clerical careerism. There are too many people in the Church living double lives. Living basic prudence is also necessary and for this regular spiritual guidance is a great help, as is honest contact with one's Church superiors or pastors to receive advice and helpful correction.

Saward's book is a joyful and positive work (how could it be otherwise if its "protagonists" include St Thérèse and GKC?). But it has an urgent message, as is suggested by its somewhat apocalyptic sub-title, *The Spirit of Childhood and the End of the Age*. This is captured succinctly in a quote from Bernanos, a deeply Catholic writer and one of the giants of French literature. 'Become children again, rediscover the spirit of childhood ... It's your last chance, and ours. Are you capable of rejuvenating the world, yes or no? The Gospel is always young; it is you who are old ... I have always thought that the modern world has been sinning against the spirit of youth, and that this crime would kill it.'

Let us pray that the synod will echo these words which in their own way merely echo words first uttered by the lips of our divine Lord. The Church must re-discover her own

childhood and then help the world to do so. If we want the Church to go forward, we must learn to become children once again.

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