

Year of the Living Word

Balancing faith like a child with adult wisdom, knowledge

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A disagreement among the apostles of Jesus about who would be the greatest sends James and John to Jesus' side. They decided to take fate into their own hands and not wait for Jesus to decide; they wish to be proclaimed the winners of the argument and ask if they can sit at Jesus' right and left in the kingdom of heaven. Instead of entering into the apostles' argument, Jesus directs them to a deeper understanding of goodness. He calls forth a child and says, "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" (Matthew 18: 3-4).

A few books later in the New Testament, we get another passage that seems to contradict what Jesus taught his apostles. St. Paul is writing to the community of Corinth. This community is suffering from conflict and division that are, unfortunately, common in all times and places. He is teaching them about the many ways they are called to live out their faith and he puts himself forth as an exemplary Christian. He says, "When I was a child, I used to talk as a child, think as a child, reason as a child, when I became a man, I put aside childish things" (1 Corinthians 13:11).

Now we are left in an apparent conundrum. Are we supposed to "become like children" or are we to "put aside childish things?" If we are to

live out the word of God in our daily lives, then what are we to do when we can not understand what God is saying to us in the Bible, much less live it out? Well, let me first propose that the problem isn't with the biblical text. Sacred Scripture is what the Catholic Church says it is, the word of God in written form, and it speaks the truth in matters regarding our salvation. This means though it appears to contradict itself, it cannot. Rather, the problem lies with our failure to understand the truth taught within the word of God. Once we have sorted out the seeming contradiction, we will be able to then properly understand how God might call us to live it out.

In the first passage, Christ is dealing with men who desire power, glory and fame. Just like many of us, their pride gets the best of them. Jesus

then uses the figure of a child as an example of humility. He is not saying that we are to behave like children in all things, but rather, we are to follow the traits of a child that we sometimes grow out of, such as a child's goodness, gentleness, dependence, trust, purity, lack of ambition, quickness to forgive, depth of love, joy, awe, desire to learn and willingness to change bad habits. This is what it means to "become like children."

On the other hand, children are certainly not perfect models of Christianity. This is why St. Paul says that he "put aside childish things." St. Paul does not want us to act like children when they do such things as pout, whine, lack self-control, become easily frightened, quickly point out the flaws of others, are ignorant of the world, are selfish or are unreliable.

With this new understanding of what Jesus and St. Paul are saying, we can see that they are teaching the same truth, that is, we are to humbly foster the virtuous qualities of children in our lives while putting aside those that are not good. To grow as Christians means we cannot become too comfortable with the current state of our spiritual lives because the goal for all of us is perfect holiness and nothing less. This is the challenge Christ and St. Paul call us to, and it is not an easy call to answer, but God did not create us out of nothing in order for us to settle for the status quo.

Of course, living out virtue and changing our bad habits are easier said than done. But, there is something else that we adults can learn from children as we try to obey Christ's command to become more child-like in our daily lives. Children are very willing to take a risk. Just think of riding a bike for the first time without training wheels. We adults can be too afraid, cautious or calculating to step out of our comfort zones with ease. But, this is just what Christ calls us to do. May we all take a risk for Christ by both "becoming like children" as we "put away childish things." In doing so, may we all become grown-up children.

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