

THE THINGS OF A CHILD

By GABRIEL REIDY

CHRISTIANITY, we are often told, is a profound challenge to human nature. It involves every aspect of the personality – intelligence and will, the sensibility, even the body, are all concerned in man's reaction to his christian vocation to perfect charity. The challenge is, perhaps, most acutely felt in his attempts to reconcile the seeming contradictions and paradoxes of that gospel life which is set before him, as in some sense an imitable model. Thus, for instance, although piety and worship are undoubtedly highly individual matters, they must also find their expression in accordance with our social nature; christians must be chaste, and yet learn how to be expansive in loving; they must, for a time, go on living in the world, though not of it.

One of the most striking of these paradoxes is the Lord's declaration that we should become as little children for the sake of the kingdom of heaven, but at the same time we must grow to a full, adult maturity. Modern psychologists are apt to make the latter demand with special insistence, in the name of a fully integrated personality, and in doing so they are led frequently into sharp generalisations about many traditional christian manifestations. Yet maturity was also demanded by Christ, and the annals of christian sanctity show how very often it has been attained. Christ asked for both childhood and maturity, when, himself an adult, he preached his kingdom mainly to other adults; it cannot, therefore, be a question of mere age. Nicodemus was right in supposing that the baptism which Christ commended must be something other than a return to the womb; yet the same Christ also held up childhood as somehow a model even for grown-up holiness, and some saints, notably Francis of Assisi in the thirteenth and Teresa of Lisieux in the nineteenth century, have taken him very literally indeed. Certain aspects of their behaviour and some of their utterances, consequently, although inspiring to many christians, are often a shock to others. At least, they pose a problem which all serious followers of Christ must attempt to solve. It is no real solution to say that some christians may have been called to perfection by way of the spirit of infancy, while modern conditions in the

read more at www.theway.org.uk

Church and society call for a more mature kind of response.

The real problem lies in the reconciliation of both these extremes, and in their universality. Every baptised member of the Church, even if he dies prematurely must somehow have attained to a degree of spiritual maturity; every confirmed, adult and responsible member of the Church must learn how to remain, in several important respects, child-like without ever deviating into child-ishness. All christian vocation is a matter of vital development analogous with our physical and intellectual growth from babyhood to full adult stature.

The problem is, indeed, a specially serious one in pastoral theology today, especially in connection with the apostolate of the laity. As Maisie Ward has testified in her recent autobiography, some early members of the Catholic Evidence Guild who joined the special training classes soon found 'that they had been attempting to meet mature minds with only a child's knowledge'.¹ It is, of course, true that apologists have for a long time been putting forward a thesis that the searcher for religious truth, although he must have moral certitude about the fact of revelation as the basis of his faith, may, at least temporarily, be satisfied with a certitude described as respective. This, by definition, is the certitude of children, through reliance on the word of a respected parent or teacher, and consequently based on grounds which are of themselves insufficient to generate it. The ordinary process of christian education should gradually, but soon, replace it with an absolute moral certitude. Some theologians have never felt themselves entirely at ease with this respective certitude, but their usual procedure is not to deny it as a fact but to try to reduce it to the equivalent of absolute certitude.² Whoever is right in this particular controversy, there is general agreement as to the progressive nature of christian knowledge; it is a matter of growing up.

The problem is not made easier by the fact that terms like infancy and infantilism are bandied about with little care for accuracy, often emotively, sometimes even passionately.³ From the point of view of the psychologist infantilism is a state of stunted growth, an arrested development. It has little really in common with the con-

¹ Cf Ward, Maisie, *Unfinished Business* (London, 1964), p. 157.

² Cf e.g. Nicolau, Michaele, S. J., *De Revelatione Christiana*, in *Sacra Theologica Summa*, I (Madrid, 1952), pp 143 ff.

³ Cf Beirnaert, Louis, *Enfance spirituelle et Infantilisme*, in *La Vie Spirituelle* 85 (1951) pp 295 ff.

cept of spiritual infancy, and when both are properly understood they are seen to be mutually exclusive.¹

A yet further cause of confusion arises when persons who have matured spiritually continue, through habit or ignorance or some other reason, to make use of vocabulary and imagery belonging rather to infancy than to the stage of life they have actually reached. Some saintly people, like some grown-up parents, indulge in baby-talk, and not only when actually addressing infants. An example of this may perhaps be found in the Abbé Godin, founder of the *Mission de Paris* in 1944. On that occasion he declared, 'Now I can disappear', and not long afterwards, died. He was assuredly a very adult christian, and this was a very adult statement on the austere and humble model of the Baptist.² Discovered among his papers, however, was a private prayer that he had composed to the blessed Virgin, which will inevitably be regarded by some as cloyingly sentimental, and not altogether free of the infantilism of which so many complaints have been made. He beseeches the Mother of God to '... take up your crook, swift and lovely shepherdess, and fly' to his help '... and later on in heaven, a corner near Jesus, oh so tiny, lying in the middle of your flock, all safely gathered in forever'.³ Far better known, of course, are the objections against the language used by St Teresa of Lisieux in *L'Histoire d'une Ame*, and even more in her verse. One must learn to prescind from all this if one desires to appreciate the validity and strength of her exceptional vocation.⁴ Ever since her canoization in 1925, much serious attention has been paid to her life and utterances by theologians of the spiritual life, and although, no doubt, much more remains to be said, there is

¹ Charges of infantilism are often urged against certain traditional ways of behaviour among christians, and in particular perhaps, against certain traditional groups in the Church, e.g. women religious. Cf Beirnaert, *art. cit.* p 301. Cardinal Suenens opposing the Schema on Religious at the third session of the present Council declared, 'Mother Superiors should avoid maternalism . . . their subjects should not imagine that obedience demands suppression of one's own personality, which leads only to infantilism'. Cf Florestal, Desmond, 'The Third Session', in *Doctrine and Life*, 15 (1965) p 23. There are other, rather hackneyed examples of conventual infantilism in Maisie Ward, *op. cit.*, 27, 71, etc.

² Jn 3, 30.

³ Quoted from Maisie Ward, *op. cit.*, p 275. Contemporaries are likely to feel similar or greater embarrassment at Fr Faber's irritating habit of referring to the blessed Virgin publicly as Mama! Cf Chapman, Ronald, *Father Faber* (London, 1961), p 300.

⁴ Cf Marie François Bernard, François de Sainte-Marie and Charles Bernard, *Enfance Spirituelle* in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, IV (1960) col 682; Lucien-Marie de Saint-Joseph, O.C.D., 'Sainte Thérèse de l'Enfant Jesu ou l'enfance unie à la maturité', in *La Vie Spirituelle*, 85 (1951) p 304 ff. etc.

now fairly general agreement that, apart from the manner in which it is conveyed to us, her doctrine of the 'little way' consists of two main components, both of which are firmly rooted in the gospel – deep humility and loving trust in God the Father. The humility is precisely that of a child of God, accompanied by a total self-forgetfulness and abandonment into his arms, because of its awareness of its own powerlessness. Several popes have lavished praises on this doctrine of spiritual infancy, and have warmly commended it to the faithful. Pius XI pointed out the 'masculine virility' of this little carmelite, and developing the paradox, declared her 'a great man' whose doctrine, far from being the sentimental, namby-pamby thing which some of its critics had imagined, was a teaching full of the spirit of renunciation. His successor Pius XII re-echoed and completed this by declaring that 'spiritual infancy is distinguished from the other sort of infancy by a maturity of judgment supernaturally inspired by our interior Master'.¹ Papal commendation of this sort, authoritative as it may be, does not, of course, intend to make the 'little way' universally obligatory, nor to impose it upon anyone as the best, or the only, way of christian perfection; it does bear weighty testimony to its validity and the success it has brought to those whose vocation has attracted them to it. The whole case of the Little Flower is a telling example of how the Church may quite suddenly become more keenly aware of certain elements in her own spiritual heritage, and put them forward with fresh emphasis, in response to special needs.

It would be unreasonable to expect to find a developed teaching and practice of this mode of christian spiritual life in the earlier stages of revelation. It is something which, of its nature, could only gradually come to fruition, after our Lord himself had chosen to enter upon his redemptive work through the normal human gateway of birth and infancy. It required, indeed, several centuries of christian reflection on the data of the gospel before there emerged any specialised devotion towards Christ's infancy, with its corresponding 'way' of christian living. Nevertheless, the roots of the doctrine and practice are to be found even in the old law, and future developments are there remotely pre-figured.

For the jews it was a sign of God's pleasure and a divine blessing to have many children, just as it was to have many possessions. This, of course, does not necessarily result in any positive appreciation of

¹ Cf Lucien-Marie de Saint-Joseph, *art. cit.*, pp 304–305.

childhood as such, still less transform it into a spiritual attitude. The chosen people of ancient times seem to have shared the outlook of the pagan world, according to which the child is nothing more than an imperfect, undeveloped human being – childish in the pejorative sense of the word. Some Quum Ran moralists contemporary with our Lord postponed the age of moral responsibility till as late as twenty years! In spite of this rather unfavourable climate of thought, the Old Testament writings allow us to discern two separate lines of development, which, one day, will mingle together and promote the notion of spiritual infancy. Such are the typical biblical notions of poverty and the fatherhood of God.

Poverty was an ever present social factor among the Jews who came out of Egypt, but by the seventh century B. C. the prophets, psalmists and sapiential writers had turned it into a spiritual attitude, a virtue. Isaias denounced pride as the source of all sin; he associates it with riches, and in contrast, exalts the faithful remnant of Israel as a gathering of the 'humble poor'. He also describes them as infants, and, whether this is to be taken literally or metaphorically, asserts that they all join in the praise of God.¹ Zephaniah pursues the same line of thought even more explicitly, and puts on the lips of Jahweh himself the declaration, ' . . . Gone from thy midst the high-sounding boast; no room in that mountain sanctuary of mine for pride henceforward; a poor folk and a friendless I will leave in thy confines, but one that puts its trust in the Lord's Name'.² Henceforward the term poverty possesses a religious colouring; it is not always easy to decide when it signifies indigence and when it signifies lowly dependence upon God. Some thirty of the psalms were composed for this remnant of Israel, the spiritually poor, and the tenth may be cited as a crowning instance of the attitude taken up; 'Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised from the earth; my mind does not dwell on high things, on marvels that are beyond my reach. Bear me witness that I kept my soul ever quiet, ever at peace. The thoughts of a child on its mother's breast, a child's thoughts were all my soul knew. Let Israel trust in the Lord, henceforth and forever.'³ The wisdom literature continued the development; the author of Ecclesiasticus completely isolates poverty from any sociological context, and puts forward the paradox that this spiritual attitude of the poor is morally accessible even to the wealthy.⁴ In this way, poverty, considered as a voluntary, total

¹ Isai 10, 21.

² Zech 3, 11-12.

³ Ps 130.

⁴ Sir 3, 17-18.

subjection to God, became an essential element in Jewish spirituality, and is attributed, as a matter of course, to great leaders like Moses and David. The theme reaches its supreme expression in a messianic context of Zechariah in the fourth century B. C. Zechariah bids the 'widowed Sion, Jerusalem forlorn' to 'see where thy king comes to greet thee, a trusty deliverer; see how lowly he rides, mounted on an ass, patient colt of patient dam'.¹

Side by side with the theme of poverty, though without fusing with it in ancient times, was the development of the teaching on the fatherhood of Yahweh. He is the creator of everything, but he is, in particular, the father of his chosen people. This paternal relationship is first understood in a collective sense; the whole nation of Israel is his 'firstborn' child, but gradually the relationship is broadened out, to refer first to Jewish individual souls, and ultimately to all individuals who are God-fearing, even if they are not Jewish in origin. Simultaneously there grew an awareness of the tenderness of this divine fatherhood: Yahweh is hailed as the Father of orphans² and of those who have been abandoned by their earthly parents.³

These two Old Testament themes of spiritual poverty and dependence upon a loving fatherhood of God were mingled together and perfectly expressed in the incarnate life of our Lord, and consequently reflected in the gospel. In fact, Christ renewed and deepened both of them, and gave to them a prominence in his new Christian covenant which they had never before enjoyed. He made poverty of spirit the first of the beatitudes, an essential quality for those who wished to possess the kingdom that he had revealed to them.⁴ In revealing to us the intimacy of his own eternal and natural filiation towards his heavenly Father, he showed us how we also may become children of the same Father by adoption, and so invoke him as 'our' Father.⁵ Although he was aware of the pejorative sense in which the imagery of childhood was so often understood,⁶ nevertheless he deliberately made use of it in two texts of major importance in the gospel, to indicate a spiritual attitude indispensable to all who desire to be his followers. Emphatically he declared that the kingdom is revealed specifically to the little ones rather than to the great ones of this world.⁷ When it is offered to us we must receive it like

¹ Zech 9, 9.

² Ps 68, 6.

³ Ps 27, 10., cf *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, art. cit. col 685-688.

⁴ Mt 5, 3 etc.

⁵ Mt 6, 9; Lk 11, 2.

⁶ Cf Mt 11, 16-17; Lk 7, 31-32.

⁷ Mt 11, 25-26; Lk 10, 21.

infants.¹ The poor of the old covenant have become the little ones of the new.²

St Paul's proclamation of 'the good news of God's grace'³ clearly recalls one fundamental aspect of spiritual infancy – its characteristic dependence. The life of grace is in no way due to us nor within the scope of our natural capacities, but can only be received with the assent of faith. Usually, however, when the apostle is talking to his converts about saving faith, he tends to avoid the typical phraseology of the way of infancy, since he shares the gentile notion of childhood as at best only a temporary, intermediate stage on the way towards the goal of maturity – our perfect stature in Christ.⁴ Without, of course, ever denying the positive values assigned by Christ in the gospel to spiritual childhood the pauline appeal is always that his converts should grow up, should 'be their age', rather than that they should hark back to their beginnings; 'Brethren, do not be content to think childish thoughts; keep the innocence of children, with the thoughts of grown men'.⁵ The same sort of attitude is to be found in Hebrews.⁶ St Peter too, in his first epistle holds up the innocence of the new-born child; a metaphorical way of referring to the effects of baptism. For him also, therefore, as for St Paul, childhood is not so much a permanent model of christian virtue, as a symbol of its initial phases, which must be transcended by taking the right sort of nourishment.⁷

Church Fathers, speaking generally, preferred to develop the pauline pattern of thought. They continually stress the need for a humble dependence on our heavenly Father, without, however, working out in detail any special theory on the spiritual 'way of infancy'. Eastern and western fathers are at one also, in the tendency to identify the spirit of poverty with this dependence on God, through representative spokesmen like St John Chrysostom and St Augustine. The latter, however, did not feel himself greatly at home with the idea of childhood's alleged innocence, and is severe, if not pessimistic, in his mature judgment of his own early years. Thus, although he knows and says that Christ 'set up the emblem of humility in the person of a child', he declares in several passages of the famous first of his *Confessions* against taking the realities of early life too romantically. In a characteristic passage he asks 'Is this boyhood

¹ Mk 10, 13-16; Mt 19, 13-15; Lk 18, 15-17.

² *Art. cit.*, col 688-694.

⁴ 1 Cor 13, 11; 8, 13; Gal 4, 1-4.

⁶ Heb 5, 11-14.

³ Acts 20-21.

⁵ 1 Cor 14, 20.

⁷ 1 Pet 2, 1-2., cf *art. cit.*, col 695.

innocence?', and replies 'It is not, O Lord; I cry thy mercy, O my God. Yet as we leave behind tutors and masters, and nuts and balls and birds, and come to deal with prefects and kings, and the getting of gold and estates and slaves, these are the qualities which pass on with us, one stage of life taking the place of another as the greater punishments of the law take the place of the schoolmaster's cane. Therefore, O God our King, when you said "of such is the kingdom of heaven" it could only have been humility as symbolised by the low stature of childhood that you were commending'.¹

One further example of patristic teaching in the west may be given here, from an Epiphany sermon of Pope Leo the Great, who here, as I have elsewhere suggested, does appear to be holding out a hand across the centuries to St Teresa of Lisieux.² 'Christ loved infancy', he wrote, 'in which he himself began, both body and soul. He loves it as a mistress of humility, a rule of innocence and model of goodness. Christ loves infancy, and guides towards it even the most grown-up and the aged. He proposes it as a model to all whom he raises to the eternal kingdom . . . Not to the games of babyhood, nor to its awkward fumbblings, must we return; we desire from it something more becoming to the gravity of age – quick appeasement of anger, prompt return to calmness, forgetfulness of offences, indifference to honours, love of brotherly union and equanimity. What a blessing it is, not to know how to hurt, not to have any taste for wickedness . . . Such is the serenity of christian infancy'.³

It was during the middle ages, and chiefly in the west, that christian people became more explicitly aware of the type of spiritual life now described as the way of spiritual infancy. It is no surprise to find this taking place under the same impulsions and in the same environments as the specialised devotion towards the babyhood, infancy and childhood of Christ himself. The two currents of piety ran parallel, and frequently encountered and nourished one another. Such developments were typical of, though not, of course, exclusive to, cistercian circles in the twelfth, and franciscan circles in the thirteenth century.⁴ The devotion to the Child Jesus reached a great climax in the seventeenth century, deep and strong enough to survive the deadening influence of rationalism and the devastations

¹ Cf *Confessions*, I, 19, trans. Sheed, F. J., (London, 1948), p 18.

² Cf Reidy, Gabriel, 'You will find a child', *THE WAY*, Vol 2 (Oct 1962) pp 294-195.

³ *Sermons on the Epiphany*, 5, 1; 7, 3-4 in PL 54, 249-50, 258-9.

⁴ Cf *art. cit.*, col 706-707; Cf also Irenée Noye, *Enfance de Jesus (Dévotion à l')*, in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, 4 (1960) col 658-659, 665-682.

of the french revolution, and reappear in St Teresa of Lisieux on the threshold of our own times.¹

Looking at the whole development of this spiritual attitude we may now sketch a more detailed moral and psychological diagnosis of it. Besides those basic factors of lowliness and dependence on God the Father (or sometimes on the tenderness of God or Christ, even as a mother), which acted as a nucleus, a whole cluster of other virtues and qualities, usually as perceived in the infant Jesus, were built up to form a rich and resourceful vocabulary, and several characteristic psychological patterns, belonging to the way of spiritual infancy: key-words and key-notions in this are, e.g., self-abandonment, self-despoilment, flight from ownership, awareness of one's own nothingness, absolute reliance upon God regarded as our all – remember the ejaculation of St Francis 'My God and my all'. Far from being negative, and a dwarfing of the human personality, these steps, it is claimed, lead to the flowering of a true and kingly christian freedom. Hence the state of spiritual infancy is often combined with a boldness, a childlike innocence, even something of the child's self-centred egoism, the expression of which may occasionally be a shock for those to whom this way is unfamiliar.

Students of the teresian 'little way' have frequently made the obvious comparison between her and St Francis, and it would meet with very general agreement that he with his earliest companions, like Clare with hers, form a sort of incarnation of this childlike spirituality. For them, no doubt, the way was not expressly formulated as a theory, but they certainly held it in a concrete fashion and considered it to be the way of perfectly imitating 'the poor life of Jesus and Mary', the apostles and the primitive Church. The *Poverello* himself was even inclined to boast of his simplicity, by which he meant a comparative lack of formal education and learning even in theological matters; he thought that his Rules and other writings were so plainly and simply composed as to require 'no gloss' for the full and perfect observance. He does not hesitate to rank simplicity and humility side by side with the virtue of divine Wisdom. In him, unlike some of his later followers, this sort of spirituality was directly nourished from the bible. His predilection for the feast of Christmas, with its crib at Greccio, is too well-known to require comment; it may be regarded as part of his simplicity that he wished it to be so universal a feast that even the animals might have a part in it.²

¹ Cf *Ibid.*, 707–710; Noye, *art. cit.*, col 665–682.

² Cf Thomas of Celano, *The Lives of St Francis of Assisi*, trans. A. G. Ferrers Howell (London, 1908), pp 327–328.

There is today a keen desire to distinguish the legitimate path of spiritual childhood from the dangerous and stunting infantilism with which it is confused by some psychologists. The distinction, already noted in St Leo, is therefore forcefully urged. Spiritual infancy, as understood and required by Christ, has nothing about it of the sentimental or the merely 'touching': it is nothing else but christian maturity.¹ Contemporary spiritual theologians see the baptismal grace as the basis of a life of spiritual infancy. 'All christian life and all holiness is reducible to this – to be by grace what Jesus was by nature – a child of God. The greatest saint in heaven is he who here below was most perfectly the child of God, and who made most fruitful the grace of his adoption in Jesus Christ'.² Baptism makes us God's children; spiritual infancy is the attitude which makes us see our Father's will in every happening. But all christian life is then a growth towards and a progressive realisation of fulness both in the order of being and of acting. The littleness of the beginner naturally tends to express itself in terms of devoted contemplation of the infant Jesus, for 'unto us a child is given'. The spirit of infancy keeps a soul in a sort of evangelical freshness and innocence. The Lord heaps graces on such childlike souls, who have faced the risk of making themselves nothing. St Teresa of Lisieux commends this boldness and asserts that 'in their self-abandonment, and in their consent to be left benumbed with cold and in trials, Christ grants them to love him for his own sake'.

However eloquently or convincingly it may be put forward as a pattern for christians to follow, it is inevitable that there should be objections of a grown-up sort to such simplicities. In this the spirituality of childhood resembles the nuptial spirituality deriving from an interpretation of the *Canticle of Canticles*. They are both legitimate expressions of the christian way; though neither of them is fully coincident with or exhaustive of christian life.

And now, what of the infantilism of which psychologists complain? Nothing could be more at variance with what has been depicted above than this refusal to evolve, this stunted growth or attempt to return to our origins in fantasy; the attitude stigmatised by Aldous Huxley in his novel *Island* as the 'Peter Pan type'. Here is a good and clinical description, by a psychiatrist, of a nervous disorder which may develop into a real neurosis – the state of *abandonniques*.³ It is

¹ Cf Guardini, Romano, *The Lord* (London, 1954), pp 263–269.

² Cf Marmion, Columba, O.S.B., *Le Christ dans Ses Mystères* (Maredsous, 1919), p 72.

³ Self-abandonment as we have seen is an element in the spirituality of infancy; but

characterised by a deep feeling of frustration, and a tendency to self-abandonment every time the circumstances of life fail to square with the desires, or seem to threaten security. Such victims are indeed infantile in their insatiable avidity for the affection of others. But their attachments are exclusive and possessive. They long not merely to be understood but to have their feelings guessed. They require assurance of love without end, proof after proof. Fixed as they are at this stage of affectivity which is passive, receptive, taking rather than giving, they frequently become aggressive, though they can never obtain satisfaction. Fundamentally, there is a doubt as to their own worth as objects of love, painful feelings of exclusion, fears of appearing what they really are, fears of taking affective risks, fears of responsibility. The *abandonique* is an infantile, un-evolved being. He will easily take his infantilism on to the religious level, where he will experience the same sort of emotional imbalance, and make the same irrational and excessive demands on God, or God's representatives, on priests, directors, superiors. How different from this is the true self-abandonment of spiritual infancy, which is full of confidence, and usually gains a peace and joy in life which are beyond our natural emotional range.

Just as there are twin ideals, of spiritual infancy coupled with spiritual maturity, for every baptised individual, so there must be the same for moral personalities, for corporative bodies within the Church like religious orders, and even for the Church militant at large, that people of God ever in pilgrimage towards the parousia, but the full development of this theme, with special reference to the difference in tone between the respective decrees *De Ecclesia* issued by the present Council, and the first Vatican Council of 1870, would require an essay to itself. So would another aspect of what has here been sketched; if we are to admit a false, as well as a true spirituality of infancy, there must also be a pseudo-maturity as well as the real maturity, sometimes to be detected under the familiar trappings of a christian life of asceticism and virtue, no more may here be said to characterise it than to point to that sufficiency which the Lord's messenger discovered among the tepid laodiceans, and which called for so grievous a rebuke.¹

there have always been false forms of this attitude which have often needed to be condemned by the Church. Cf Pourrat, Pierre, *Fausse Abandon*, in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, I (1937) pp 25-49.

¹ Apoc 3, 16-18.