

GROWING UP INTO CHILDHOOD

The Franciscan Embrace of the Inner Child

Howard Worsley

THE FIRST FOLLOWERS OF ST FRANCIS OF ASSISI were known as *jongleurs de Dieu*, the 'jesters of God'. In his biography of St Francis, G. K. Chesterton speaks of what this might mean:

There was to be found ultimately in such service a freedom, almost amounting to frivolity. It was comparable to the condition of the jongleur because it almost amounted to frivolity. The jester could be free when the knight was rigid; and it was possible to be a jester in the service which is perfect freedom.¹

In its freedom, this spirit of St Francis is essentially the spirit of the child who, knowing that he or she is loved, is adventurous, trusting and creative. The Franciscan spirit takes seriously the simple command of Jesus to St Francis to build the Church, even when it is in ruins. There is no restraining this spirit because it is uncluttered and knows no fetters; it runs amok through the adult Church, taking God at God's word, resisting the corruption of power. St Francis discovered the truth in what Jesus said when he instructed his disciples to become like little children if they wished to enter the kingdom of heaven.

I would like to offer some insights here into how adult faith is enriched when the 'inner child' is revived. The term 'inner child' draws on the literature of Transactional Analysis (TA), a theory of personality which identifies three states of being, or ego states, known as the Parent, the Adult and the Child, operating constantly alongside one

¹ G. K. Chesterton, *St Francis of Assisi* (New York: Image Books, 1987), 62.

another.² In my own research the ‘inner child’ is a historic formation of the child within the adult which provides resources for later development. I should like to present four steps towards reclaiming the inner child, and three ways in which this can help us in the twenty-first century to learn from the example of St Francis.³

Reclaiming the Inner Child

Faith Development Theory

Psychologists who are interested in exploring how faith develops over a lifetime have tended to focus on the way in which people engage with the different stages of life. They adopt the broad idea that faith is ‘the way in which we lean into life’, that is, how we make sense of our existence.⁴

The key theorists, James W. Fowler, Fritz K. Oser and John H. Westerhoff,⁵ have offered ways of mapping a person’s life up to the present and of identifying the structural aspects of believing that have shaped that person’s cognitive and affective processes. Faith-development theory is optimistic about the ability of adults to find a resourceful faith—a faith that nurtures their development as human beings—because it embraces the notion of the life cycle.

From a developmental point of view, a healthy personality evolves by growing successfully through various stages, without either becoming fixated or remaining immature. Abraham Maslow has catalogued the measurable characteristics of the healthy human, detailing them in both subjective and objective ways. He writes:

We now have from a few research beginnings and from countless clinical experiences some notion of the characteristics both of the fully evolved human being and of the well-growing human being.

² Thomas A. Harris, *I’m OK—You’re OK* (London: Pan Books, 1972), 20; and see Amy Bjork Harris and Thomas A. Harris, *Staying OK* (London: Pan Books, 1985).

³ See Howard Worsley, ‘The Inner-Child as a Resource for Adult Faith Development’, *British Journal of Religious Education*, 24/3 (2002), 196–207.

⁴ James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981).

⁵ See Fowler, *Stages of Faith*; Fritz K. Oser and Paul Gmunder, *Religious Judgment: A Developmental Perspective* (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1991); and John H. Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1976).

These characteristics are not only neutrally describable (objective) they are also subjectively rewarding, pleasurable and reinforcing.⁶

The developmental approach is particularly helpful to me here in defining faith as a resource because it perceives these characteristics of humanness as stages in a continuing journey.

Resourceful Faith

Psychology has often been suspicious of faith,⁷ and, given that religion can operate as a means of social control,⁸ it is important to clarify what it means here for faith to be 'resourceful'.

For faith to be a *resource* it must facilitate the development of a functional, healthy personality, as well as be of benefit to the wider community in terms of a person's active service. Faith is discussed as being resourceful by considering, first, how it contributes to what Maslow calls 'full-humanness',⁹ and then how it operates as a personal resource, and as a wider resource. Foundationally, faith must work within individuals, allowing them to live with themselves, to develop their inner world and to become fuller human beings. This process can be observed from the functioning of the individual's personality. Secondly, faith can work interpersonally, benefiting the community by improving the interaction between individuals. And finally, faith may be an even wider resource when it operates in a global way, benefiting an area which is wider than the community.

The Inner Child

My particular interest here is the influence of childhood faith, traced across life from its formation until it emerges in the adult. My hope has been that where a functional faith from childhood—a faith that benefits the believer as a human being—has been adequately reworked, responding and adapting to life experience, it can emerge into an adult faith that reflects a renewed childhood within the adult identity. Paul

⁶ Abraham H. Maslow, *Toward a Psychology of Being*, third edition (New York: Wiley, 1999), 172.

⁷ See for example Sigmund Freud, 'The History of the Psychoanalytic Movement', in *Collected Papers*, volume I (London: Hogarth, 1948).

⁸ See Emil Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, translated by J. Swain (London: Collier Books, 1961), and the works of Karl Marx.

⁹ See Maslow, *Toward a Psychology of Being*, xliii.



Ricoeur has called this ‘second naïveté’,¹⁰ and other writers have picked up on and elaborated his term. Ronald Rolheiser writes,

Second naïveté is not a sticking of one’s head in the sand or a false optimism, nor is it anti-intellectual and anti-critical. It is post-critical, post-sophisticate, post-taboo breaking.¹¹

‘Second naïveté’ is similar to the style of faith that James Fowler identifies as emerging after the ‘individuating-reflective’ stage of a person’s development. The individuating-reflective stage is characterized by reliance on personally formed judgment, and is typical of the onset of middle age. After this period of analytic tidiness there can be a return to an earlier openness: the subsequent stage, called ‘conjunctive faith’, is noted for its balance, and for its ability to embrace paradox and multiple points of view.

It is necessary here to distinguish between functional and dysfunctional aspects of faith, and to notice the different ways in which

¹⁰ See Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978).

¹¹ Ronald Rolheiser, *The Shattered Lantern: Rediscovering a Felt Presence of God* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1994), 163.

functional faith can be a resource at the intrapersonal, interpersonal and global levels. It must also be noted where faith has *not* been resourceful. It may have resulted in 'precocious identity formation', in which a child prematurely takes on an adult style of faith,¹² or it may have inhibited a person's development by causing a legalistic 'religious rigidity'.¹³ Constant reflection is needed if childhood faith is to be successfully reworked.

Four Steps to Reclaim the Inner Child

Searching for the Inner Child

In order to begin the process of reclaiming the inner child, it is necessary to identify a primal faith in the adult and to trace it back historically to childhood—to search for the inner child. A good place to start is with the terminology of Transactional Analysis. The TA concept of the archaic 'free child' or 'natural child', an aspect of the Child state, can be related to that of the 'inner child'. Thomas A. Harris writes:

The Child may be thought of as having two natures: the Natural Child (creative, spontaneous, curious, aware, free of fear) and the Adaptive Child (adapted to the original civilizing demands of the Parent).¹⁴

This way of understanding the inner child highlights the existence of the 'free child' as an archaic ego state active within the developing adult who is discovering faith. But the inner child is more than the archaic 'free child'. The inner child is recognisable within society as being useful, playful, poetic and open to learning: it also contains elements of the 'adaptive child'. It is the spirit of the artist, the openness to what is spiritual, and the being who lives by faith.

Highlighting What is Resourceful in the Inner Child

Having identified the inner child, the next step is to consider whether that original child had discovered a functional faith by which he or she was nurtured into development. This inquiry has its focus in the past,

¹² See Philip M. Helfaer, *The Psychology of Religious Doubt* (Boston, Ma: Beacon Press, 1972), 129.

¹³ See Peter Hammersley, 'Adult Learning Problems and the Experience of Loss: A Study of Religious Rigidity', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 1997.

¹⁴ Harris, *I'm OK—You're OK*, 126.

considering the nature of faith that the inner child once discovered and then seeing how that faith has developed. If that faith has released a creative energy to evolve and progress through the life cycle, then it can be considered to be a resource. But if that faith has been a hindrance to development, causing introspective fixation or a world-denying perspective, then it cannot be deemed resourceful. The task of redeeming what is resourceful will involve reworking certain memories, as well as reclaiming other lost ideas from childhood that may be stimulated by the experience of faith.

Reviving the Inner Child

The revival of the inner child, involves what Freud would call 'regression', but this is understood not as a pathological activity that ends in fixation, but as a resourceful revisiting of an earlier state of being. In this sense regression can be considered as a recovery of a state of mind in which the individual is more open to symbolic thinking, more able to accommodate ambiguity and paradox.¹⁵ This is a natural and resourceful activity for the individual which puts him or her into a more intra-dependent relationship with society.¹⁶ It is a conscious activity of the mind which draws on both conscious and unconscious processes by causing remembered, barely remembered and forgotten memories to be stimulated.

The revisiting of early memories also has the effect of reconstructing those memories. An earlier faith position can lose or gain meaning in the process of being remembered and articulated: it evolves in a flux between a present perception and a past or future reality. Arousing memories in this way encourages a functional faith and a firmer identity because it can create new meaning that will add to present well-being.¹⁷

Releasing the Revived Inner Child

The way is now open for exploring how the inner child will continue to provide a resourceful faith that helps the adult to develop and engage with life. This question has its principle focus on the future, rather than

¹⁵ Bruce Reed, *The Dynamics of Religion: Process and Movement in Christian Churches* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1978), 20.

¹⁶ Reed, *The Dynamics of Religion*, 30–31.

¹⁷ See Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society* (London: Burns and Oates, 1980).

the past: it is drawing on archaic material to consider not only whether the inner child is a resource now, but also whether it is likely to be a resource throughout the life cycle. This question is prompted by the way in which many Christian adults demonstrate a past development and resourcing of their historic faith position, but then show a period of lengthy stagnation in faith in the present. In a sense it is a continuation of John M. Hull's question: *What Prevents Christian Adults from Learning?*¹⁸

Is the reclaiming of childhood faith through the inner child in fact a denial of present reality and a refusal to engage with the world? Or is the problem that in these cases the inner child has been revived but not re-examined? If this is so, the inner child can be seen as a resource to the developing adult, but one that must be constantly revisited.

The Inner Child Released in St Francis

The story of St Francis is an example of how an adult was able to revive the simplicity of the inner child throughout his life. St Francis learnt how to identify what was resourceful at the core of his being. He learnt the nature of money when, having been disinherited, he renounced even the clothes he was wearing and stood naked before his father. He learnt that physical revulsion need not distance him from a leper. He learnt that neither civil war nor war between nations need stop him from speaking out a simple message of reconciliation. In all these things, he showed the straightforwardness of someone who had processed the major influences on his life and who was learning to handle the daily struggles for power and influence within his own personality and the world around him.

This is why Francis could ask Brother Masseo to 'turn round and round as children do' at a crossroads, and then to take as guidance from God the direction in which he ended up facing.¹⁹ It is also why Francis could send Brother Ruffino to Assisi naked to preach the gospel, and then do the same himself, aware of his foolishness in the eyes of the people. He had no image to maintain.²⁰

Of the many themes that arise out of the life of St Francis showing ways in which he might lead us like a child today, I would like to consider three:

¹⁸ John M. Hull, *What Prevents Christian Adults from Learning?* (London: Trinity, 1991).

¹⁹ *The Little Flowers of St Francis of Assisi* (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007), 28.

²⁰ *The Little Flowers*, 84.

1. interfaith dialogue;
2. simplicity in handling resources;
3. reform of the Church.

For each I will offer a brief sketch of the current context, an overview of Francis's own story, and a present-day application.

Inter-faith Dialogue

Since the destruction of the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001, the Western world has been ever more suspicious of Eastern nationalities and of the Islamic faith. Incidents involving racial prejudice have increased. Many people in the West blame Islam for this and draw on the tribal aspects of Christianity to justify their own crusade for dominance. Such fundamentalism echoes the crusades of the thirteenth century, in the days of St Francis.

Francis grew up during the period of the Third Crusade, a time when Muslims (Saracens) would have been viewed as 'infidels' or non-believers. However, he managed to overcome such prejudices and went boldly to speak with them face to face. Thomas of Celano, in the earliest biography of St Francis, tells us that in the thirteenth year of his conversion Francis managed to reach Syria with a companion and then went on to Egypt, where he presented himself before the Sultan of the Saracens 'at a time when great and severe battles were raging daily between the Christians and the Pagans'.²¹

Jacques de Vitry reported this event in 1220:

Francis came into our camp and, burning with zeal for the faith, he was not afraid to go into the very camp of our enemy. For several days, he preached the word of God to the Saracens, but with little success. The Sultan sent for him in particular and begged him to pray to the Lord for him, the King of Egypt, so that God might show him what religion he wished him to embrace.²²

Francis responded to Christ's command to preach the gospel to all nations by taking this as part of his own commission. He also prepared

²¹ Thomas of Celano, *St Francis of Assisi: First and Second Life of St Francis, with Selections from Treatise on the Miracles of Blessed Francis*, translated by Placid Hermann (Chicago: Franciscan Herald, 1963), 31.

²² *St Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies: English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St Francis*, edited by Marion Alphonse Habig (Chicago: Franciscan Herald, 1977), 1609.

those of his friars who wished to go among the Muslims, teaching them to respect the strangers' beliefs and to remember that only God can change hearts.²³ As Julio Mico writes:

Francis therefore sent the friars among non-believers to bear witness to their Franciscan way of Gospel life. Instead of becoming embroiled in disputes and controversy, they were to remain peacefully among the non-believers to show them the faith which was the rule and sole aim of the Fraternity. In a word the friars were to be there as Christians among Moslems.²⁴

Francis, in his childlike simplicity, wanted a new kind of relationship to be established between Islam and Christianity. Faced with the bitter, long drawn-out struggle over Jerusalem, Francis believed that a more neutral dialogue was possible.

For the twenty-first-century Christian to follow Christ in the footsteps of St Francis, it is necessary to learn to be hopeful in the face of increasing racial prejudice, and patient in the face of drawn-out conflict. This is a place where the Church may appear to be out of touch, but it is also where the ancient doctrines of repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation can be seen to be effective. The Church in the twenty-first century must avoid tribal posturing and demonstrate global citizenship. This is the vision of the free child who knows the common bond of humanity and who believes that all humans are children of God.

During his lifetime, Francis did not make great progress with interfaith dialogue, nor with international reconciliation. Six hundred years after his death, though, Brother Charles de Foucauld travelled to Tamanrasset in modern Algeria and spent his life living among the Muslim Tuaregs, influenced by the simplicity of St Francis. His example is one of authenticity to the gospel and it is what inspires Christians to be peacemakers and not just peace-keepers.

Simplicity in Handling Resources

The twenty-first century is a period of greater wealth and availability of resources in the West than ever before in history. However, into this

²³ See St Francis of Assisi, 'The Later Rule', chapter 12, in *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*, translated by Regis J. Armstrong and Ignatius C. Brady (Mahwah: Paulist, 1986).

²⁴ Julio Mico, 'The Spirituality of St Francis: Going among Non-believers', *Greyfriars Review*, 10/2 (1996), 111–133.

prosperity comes a new poverty of spirit as materialism can be seen to crowd out the spiritual, leaving a smaller Church and a greater distance between the wealthy and the poor. A growth in technology, communications and the leisure industry has not brought an equivalent contentment.

The thirteenth century was similarly a time of increased wealth and communication in western Europe, as trade routes were opened up. The rural economy was giving way to a mercantile economy in which market centres were developing alongside a class system based on money, property and power.

The story of Francis returning his money and his clothes to his demanding father is an obvious occasion when the saint is seen to renounce material goods in order to embrace poverty.²⁵ *The Little Flowers* also records an account of how Francis helped his first companion Bernard of Quintivalle to get rid of his wealth. Francis had heard the words of Jesus: 'If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor ... then come, follow me' (Matthew 19:21). He therefore helped Bernard to give away his wealth and possessions. As Francis was doing this, a grasping priest called Sylvester came up and demanded payment for some stones that he had provided for repairing churches. Francis put his hand into Bernard's cloak and poured the money into Sylvester's lap saying, 'If you ask for more, I will give you still more'.²⁶ That evening, Sylvester was so overcome by the fervour and holiness of Francis and Bernard that he resolved to dispose of all his own property, becoming a Franciscan himself.

As Brother Ramon comments:

Francis' call coincided with the emergence of the moneyed merchant class in which self-esteem and rank in society would be measured in proportion to the acquisition of wealth. Money, and what it represents, increasingly became the aim of life, and we seem to have come full circle in our modern Britain-within-Europe in which all our lives seem geared to market forces. This ideology has invaded our values of self worth, health, education, food production and commerce.²⁷

²⁵ *The Little Flowers*, 5.

²⁶ *The Little Flowers*, 5.

²⁷ Brother Ramon, *Franciscan Spirituality: Following St Francis Today* (London: SPCK, 1994), 68.



Detail from St Francis Marrying Poverty, by Andrea Sacchi

Like a child, Francis saw clearly that it was not possible to serve both God and money, and so he renounced money, seeing it as a potential enemy of God. Therefore he could actually envisage poverty as an aspiration, and he personified it as ‘Lady Poverty’—that which he sought to embrace.²⁸

For twenty-first-century Christians to follow Christ in the footsteps of St Francis, they must learn to travel light—without needing to carry possessions or to acquire them on the journey. The child has only a small knapsack. This is more than a mild eccentricity to the capitalist world: it strikes at the core of capitalism’s identity. If we no longer worry about our pension, our amassed treasure to be left to our survivors, or our savings for when we retire, or indeed if we earn less than we could, we tend to draw down profound disapproval. Some will say that we are creating a burden for the state, some that we have no regard for those who might have inherited; and some will simply scorn our naïveté. However, the childlike follower of Christ is aware that ‘It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God’ (Mark 10:25).

²⁸ See *The Little Flowers*, 152.

Reform of the Church

Writing in *The Cord* in 2003, Tom Washburn reflected on the scandals affecting the Church in the twenty-first century and compared then with those in the time of St Francis. Concerning the media attention to priestly drunkenness, loss of chastity, and perpetration of child abuse, he wrote,

As a priest ordained just over two years ago, I find myself and my contemporaries struggling with the question of what it means for us to be priests in the Church today. What will we do in the face of a world that looks upon us with suspicion and presumes distrust?²⁹

In the thirteenth century, the Fourth Lateran Council passed many canons addressing abuses similar to those causing scandal today. Canon 17, for example, reads:

Not only ... clerics but also some prelates of churches pass almost half the night in unnecessary feasting and forbidden conversation, not to mention other things, and leaving what is left of the night for sleep, they are barely roused at the dawn chorus of the birds and pass away the entire morning in a continuous state of stupor.³⁰

The state of affairs is reflected in the characters of the various religious and priests depicted in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

Into all this St Francis came as a believer in right living with the simplicity of a child, establishing an order of poverty, chastity and obedience not only for male friars but also for females and for lay people. It is likely that Francis was present at the Fourth Lateran Council, so he would have developed his ministry while being strategically aware of the problems of the day. Francis encouraged a healthy and holy approach to reform, calling for clean living amid the corruption. He exercised stringent discipline on himself and on the Brothers Minor for whom he was responsible, but he would not be drawn to speak ill of his superiors—the bishops and cardinals of the wider Church. He wrote in his Letter to the Faithful,

²⁹ Tom Washburn, 'Reflections on the Scandal from Francis of Assisi', *The Cord*, 53/2 (March/April 2003), 80–85.

³⁰ Quoted in Washburn, 'Reflections on the Scandal'.

We must also visit churches frequently and venerate and show respect for the clergy, not so much for them personally if they are sinners, but by reason of their office and their administration of the most holy Body and Blood of Christ which they sacrifice upon the altar and receive and administer to others.³¹

Twenty-first-century Christians must return to the simplicity of following the gospel of Christ as a child—approaching what they see before them straightforwardly. If what they see is sin, childlike Christians can invoke the example of Christ, who said ‘Go your way ... and do not sin again’ (John 8:11).

This is a profound mystery that allows an adult in a complex situation to see the issue clearly and yet to have hope and belief in a simple resolution. It is the mystery of hope in a bleak context, believing that the humble action of a child can make a difference.

Brother Edward, of Alnmouth Friary in England, (born Christopher Lee Smith) remembers that as a child he was close to his father, a member of the British Cabinet, the Secretary of State for Education. He recalls that at the age of about ten he became aware of how quail were imported from overseas, picked up exhausted after flying across the ocean. They were then shipped in cases to Britain. On the voyage most would die, but the small percentage that survived provided a sufficient economic return for merchants to continue the practice. He was appalled and told his father. When a letter to the House of



St Francis Feeding the Birds, by Giotto

³¹ St Francis of Assisi, ‘The Second Version of the Letter to the Faithful’, in *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*, 69.

Commons was read out attacking this inhumane trade, rather than dismissing it summarily, as might have been expected at the time, Brother Edward's father remembered the conversation with his son the night before. He put his considerable political backing behind the protest with the result that the cruel practice was stopped. Brother Edward recalls how the simplicity of a child objecting to needless cruelty could influence a government minister and make a difference.

It is the simplicity of the child that can believe in one right action mattering—even when it is outnumbered by wrong actions.

The Spirit of St Francis

Childhood, for the mature Christian, is not something to be simply left behind. It is part of his or her development in Christ that the adult learns to become like a child again. In St Francis we see an example of someone who has embraced his inner child, not allowing his adult self to swamp the original blessing of his childhood. Whether this was done by a form of reclamation or by resisting certain aspects of adulthood through the gospel is not clear. What is apparent is that Francis Bernardone remained a simple and passionate believer throughout his life, and that his straightforward innocence has been an example for Christians ever since.

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