Columns
Spirituality



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by Kathryn Press

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I've always worked with children. My sister arrived on the scene when I was 4. By age 10, I babysat for the neighbors across the road. I didn't need a job in high school because I was busy looking after someone's children every weekend.

In college, I studied child development and worked at the day care on campus. All through graduate school, I taught Sunday school in the parish and nannied on the side.

The theme continued. In the convent, I've taught every age from 3 to 16, from preschool to secondary school. But for the past three years, my ministry has largely been with adults and young adults. It's been a welcome change, as every age group has something special to offer.

Still, I find myself missing the "smallies" of late, missing the challenge they ask of me in terms of patience and humility, but also missing their joy and simplicity.



Apostle of the Sacred Heart of Jesus Sr. Kathryn Press meets her nephew in June 2020. (Courtesy of Kathryn Press)

In the Gospels, Jesus' disciples ask, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Not just "Who is OK in the kingdom of heaven?" or "Who's doing pretty good?" They want to know who is the *greatest*.

And we know Jesus' response, "He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, 'Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never

enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven' " (Matthew 18:1-4).

November begins with the Solemnity of All Saints, acknowledging all those holy men and women (boys and girls) who are models of holiness, both known and unknown. And as I mentioned in an earlier column, there's a great deal of celebrating the saints in November.

In Ireland, when we celebrated the feast of All the Saints of Ireland (Nov. 6), we flipped back six days in our Liturgy of the Hours to Nov. 1. One line from our prayers leapt off the page at me, taken from Hebrews 12:1: "With so many witnesses in a great cloud on every side of us, we are encouraged to run steadily in the race we have started." And our response: "With all the saints, we praise and thank you, Lord."

My first understanding of the spirituality of children came through learning about the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. Listening to them pray, children seem to be closer to God. Praying with children changed me. They call me to be sincere and genuine in my encounters with others. They invite me to live in awe and wonder.

So, it's not a stretch then for me to look to the youngest saints (and soon-to-be saints) we have in our tradition for examples to imitate. They are who Jesus says is the greatest in the kingdom.

We have young martyrs such as the children of the recently beatified Ulma family of Poland and the Holy Innocents who died in the place of the infant Jesus. At ages 9 and 10 the shepherd children of Fatima offered all their physical pain and suffering for others.

St. Dominic Savio died at age 14, having prepared himself for heaven from his first holy Communion with four resolutions for holiness.

Well-known of late, and loved among the Irish, is Blessed Carlo Acutis. His witness of holiness impacted his family far more after his death than it did while he was alive.

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"I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children" (Matthew 11:25).

Two other young examples capture my heart, and perhaps in time, the church will formally proclaim them as saints. The first is Ellen Organ (Little Nellie of Holy God) and the second is Antonietta Meo (also known as Nennolina). Both girls deeply desired to receive Jesus in the Eucharist, even before they were technically allowed to receive Communion. They also show what redemptive suffering looks like in the very young.

Jesus must have spent time with children. If this isn't something you can easily picture, you might be inspired by the TV series "The Chosen." Perhaps you're already a devotee, maybe you've yet to jump on the bandwagon. Either way, I encourage you to (re)watch this episode. It's a half hour well spent. It helps me understand why Jesus tells us to become like little children.

The kingdom of God is characterized by a status reversal. Jesus calls the apostles, and then us as baptized followers, to exercise total dependence of God in this form of servant leadership. And to top it all off, we need a childlike simplicity to enter this kingdom.

November is a great time to remember that we really are surrounded by a great crowd that is truly cheering us on. I, for one, know of a few faces I hope to greet me one day.

Perhaps you want to (re)acquaint yourself with the names of some of the younger members of said crowd, regardless of whether they are formally canonized, in the process, or simply a holy soul we've encountered along the way. After all, it is the Lord who has called us children of God and that is what we are! (1 John 3:1)