

Children In The Liturgy

by Louis Weil

(from an interview by M.R. Ritley and Donald Schell)

The Red Chapel at Nashotah House (the Episcopal seminary in Wisconsin) was my major experience of including children in the liturgy, twelve years in a small chapel where there were no pews, or even seats except along the outer edge for parents with small children or elderly people.

In the twelve years of the Red Chapel at Nashotah House, I saw some remarkable things. We were watching the formation of liturgical Christians. Children there willingly and fully participated in the liturgy. It became their own experience, not something derivative. They claimed it as their own and identified with it.

Children are startlingly direct in engaging signs. I knew one child, an extraordinary child named Sean, just two in his father's arms. His parents hadn't decided yet whether to let him have communion, but as I placed the sacrament in his father's hand, Sean reached out to me and said, "I want Jesus too." As a rule I don't give the sacrament to a child until the parents approve, so I blessed Sean and afterwards talked to his parents. When I had talked to them before they had said, "We need some sign that he knows what he's doing." This time I said, "Well, if you want a sign, I think you've been given a sign." The next Sunday, we made Sean a communicant.

Children experience something on a deep level, not heavy-handed or didactic but very direct, from observing adults. Adults' reactions are profoundly important. By their reactions adults share, subtly but directly, in the formation of the attitudes of the children. What I remember from my childhood experiences in the synagogue are the great dramatic acts in the liturgy, the carrying in of the Torah, for example, and the effect those acts had on others in the congregation.

I'm eager NOT to impose a liturgy basically designed for children on the adult community. Some special occasions may present reasons for offering children's liturgies, but in general I want us to create a liturgy which is inclusive in broader sense. In fact, we ought not to lose sight of the elderly at the other end; interestingly, they pose some of the same questions that children do. But for now, let's focus on the children.

In an article on baptism Aidan Kavanagh wrote of the revolutionary impact on the community of each person's baptism. In each baptized person, the

community is receiving the whole mystery of that specific person's gifts. Each particular human mystery that comes into the community changes the community by the unfolding of that person's faith, that person's gifts, and that person's searching. Kavanagh's marvelous insight speaks to why I believe including children in the liturgy is for the whole community and not just for the children.

To provide a liturgy which has substance for an adult community, we need symbols that are so manifest that children can engage them at their own level. Our task is to offer the symbols and invite children and adults into the ritual and then let them have their own experience. The experience will be different for different people and different levels of engagement which is fine; specific experience is the Spirit's work in the liturgy not the clergy's. If we keep our understanding of symbol really rooted, we can simply invite their experience of engaging the symbol in its weightiness.

I have enormous awe for what people do experience in the liturgy if we don't get in their way by over-programming. I've seen this over a long period of time. Like adults, children engage in their own way and we can't fathom it nor we can we decide HOW it's going to happen. A human but ritually-conscious action unfolding in beauty and majesty forms people in ways that are so subtle, so profound, and so far-reaching that one just wants to let it happen and not get in the way. In good liturgy, this can happen both for adults and children. So often for us there is a moment of seeing, an illumination when everything clicks and falls into place.

I remember when the vote on the ordination of women took place at the Minneapolis General Convention. That vote was a bit of a trauma for Nashotah House, so we were all talking about it in the community, and I had talked about it at Eucharist in Red Chapel. Later a mother came to me and said she had come into their living room and found their daughter standing at the coffee table with her hands raised up, and on the table a saucer and a piece of soap, and a cup with some water. Now she could do it! Children don't miss a thing. This little girl in her living room was claiming something as her own, because she had experienced it in all its weight within the liturgy.

EACH PARTICULAR HUMAN MYSTERY THAT COMES INTO THE COMMUNITY CHANGES THE COMMUNITY BY THE UNFOLDING OF THAT PERSON'S FAITH, THAT PERSON'S GIFTS, AND THAT PERSON'S SEARCHING.

This kind of inclusive vision of bringing the children into the liturgy places responsibility on parents as house theologians, a responsibility that many parents are very nervous about because we haven't instructed them. People need to be enabled to respond to their children and respond to each other, not with theological terminology, but with some understanding of how this question, that

issue, this sorrow or whatever it is connects to the Gospel.

When I did adult education in a parish in Milwaukee for five years my theme song was, "I want you to be theologians." They thought a theologian was someone in seminary teaching courses, but I worked to tell them that a theologian is someone who is able to speak of their faith. And that, it seems to me, is a key role for parents. As we invite the parents themselves to be present and open to the power of sign and liturgical action and what these say to them, we can also begin to help them find words to talk with their children of the experience of faith.

As we begin to work on the specifics of liturgy, the signs and actions may be a little easier to see at the Table. To have children present through the whole liturgy beginning with readings and sermon, you have to re-think the Liturgy of the Word. We did that at the Red Chapel, so I know it's possible. On principle or theoretically, I might prefer it, but to do it you have to re-think the quantity and weight of material in the Liturgy of the Word. An exclusively adult community can bear more verbal weight and a different kind of silence than a community with children present. You have to engage them differently and there's a dilemma. I really do want time in the liturgy to sit and be still, not meditation in the full sense of the word, but liturgical silence. That silence is the best reason for separate Liturgies of the Word for children and adults, each with its own dynamic, but if you're going to divide, it does seem to me the structure that makes the most sense would be separating children and adults for Liturgy of the Word - the first part with readings, sermon, and prayers of the people - and then bringing everyone together at the Table for the Eucharist.

Whether they're just present when we're at the Table or for the whole Liturgy, I expect two-year-olds to be two-year-olds. At Red Chapel, I affirmed the parents' letting the children be who they were, which gave the parents energy to hold on and not to submit to what I think are the illegitimate pressures either to get the children out or make them conform. At Red Chapel I tried to affirm that it was okay in the liturgy for the children to suddenly misbehave, that the parents didn't have to go into panic. I tried to be accepting of the children's nonconformism.

Surely you've been at liturgies where children have been treated as a nuisance. O.C. Edwards and his family were at Nashotah before he became the dean of Seabury Western (Evanston, Illinois). One day O.C. was off guest-preaching, and he brought his wife and daughter with him. As the family left church, their little girl, Louise, was very quiet. As they drove down the highway, suddenly Louise said, "I never want to go to that church again!" Of course, O.C. and his wife asked about it, because they hadn't seen anything happen. "They don't like children!" Louise insisted. No one had said anything, but she felt the body language that said, "You are a nuisance, you shouldn't be here."

In a community where children are affirmed, the children don't submit to an adult-imposed model, but are there as they are. I can give you an example, and

one that I'm very proud of though I can't claim any credit for it because it came in the moment and from the heart. We were at the offertory for a Sunday liturgy. We had as little on the altar as possible. A first year student was standing near with his young son and daughter who had been given a Raggedy Ann and Andy for Christmas. While I was placing the bread and wine on the altar, here were these two little children with their heads lower than the altar, and suddenly FLOP! Raggedy Ann and Andy were on the altar. They did it so quickly the father couldn't stop them. What panic on the father's face! What was I going to do? I took the two dolls and leaned them against the two candlesticks, so that Raggedy Ann and Andy were the closest participants in the Eucharist. I did it absolutely spontaneously.

Another time the wife of a new student from a very conservative background came up to me enraged after the first Red Chapel liturgy they'd been to and she said, "Don't you realize these children will never be able to worship in a normal Episcopal Church?" And I said, "That's right!" I meant it because what we were doing was deliberately subversive of those adult models that are excessively cerebral, excessively verbal, self-consciously non-tactile. Children open a door: It's very deliberate on my part. When I think of engaging the children, I think of color, movement, presence, focus. Intuitively, I stick to minimal gestures. All the things that make good liturgy. Some clergy still do fussy gestures at the Table, but it's just something they'll have to unlearn, because the direction everything is moving is away from manipulation.

I don't want manipulation but I do believe in careful planning: welcoming the children to liturgy takes planning. At Red Chapel I constantly tried to give the children connections between their experience and the liturgy. I did this musically with certain elements that occurred virtually every week in the liturgy, familiar elements that the children could count on. And by "count on" I don't mean that I was explaining or that they were keeping track, but that I chose things I knew they would come to recognize and feel at home with.

At Red Chapel children were free. It was their space. It was a remarkable experience and for me transformative. All the theory and the history suddenly got practical in the best sense of the word, not just reproducing what we had always done, but seeing something remarkable develop in the experience of the community with those children.

My goal with these children was what I call liturgical catechesis ["teaching or instruction by liturgy" --*Ed.*]. For example, we had one liturgy in which children were asked to bring their favorite story. We knew we risked not being able to read them all, but we worked out an open-ended way to read several stories. And then we made the link - that what we're in church doing is hearing the story, the story of Jesus. So we related something they knew and loved, hearing stories reading, to reading the Gospel. I remember making the link between the Eucharist and an ordinary meal by getting out of the little Red Chapel into a thoroughly open space, just a room where we had a simple meal together and did

the Eucharist right there in the meal. I wanted to let the sacrament be natural to them, so I made that link. I just made it happen in this different place and let them see it, because I don't believe in manipulating the people with the liturgy.

In the Eucharist, what's important is that the children engage the whole physical event. The prayer itself is not paramount. Of course, the language should not be condescending or trivial, but accessible and personal and rich in images. It is good if it has repeat refrains, something everyone can follow and claim as their own. But I remember saying to someone at Nashotah House, "I don't think in the long run the text makes that much difference. I could use the Roman Canon in Latin because what matters is what's happening." I didn't mean it quite literally, but I do not think the formulas make that much difference. What counts first is that children engage the whole physical event, and, yes, in that context, I would prefer a prayer which is accessible and which has images that they will latch on to, but the really important question is how the whole liturgy unfolds and works and whether the signs are allowed their inherent power.

The unfortunate kind of liturgical renewal just makes everything pedestrian, so accessible that it loses any sense of something beyond it. . To me the symbol always points beyond itself. I don't mean to suggest that mystery is only in an incense-filled church where you can't see the altar, although I love that, but mystery can be dazzlingly present in the most ordinary things. When you lift up a piece of bread and offer it to someone, it's far more than merely a piece of bread. Ordinary is not pedestrian.

Let me conclude with an anecdote that may convey more than all this theory. I was at the butcher block altar in the Red Chapel, and David Brewer had his boy, Jamie, about three, in his arms. I had a pewter bowl in my hands with a bread loaf in it, and all I did was lift the bowl as I said the words of institution. Now, in the ancient Roman Rite, the deacon's response was to say, "Mysterium Fide," the mystery of faith. After I said, "Do this in remembrance of me," Jamie said, "Look!" Nothing complicated was happening but he felt the awe. If we can make the symbols clear, and get out of the way, the children will perceive the praying.

*Louis Weil has been Professor of Liturgies at the Church Divinity School of the Pacific in Berkeley, CA, since 1988. He has also taught liturgies at Nashotah House and served parishes in Puerto Rico. He is the author of several books, including **Gathering to Pray, Sacraments and Liturgy**, and (with co-author Charles Price) **Liturgy for Living in the Church's Teaching Series**. Louis also teaches at the Graduate Theological Union, where he has helped develop an interdenominational (Anglican - Lutheran - Catholic) seminar on the eucharist. He holds degrees from Harvard University, General Theological Seminary, and the Institute Catholique in Paris.*

[M.R. Ritley](#) is Associate Presbyter at St. Gregory's and teaches adult classes in Sufi spirituality and prayer.

[Donald Schell](#) is Presbyter and (with Rick Fabian) Rector of St. Gregory's.

[Top of Page](#) | [Contents Volume 9 No. 1](#) | [St. Gregory's Main Page](#)

Updated April 8, 2002 by Todd Fincannon <webmaster@godsfriends.org> | Homepage is www.godsfriends.org