

# The Child's Potential for Contact with God

By Venerable Marie-Eugene of the Child Jesus, OCD

*Ven. Marie-Eugene of the Child Jesus, OCD founded the secular Institute of Notre Dame de Vie in Venasque, France in 1932. One beautiful fruit of the Institute has been the development of a catechetical program for children called "Come, Follow Me." This catechetical model proceeds from the conviction that children are capable of genuine contact with God—and that a marvelous exchange is possible for the child living in the grace of Baptism.*

*For the edification and inspiration of our readers, we wish to share this excerpt from a hitherto unpublished presentation given by Ven. Marie-Eugene in 1959, in which he describes the supernatural capacities of a child in grace. This discalced Carmelite's confidence in the child's ability to penetrate into the divine mystery, because of the presence of divine life in the child, is provocative. It is indeed a fascinating insight—the possibilities for communion with God available to the youngest children before the age of reason, who are in possession of the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity and yet unencumbered by personal sin.*

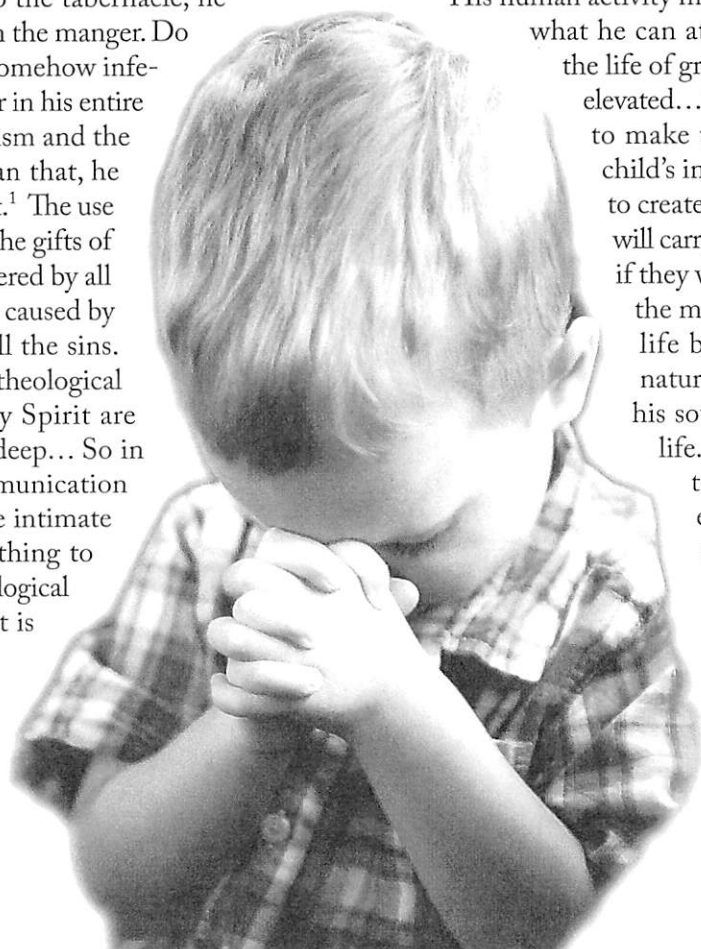
Here is a little child who is carried to church in his mother's arms. He has been baptized; he is already two or three years old. His intelligence is awakening. His mother shows him the tabernacle and tells him, "Jesus is there." Or, she leads him to the crèche. What does this little one do? He uses his senses. He opens his eyes; his mind is at work. He believes what his mother has told him, he believes that Jesus is there. What will he do? He will put his faith in action. He will blow a kiss to the tabernacle; he will smile at the infant Jesus in the manger. Do you think that this prayer is somehow inferior? He may never pray better in his entire life. He has the grace of baptism and the theological virtues. More than that, he has the gifts of the Holy Spirit.<sup>1</sup> The use of his theological virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit are not hampered by all the layers that will come later, caused by selfishness and all the rest, all the sins. We could almost say that his theological virtues and gifts of the Holy Spirit are within easy reach, only skin deep... So in this smile there can be communication with God that is all the more intimate as there are no obstacles, nothing to hinder the free use of the theological virtues, since the child's heart is pure and uncomplicated.

And in response to this smile of the child at the Nativity scene or the tabernacle, a torrent of divine life flows into his soul. This

little child has touched the divine fire, the burning bush, the fountain of living water. And this fountain of living water overflows. Why? Because faith has touched it. Just as the sick woman who followed Jesus in the streets of Capernaum found a healing grace simply by touching the hem of his clothing, so will this little child find grace and a singular increase of divine life through this clearly supernatural contact.

Let us not say that this little one's prayer is inferior.

His human activity may be limited, for he is doing what he can at his age, but the activity of the life of grace in his soul is already very elevated... That is why it is so important to make the most of this age, of the child's innocence and purity of heart, to create in him spiritual reflexes that will carry him toward God later on, as if they were second nature. Thus will the movement of grace and divine life be inscribed along with his natural reflexes in order to enrich his soul already with supernatural life. From this stems the importance of education and catechesis given to the youngest, awakening them to the truth expressed quite simply. It is not first of all a matter of educating this little one's mind, but of nourishing his faith, for his faith may well be more developed than ours.



Why shroud the divine truth given by catechesis, by the Gospels, in symbols that diminish it? Give it to him as it is, as it gushed forth, so to speak, from God's heart, from our Lord's mouth. It is specifically meant to nourish faith. And we can hope that as this little one grows up, he will always be able to pray perfectly through this intimate contact he first made when he was very young.

This education of the youngest, this catechesis given to children, is extremely important. Why? So as to create spiritual reflexes and also because at that age the supernatural life can develop, blossom and act in complete freedom. Indeed, it is not hampered by passions or by the hardened layers our faults, vices, and sins—as well as our developing selfishness—which unfortunately pile onto our souls.

The child will grow and be nourished by imagination and with images. Let's be vigilant to make sure these images also put his theological virtues into action. This is of the utmost importance. Later on he will use his reason; his reason should also put his theological virtues into action. Will he meditate in a structured way? Not necessarily. But if his spiritual reflexes have been developed and are in harmony with his supernatural life, he will already be a person of prayer.

One time in Religion class, the teacher had the young children pray silently for five minutes a day. One of them was asked: "What are you doing, my little one?" "Oh! Nothing... Yes, nothing... But we are together..." This response does seem to indicate a truly mystical experience, doesn't it?<sup>2</sup>

*Pope St. John Paul II once wrote that children "are the eloquent symbol and exalted image of those moral and spiritual conditions that are essential for entering into the Kingdom of God and for living the logic of total confidence in the Lord."<sup>3</sup> If this is so, then the child at prayer, cooperating with baptismal grace, might be a singularly important model for the rest of us in our pursuit of intimate communion with God. Ven. Marie-Eugene's words above provide a penetrating insight into the meaning of the Lord's words when He said, "I give you praise, Father, Lord of Heaven and earth, for although you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, you have revealed them to the childlike."<sup>4</sup>*



## Notes

1. Ven. Marie-Eugene is referring here to the teaching of St. John of the Cross, who described the gifts of the Holy Spirit as receptive capacities that are part of our baptismal grace, capacities which the Holy Spirit uses to intervene directly in our prayer and in our action. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* puts it this way: "The moral life of Christians is sustained by the gifts of the Holy Spirit. These are permanent dispositions which make man docile in following the promptings of the Holy Spirit" (par. 1830).
2. These words come from a presentation, "La Priere: Contact avec Dieu," which was a public lecture given by Venerable Marie-Eugene of the Child Jesus at Bordeaux, France, January 10, 1959. The translation of the unpublished manuscript was made by Teresa Hawes (October 26, 2013).
3. *Christifideles Laici*, no. 47.
4. Luke 10: 21.

SPECIAL THANKS GOES TO TERESA HAWES OF NOTRE DAME DE VIE FOR HER ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF THIS PRESENTATION BY VEN. MARIE-EUGENE.

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