

I've seen many funny things that kids have done at Mass through the years – sometimes you just have to laugh out loud. A poet like Brian Doyle can take one of these experiences and paint the picture perfectly. He writes: "Highlight at church yesterday: a small boy, age 4 or so, crawling ever so deftly and silently out of the front rows, and getting all the way to the edge of the altar platform, and then getting both arms and one leg up on the steps, before he was hauled back to base, giggling so infectiously that everyone in the front rows and the presider started laughing too. Even the pianist was snickering, and she is usually the soul of stern decorum.

"That the perambulator had, I kid you not, a bright blue Mohawk haircut, and was wearing blue pajamas with black cowboy boots, added to the pleasure of the moment, because, you hardly ever see anyone at church wearing pajamas with cowboy boots, not to mention such a rakish haircut. But it was his giggle that got me, and has stayed with me happily this morning. His giggles were utterly and completely and totally artless. They were not wry comments, or default nervous tics, or conscious efforts to deflate tension, or even the evidence of skepticism suddenly flushed out into the open, as giggles sometimes are. No: they were pure merriment, and they pealed, they rang, they chimed, they pierced the moment and peeled away a normal for an instant, and everyone burst out laughing, and I am fascinated and moved by this, and wish to explore it a bit with you, because isn't his giggling somehow a naked holy thing.....*Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.*"

Elsewhere, Jesus said *Let the children come unto me, for of such is the kingdom of Heaven*, He SAID that, He spoke that clear and adamant and inarguable, with none to gainsay Him, and very rarely indeed, I would guess, did He say something He was not sure of with every fiber of His inexplicable being. Of children is heaven, in children is heaven, to be like children is heaven, what could that most mysterious Arab Jew MEAN by this?

Not simplicity, for children are anything but simple, as every parent knows. Not brevity of height or paucity of muscle and money, for we know that might is not at all right, and to be rich is to be penniless in the stuff of holiness; He said that too, blunt and clear as always, and adding the image of moaning camels trying to stuff themselves through the eyes of protesting needles so that we would never forget what He said.

Did He mean because they are artless, and have no agendas, no end games, no filters and disguises, no masks and shields to hide behind? Was He hinting that their unadorned speech and untrammelled curiosity are shining paths for us to return to? Did He mean that all the things we mean by accomplishment, and maturity, and reason, and progress, are actually small niggling things that we must finally shuck and lay aside, in order to again be like children, spiritually open and emotionally naked and constantly liable to giggling?

I think so. I am NOT sure He meant that we should all have blue Mohawks and blue pajamas and black cowboy boots in order to be like unto children, although perhaps He did; you can never be quite sure of His wry wit, and it is entirely possible that the boy I heard yesterday morning was indeed a great sign unto the people, and I am the one chosen to perceive him, and report thereof to you. Who can account the ways of the Lord, who Himself came into this world as a rotund child, giggling when his mother and father tickled Him, and surely making all and sundry within earshot giggle also? Which in some remarkable and mysterious way He still does; and I report this fact to you, so that we can ponder it the rest of the day, grinning widely at the thought of the Lord of the Heavens with a crisp blue Mohawk and black cowboy boots, giggling to beat the band. Remember: except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe. (EIGHT WHOPPING LIES, p. 164-166)

Second, a bit of background. My CULTURAL BACKGROUND STUDY BIBLE has a footnote on this arguing with one another. It points out that “rivalry for greater honor was common among ancient Mediterranean men. (Has anything changed in 2000 years?!) This practice ranged from playful competition among friends to deadly competition among enemies; Jesus disciples here are not enemies, but it is probable that they have gone beyond playful banter.” (p. 1723, note 9:34) In any group, there are always tensions about the greatest, and each group has its own rubric for deciding what the greatest is. Comparison is like a spark to the fuse of conflict. Once we begin the comparison game, we are unlikely to end it until it ends us somehow – bringing us to aggression, exclusion, judgment and reduction; determining once and for all who the loser is.

We are told that Jesus sits down. It is an indication of the posture for revered elders. The disciples would have sat lower than Him in all likelihood. So their body language had to change; they are called from a jostling crowd of bantering men into a posture of humility and hierarchy – and sometimes – when it is able to be trusted, as with Jesus – hierarchy has its function). And the most surprising thing happens: Jesus presents a child. We were told that Jesus arrives at a house; we are NOT told whose house it is, but it is possible that it is Jesus’ house. It would indicate that Jesus’ house was a house that children ran through, ready to be scooped into an explanatory parable.

Anyway, a child is presented. And the child is embraced. The child is the physical embodiment of the exact opposite of greatness. Whatever the worldly measure of greatness has been, this child is not great. The child is small. The child is powerless. The child may not even be cute. The child is a child, away from the power-games of men. Hearing an argument about greatness conducted by males, Jesus makes them sit down to learn, and then faces them with an independent other who embodies the opposite of the thing that was consuming them. This child upsets the economy of importance that has been their obsession. (adapted from IN SEARCH OF THE DEEPER STORY, Pdraig O Tuama, in AMERICA, 30 September 2019, p. 30-31)

Third, so what? A few years back, a woman came to me for confession. Her confession was long and sincere. But her sincerity and genuine sorrow were constantly punctured by a cynicism, sarcasm and a background experience which caused her to be constantly questioning whether she wanted to be sincere and contrite.

She was very bright and very experienced. In virtually every sense of the word, she had done it all. She had been around. She was also deeply unhappy.

When we had finished, she asked what I felt she needed to do. I suggested that she should begin the long process of revirginization. It was a suggestion which shocked her, but it was what she really needed.

Though young, she had been almost everywhere, done almost everything, and had, in a way of speaking, sophisticated herself into a huge unhappiness. There was not a childlike bone in her body nor a childlike thought in her heart. She had lost most of her virginity.

I think we could all learn from this notion of revirginization. We are, in general, very unvirginal persons. What do I mean by this?

Virginity is, in its deepest sense, not something just physical. In fact, it is more about a present attitude. Whether one is a virgin or not has less to do with our past sexual experiences as it has to do with the posture with which we meet reality.

What is the posture of virginity? It is comprised of 3 intertwined elements: First, virginity is the posture of a child before reality. A child has a very primitive, virginal spirit. In a child's heart and mind, and in a virgin's, there is a sense of newness, of experiencing for the first time. There is a capacity to be surprised.

There is no illusion of familiarity and there is a natural 'fear of God,' love's fear, the fear that is the beginning of wisdom. Because of this, there is in the child or the virgin a sense of mystery, a sense that some things are sacred, untouchable, beyond manipulation.

Secondly, virginity is living in a certain inconsummation, living with a desire for experience which is not fully satiated. To be a virgin is to live in tension, unfulfilled, longing, waiting for a time in the future when one will be fulfilled. The virgin does not prematurely enter the marriage bed. This is true not just in the area of sexuality, but in all of life.

Finally, virginity is living in such a way that there are certain areas of our personality and life which are revered and sacred and which are then shared only within a context which fully respects that sacredness. For a virgin there is a certain chastity in experiencing, in all areas of life including the sexual.

Virginity opposes itself to promiscuity of all kinds. The virgin knows that the human heart, temple of the Holy Spirit that it is, is not cheap. As a precious gift it may only be trustfully given; it can never be grabbed. It can never be given away in a one-night stand or in anything casual.

This posture, virginity, is natural in a child. However, there it is dependent upon certain factors which are themselves natural in children, namely ignorance, lack of experience, superstition, lack of opportunity, natural naivete, and a lack of criticalness.

As we grow older, as our critical faculties sharpen and as we experience more, we naturally lose much of our virginity. Partly this is necessary, natural and healthy – to be adult and naïve is not an ideal.

However, partially this loss of virginity is unnecessary and unhealthy. As was the case with the woman I am speaking of, partly the loss of virginity is the result of giving in to the urge to experience indiscriminately, of stripping reality unduly of too many of its sacred dimensions, of illicitly breaking taboos – including sexual ones – and of letting impatience and despair drive us beyond chastity and holy waiting.

When this happens, and to a greater or lesser extent it happens in all of our lives – we develop a false familiarity with life and begin to live under the illusion of familiarity and boredom. This is the real loss of virginity, living in an unhealthy familiarity with life, others, sex. In this state, all real love, real romance, and all aesthetics in love, die. Ultimately the loss of virginity is characterized by a sophisticated unhappiness, an unchildlikeness which, while miserable, refuses to admit its own misery and its cause. That is one of the qualities of being in hell, to be miserable and refuse to admit it. (adapted from Ronald Rolheiser, FORGOTTEN AMONG THE LILIES, p. 88-90)

In the end, we need to return to the childlike posture toward life – the secret surprise of ordinary objects – love and compassion, falling down and getting up, trying again no matter how old we are, simple gratitude for the gift of life itself, cherishing the immense love that our Father God has for us even as we have strayed and wandered throughout our lives. Carol Houselander says that "the divine architect made the doorway into heaven so small that only children can manage to get through." May we be small enough, unsophisticated enough, virgin enough, to receive the life we are given – as gift of God, in gratitude. Amen.