CHILDREN, PRAYER, RELIGIOUS IMAGINATION AND ONTOLOGICAL WHOLENESS

SUMMARY

This paper explores how sharing the Church’s tradition of prayer with children offers them opportunities to develop an awareness of their ontological wholeness as they are shown how to reach out freely beyond the ordinary events of each day, to engage in creative manners of prayer, and to explore how religious imagination interconnects their relationship with the Divine Spirit. It argues that sharing the Church’s tradition of prayer through religious education, children are provided the opportunity to participate in, and to continue this tradition, while at the same time, they are expanding upon this communal and cooperative relationship with God. In sharing Christian traditions of prayer with children, parents and teachers can offer ways to explore the collective imagination of prayer as being vital for the formation of a religious imagination. They can strive to enable children to see God in all things, to have faith in the conviction that God “reaches out to us,” to have faith that humanity can and will respond in the ordinary events of everyday life.¹

This study looks at imagination as what happens when action becomes a creative process.² Jerome Berryman suggests that imagination is the key to unending renewal of life: “Enter the existential game with imagination, wonder, and laughter if you want to become new without end.”³

Theologian Karl Rahner’s Theology of Worship considers the human body as the symbol of the soul, and each individual as an embodied spirit.⁴ This study argues that Rahner’s theology supports the indwelling of God in each person as “Spirit-in-the-World” who is capable of conscious acts of worship, and as finite creatures humans are able to embrace a relationship with the infinite Creator.⁵ Maria Harris explores this relationship more fully: “Because we are made in the image of the Creator God, we, too, are fashioners. Our human vocation is to be in partnership with God to fashion even as we are being fashioned, attempting to realize our artistic capacities as this happens. For to the question, ‘Who is fashioning?’ the response is, ‘God and ourselves.’”⁶

The paper promotes the conviction that engaging children through the use of their imagination is at the heart of teaching, as children are naturally imaginative.⁷ In teaching children to pray educators can and should encourage them to employ their imaginations in order to artistically, creatively, and consciously communicate with God. Showing how to use the imagination is a way of creating possibilities, and children have the capability to alter their destinies and their existence through the exercise of imagination.⁸ “Imagination can change,

² Ibid., 133.
⁵ Ibid., 21.
⁸ Ibid., 3.
reverse, and re-create present reality,” Harris notes. The paper affirms how important it is to teach children that imagining possibilities and asking questions is natural for everyone to do. The imagination allows us to know a reality that is no longer too big for us to fit our minds into or too small that we might by omission simply dismiss as being not important.

The paper proposes that it is through prayer that adults and children can engage the “religious imagination.” It is here that the past, present, and future can intertwine, revealing the entrance into God’s reign. By experiencing revelations of new things in life, teaching children to engage both wonder and imagination offer them ways to encounter the mysterious, and that the mysterious provides a door to perceptions of transcendence. This study also explores the fact that for young children the world is full of wonder and the emergence of new life and that they are experiencing revelations of these new things. In terms of religious education, experiences of the mysterious can enable children to be open to an encounter with the Transcendent God.

This paper also explores Harvard theorist, Howard Gardner’s position on spirituality as being an ontological as well as a biological reality. Based on his research of this ontological reality, Brendan Hyde contends that the natural path of spiritual existence moves toward a transcendence of the ego in order for the self to achieve a higher consciousness. In a state of higher consciousness the self is free to be joined with the other, forming a relationship of Ultimate Unity.

This paper looks at the experience of self-transcendence – of being one with God, Karl Rahner’s theology of transcendence and that the goal is “the infinite, ultimate reality which remains at the root a mystery: that is to say, God.” Correlatively, in the action of “being,” these children had perhaps experienced something of the presence of God,” for here they encountered the indwelling of God in their own “being.” Therefore, through prayer, the study argues that children can experience something of the presence of God.

METHODOLOGY
This literature-based review and analysis is a humanistic study that strives to foster a greater understanding of human persons, especially children, as spiritual beings gifted with a natural sense of wonderment and imagination. It utilizes theological research that is informed by Christian faith.

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9 Ibid., 181.
10 Ibid., 141.
11 Hyde, Children and Spirituality, 43.


