

# Villanova University Charles Widger School of Law

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## Introduction to The Vocation of the Child

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# Introduction

*Patrick McKinley Brennan*

## I. Of Fate, Luck, and Vocation

Out-of-wedlock births in the United States, long on the rise, now account for a near record 40 percent of the babies born. While such births have historically been associated with teenage mothers, in 2005 the birthrate of unwed teenage mothers dropped while that of unwed women in their twenties rose.<sup>1</sup> *On any given day* in 2005 in the United States, 3,879 babies were born to unmarried mothers.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the number of unmarried-couple households with children has risen precipitously in recent years; fewer than 200,000 in 1970, it surpassed 1.7 million in 2005.<sup>3</sup> Anyone giving such statistics conscientious attention will wonder and worry about the children involved.

Other statistics, about the daily lives of some of the most vulnerable among us, raise additional cause for concern. In 2005 in the United States, more than twelve million children — that is, nearly 17 percent of the child population — lived in households where there was low or very low “food security.”<sup>4</sup> Because

1. “Babies Born to Singles Are at Record: Nearly 4 in 10,” *New York Times*, November 22, 2006.

2. 2005 Children’s Defense Fund Action Council, “Did Your Members of Congress Protect Children?” Nonpartisan Congressional Scorecard, 2006.

3. “Babies Born to Singles Are at Record.”

4. U.S. Department of Agriculture, *Household Food Security in the United States*, 2005, Economic Research Report, no. 29. A U.S. household is “food secure” if the household has “consistent, dependable access to enough food for active, healthy living” (iv). A household experiences food insecurity when its access to food “is limited by a lack of money and other resources.” Although children are usually shielded in a situation of food scarcity, on a typical day in 2005, children in 32,000 to 43,000 households experienced disrupted eating patterns and a reduction in food intake (v). In 2006, 17 million children received a free or reduced-price lunch through the National School Lunch Program and 8 million children received a free or reduced-price

data about exactly how food gets shared around a table of hungry mouths are understandably impossible to produce, one can only speculate about the exact number of children who go to bed hungry on a given night.

Other facts are easier to come by, but not easy to forget. *On any given day* in 2005 in the United States, 2,447 babies were born into poverty, and 2,482 children were confirmed as abused or neglected.<sup>5</sup> It is estimated that 1 million to 1.6 million children in the United States are likely to experience homelessness over the course of a year.<sup>6</sup> One study estimates that 39 percent of the homeless population are children. Again, anyone attending to such statistics will worry about the children.

Many people, perhaps including a good number of Christians, will frame their worry in terms of the *fate* of the children. Fate is a word Christians use only provisionally, however. They speak the word-sound, all right, but, as Saint Augustine said of some converts who continued to rue their “luck,” they must believe in their heart that the revelation of the providence of a personal, loving God supplants the randomness of an ungoverned cosmic lottery. Quite simply, Christians ask what God wills for them and calls them to; they seek their *vocation*. And, because they believe in faith that no person exceeds God’s providence, they affirm that every person is called by name, that *every* person has a vocation.<sup>7</sup> They even go so far as to inquire into the vocation of *the child*.

And so they ask, what is the vocation of children born to single mothers or unwed couples? How does it fare vis-à-vis the vocation of children born to parents bound together in married love? What is the providential “fate” of babies who do not know the vowed love of two parents? What is the destiny of babies born in poverty? Of children who grow up in squalor?

The measurable effects of poverty and other forms of neglect confirm the child’s vulnerability.<sup>8</sup> But is a person’s *vocation*, because it is from God, invul-

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breakfast through the National School Breakfast Program. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service Program Data, as of December 22, 2006. In contrast, only 1.9 million children participated in the Summer Food Service Program during the peak month of July.

5. 2005 Children’s Defense Fund Action Council, “Did Your Members of Congress Protect Children?”

6. National Alliance to End Homelessness, “Fundamental Issues to Prevent and End Youth Homelessness,” Youth Homelessness Series, Brief No. 1, May 2006. Homeless families, comprised of an adult with one or more children, make up 34 percent of homeless people found in homeless assistance programs. Maggie McCarty, *Homelessness: Recent Statistics, Targeted Federal Programs, and Recent Legislation*, Congressional Research Service, May 31, 2005.

7. On “vocation” as a contested but uniting Christian concept, see William A. Placher, *Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

8. See, e.g., T. Berry Brazelton and Stanley I. Greenspan, *The Irreducible Needs of Children: What Every Child Must Have to Grow, Learn, and Flourish* (Cambridge, Mass.: Perseus, 2000).

nerable? Are we adults capable of squandering our children's vocations? Alternatively, can we help them discover and realize their vocations?

The belief that a person has a vocation can supply a reason to others to help that person find and embrace it. Differently conceived, the belief that everyone has a vocation can court apathy or detachment, if only at an unconscious level. The agnostic saying has it that "There is a reason for everything." It is obvious that very young children are, in almost every respect, helpless to help themselves. According to the seminal chapter by John Coons (chapter 3), however, the *vocation* of even the youngest (rational) children is wholly in their own hands. Coons's provocative thesis draws on Christian philosophy and theology, but even more on moral sentiments that are widely shared, in order to identify within the vulnerable child a core *self* that stands invulnerable, infallibly called by God. Without licensing adults to neglect their dependents, Coons attempts a proleptic rescue of the true vocation of the child — a feat to which we return repeatedly below.

Shifting the focus from the consequences of a child's being born either out of wedlock or in poverty, what about the "fate" of children adopted or artificially conceived by lesbian or gay couples? What do these rapidly changing social norms mean for the children involved? Today, all but eight states permit adoption by gays and lesbians. All but two states permit gays and lesbians to serve as foster parents. However, as of 2008, only six states permit gay couples to enter into marriage or civil unions. Meanwhile, as many as nine million children in the United States have a gay or lesbian parent, and approximately a quarter of all lesbian or gay couples are raising children.<sup>9</sup>

These children have an experience that is importantly different from the one that has been both normal and normative. Would anyone suggest, though, that these children have a vocation that is categorically compromised, as compared to that of children born to a heterosexual mother in traditional marriage in which the parents stay together and share the parenting responsibilities? The social science shows that children reared by homosexual parents are more likely to be homosexual as adults.<sup>10</sup> Readers will draw different conclusions about the significance of this phenomenon.

Another social force that shapes our children is schooling. In the United States, primary and secondary schools of the "public" sort are funded on the basis of property taxes. The result is that children in rich or prosperous districts attend commendable schools, while children in poorer districts are conscripted

9. Richard E. Redding, "It's Really about Sex: Same-Sex Marriage, Lesbiger Parenting, and the Psychology of Disgust," *Duke Journal of Gender Law and Policy* 15 (2008): 127. On file with author.

10. For a survey of the social science literature on the effects on children of growing up in gay or lesbian households, see Redding, "It's Really about Sex."

by schools that range from threadbare to threatening. An exception to the rule for children from poor districts depends on scholarships, voucher programs, or charter schools that allow access to the educational opportunities that are the ordinary option of the children of rich and upper-middle-class parents.

Is it not worth wondering what this educational disparity means for the vocation of the children who live it? Are the children playing and praying together at Portsmouth Abbey better equipped to discern and embrace their vocation than those smoking cigarettes in the bathroom or crack in the alley, undetected by the disaffected and disenchanted staff? God calls, but who can hear?

And then there are the approximately two million children involved, on an annual basis, in prostitution and pornography. Not to mention the nearly six million in forced and bonded labor. As well as the 300,000 engaged in armed conflict.<sup>11</sup> What of their vocation? To what, and by whom, are *they* called?

Without risking hyperbole, one can say that the visible situation of the child today frequently is grim. Even in the generally prosperous and comparatively educated United States, some children flourish, but strikingly many, and not just the victims of prostitution or pornography, lack what many agree is necessary to a healthy upbringing and a bright, or at least promising, future.

"No child left behind"? That is not what happens in the world we see. But what of the child's vocation from God? Can it possibly be safe from worldly depredation, as Coons hopes? Can Christians, along with others, *plausibly* regard it as invulnerable?

## II. An Ironic Reversal

It is widely acknowledged that the twentieth century was the most violent in human history. As our capacity to destroy one another grew exponentially, our willingness to care for our fellow humans suffered in proportion. Alongside quantum leaps in science and medicine, we witness a growing degradation of the human person in war, widening poverty, devastating disease, and every conceivable social malady.

This growing human capacity for self-destruction has led to an arresting, though easily overlooked, reversal, of which this study, of the vocation of the child, might be seen as a manifestation. "It is no longer the human which takes charge of defending the divine," Jacques Maritain observed in 1965, "but the di-

11. International Labour Organization, "Every Child Counts: New Global Estimates on Child Labour," *Statistical Information and Monitoring Programme on Child Labour* (Geneva, 2006).

vine which offers itself to defend the human (if the latter does not refuse the aid offered)."<sup>12</sup> The trend Maritain recognized was only in its infancy in 1965. Today, with ever greater frequency and fervency, Christians are coming together, both denominationally and ecumenically, to remind the forgetful that it does not fall to us humans, least of all as a right enforceable at law, "to define one's concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life."<sup>13</sup> Christians are testifying that it falls to us, rather, to seek to discover the divine plan for human life, a plan that includes peace, respect, justice, and treatment consistent with human dignity. In a word, it includes recognition of and response to the vocation of every person, if we do not "refuse the aid offered."

Christian efforts to defend the human have had among their targets war, violence, starvation — social surds of which no known historical epoch has been innocent. Increasingly, though, Christians have also lent support to defending the divinely ordained but thoroughly human institutions of marriage and family. Once virtually unquestioned and almost everywhere supported, today marriage and family are insulted and undermined. It is even suggested that they are optional. For example, one scholar avers that "The law," alone, "creates the family, and things could not be otherwise."<sup>14</sup> What the positive law has created solely of its own power, it can de-create — thus raising the hard-to-imagine possibility of a family-less world. Christians, in concert with others, answer by reminding humanity of what would have seemed obvious to our forebears: "The law no more 'creates' the family than the Rule Against Perpetuities 'creates' dirt."<sup>15</sup>

Though the efforts of Christians on behalf of the family necessarily have had children among their intended and actual beneficiaries, Christians have also come directly to the defense of the child. For, although the child is at home in the family, the child is by no means reducible to it. Children are needful of additional, and specific, defense. In a tradition that has oscillated between regarding children as "priceless" gems and as a source of cheap labor, as gifts from God and as mouths to feed, as models of innocence and pictures of wickedness, the child wants understanding.<sup>16</sup> Is the child "like the young of some domestic

12. Jacques Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), 4.

13. *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, 505 US 833, 851 (1992).

14. James G. Dwyer, "Spiritual Treatment Exemptions to Child Medical Neglect Laws: What We Outsiders Should Think," *Notre Dame Law Review* 76, no. 1 (2000): 167.

15. Richard W. Garnett, "Taking Pierce Seriously: The Family, Religious Education, and Harm to Children," *Notre Dame Law Review* 76, no. 1 (2000): 114 n. 29.

16. For a survey of centuries of societal attitudes toward children, see Linda A. Pollock, *Forgotten Children: Parent-Child Relations from 1500 to 1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

pet in need of habit training, . . . [or] like the seed which should be allowed to grow naturally,"<sup>17</sup> or like some third thing? Appreciating the child for what she is, in both her vulnerability and her promise, may even lead, moreover, to a renewed appreciation of what family itself is for.

The youngest and most defenseless among us, children have always been at risk of abandonment, of exposure, of abuse, of neglect. However, in a new world order in which it is the putative power for self-definition that is revered, children, along with the aged and disabled, become vulnerable in a novel way. Unable to speak on behalf of himself or herself, the child can be defined away, into spans of time or into systems, by enterprising or eloquent elders. For an example of the latter de-creating act, one might consider the analysis of Harvard philosopher John Searle:

It would be tricky to try to define the notion of system, but the simple intuitive idea is that systems are collections of particles where the spatio-temporal boundaries of the system are set by causal relations. . . . Babies, elephants, and mountain ranges . . . are examples of systems.<sup>18</sup>

Not called by name, they may not be called at all. And so we might ask, with Joseph Vining, "whence comes any real reluctance in total theorists," those who see it all as system, "to treat the child like the young song sparrow, deafening him, keeping him in silence, isolating him, sacrificing him, and cutting his brain into slices?"<sup>19</sup> Christians coming to the defense of the human see openings, not system; callings, not cuttings; vocations, not brains for vats. Anthony Kelly, C.Ss.R (chapter 8), puts it this way: "[T]he child is conceived," in the flesh, "as an irreducible 'other,'" (220) and it is our task — as parents, aunts and uncles, neighbors, fellow citizens, fellow Christians — to understand the child, to care for him, and of course to love him. But how? Perhaps by understanding what the child is *called to*.

The recent book *The Child in Christian Thought* provided "a critical examination of past [Christian] theological perspectives on children in order to strengthen ethical and theological reflection on children today to contribute to the current academic and broader public discussion on children."<sup>20</sup> The present volume pursues a cognate goal, but by asking an intentionally unexpected ques-

17. Hugh Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society Since 1500*, 2nd ed. (Harlow, England: Pearson-Longman, 2005), 202.

18. John Searle, *The Rediscovery of Mind* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 86-87 (quoted in Joseph Vining, *The Song Sparrow and the Child* [Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004], 8).

19. Vining, *The Song Sparrow*, 114.

20. Marcia J. Bunge, ed., *The Child in Christian Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 7.

tion: "What is the vocation of the child?" Centuries of reflection on the duties and rights of children, decades of modern international pronouncements of the rights of children, several generations of American debate about the intersection of the "right to life" and the "right to choose" have made timely a fresh focus on an ancient Christian question. Christians are heard to claim that every human person has a "vocation." But what of the young person, the child? What can it mean for him or her, who can neither get a real job nor be ordained to ministry, to have a "vocation"?

Some of the work of this volume is historical; an understanding of the child is not ours to invent from scratch. Much of the work is philosophical and theological; the child continues to demand much of our efforts to say and spell out what nature and grace make possible. There is also what Anthony Kelly calls "phenomenological" work to be done, for, as Kelly observes, the child is a phenomenon, one of what Jean-Luc Marion understood as "saturated phenomena." We need not romanticize or idealize the child when we observe that he or she is a gift, and

an open-ended, transformative event. It is no *fait accompli* in terms of assignable causes and predictable effects, but an event overflowing into the constitution of the family, society and even world history. . . . (220)

As he goes deeper and deeper into his own phenomenology of the child, Kelly is finally led to ask whether the phenomenon of the child "call[s] the church itself to a new kind of thinking" (222). Together and each in its own way, the fifteen chapters of this study of the vocation of the child, while drawing on the traditional categories of rights, duties, responsibilities, and so forth, also invite a new kind of thinking. Wielding control of food, sacraments, schools, shelters, discipline, and violence, we adults have to decide where the child "is to be put,"<sup>21</sup> and knowing what it is for a child to have a vocation will help both us and the child, whom we, necessarily, "put."

### III. The Splendor of Vocation

In *Brideshead Revisited: The Sacred and Profane Memoirs of Captain Charles Ryder*,<sup>22</sup> English novelist Evelyn Waugh (1903-1966) uses the narrative voice of

21. Vining, *The Song Sparrow*, 152.

22. Evelyn Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited: The Sacred and Profane Memoirs of Captain Charles Ryder* (London: Little, Brown, 1944; New York: Knopf, 1993). Citations are to the Knopf edition.



Charles Ryder to chronicle the life of the fabulously rich Flyte family and those who come into contact with them during the second quarter of the twentieth century. The Flytes, though very English, are all of them Catholic, each in a puzzlingly peculiar but perhaps profound way. Drawn into the Flyte family by its charm, Ryder, a confirmed agnostic, is at first patronizing toward the varieties of the family members' religious experience. The Flytes do say, and do, some remarkable things in the name of their Catholic religion. Over time, though, Ryder's contempt matures into curiosity. The unanticipated deathbed repentance of the long-lost Flyte family patriarch, Lord Marchmain, who spent most of his adult life in flight (with a mistress) from his scrupulously pious wife, is the beginning of Charles Ryder's conversion to the Catholic faith.

Along the way, Charles is taken by, but pities, the zealous and guileless Cordelia, the youngest Flyte, who hopes she has a vocation, as she blurts out over dinner with Charles at the Ritz Grill.

"I hope I've got a vocation."

"I don't know what that means."

"It means you can be a nun. If you haven't a vocation, it's no good however much you want to be; and if you have a vocation, you can't get away from it, however much you hate it. Bridey thinks he has a vocation and hasn't. I used to think Sebastian had and hated it — but I don't know now. Everything has changed so much suddenly."<sup>23</sup>

Bridey, or Brideshead, the eldest of the four Flyte children, supercilious and greedy, half hoped for a vocation to the priesthood. He fades from the story, and is disinherited, after marrying Mrs. Musprat, a widow whose late husband he knew thanks to their common interest in matchboxes. Cordelia, meeting up with Charles years after their dinner at the Ritz, inquires, "When you met me last night did you think, 'Poor Cordelia, such an engaging child, grown up a plain and pious spinster, full of good works'? Did you think 'thwarted'?"<sup>24</sup> Though Cordelia shows the wear of her work in the war prison-camps in Spain, she does not speak a word of dissatisfaction about anything. Charles answers Cordelia's questions in the affirmative, but then goes on to doubt his first impression because of what, in the interim, he learns from Cordelia about her brother Sebastian, whom they both loved.

Sebastian, the most conspicuous man of his year at Oxford, by reason of his physical beauty and ostentatious behavior, dies in obscurity in North Africa, an alcoholic in flight from his overbearing family, but even more from his own

23. Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited*, 201.

24. Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited*, 279.

weakness of will. So far as the reader is given to speculate, Sebastian's last days are spent on the fringes of a monastery, living devoutly and serving the community, except for the occasional several days' bout of drinking. When Charles suggests to Cordelia that Sebastian's last days were not "what one would have foretold," and goes on to console himself with the thought that at least Sebastian "doesn't suffer," Cordelia replies, "Oh, yes, I think he does. One can have no idea what the suffering may be, to be maimed as he is — no dignity, no power of will. No one is ever holy without suffering."<sup>25</sup> People such as Sebastian, Cordelia believes, "are very near and dear to God."<sup>26</sup>

Before his own conversion, Charles naturally sees Sebastian as thwarted, full stop. Cordelia, who in her youth equated vocation with a call to priesthood or the nunnery, teaches Charles that beautiful, willful Sebastian was not without a vocation. No one is without a vocation.

Vocation, as Waugh understands it, is a call to a "single, peculiar act of service," some unique act "which only we can do and for which we were each created." It refers to "a particular task for each individual soul, which the individual is free to accept or decline at will and whose ultimate destiny is determined by his response to God's vocation."<sup>27</sup> God's call is a person's vocation. For all the Flyte family's religiosity, and for all the family members' varied decencies, it is only Sebastian the drunkard whom the reader is invited to regard as holy. Yet, by Waugh's lights, each person has a unique work to do, a singular life to lead, a particular person to become and be. This is his "vocation" because God calls him to it.

The case of Sebastian Flyte illustrates a risk to those taking Evelyn Waugh's measure of vocation, especially as it may touch children. Sebastian's suffering was real, his objective circumstances wretched. The tradition of worrying that Christians will try to rationalize circumstances that they should seek to improve is venerable, if checkered; even Christians are heard to say "everything happens for a reason." If Sebastian was holy, "very near . . . to God," still, the suffering, which Charles was inclined to blink, asks to be accounted for. Cordelia makes it a condition of Sebastian's holiness.<sup>28</sup>

The young Cordelia's limiting "vocation" to God's calling a person to holy

25. Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited*, 279.

26. Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited*, 278.

27. Douglas Lane Patey, *The Life of Evelyn Waugh: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 296.

28. For a concise statement of Waugh's theological conviction that suffering is at the heart of God's call of every person to holiness, see George Weigel's introduction to Evelyn Waugh's novel *Helena*, about the vocation of the mother of the emperor Constantine. George Weigel, introduction to *Helena*, by Evelyn Waugh (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2005), xiii-xvii.

orders or religious life has its contemporary echoes in some Catholic quarters. The common conception today, however, continues the theological turn begun when Martin Luther and then other reformers taught that every person has a vocation, which may include (but is not exhausted by) the work we do in the world. Quoting John Henry Newman, William Werpehowski (chapter 2) reminds us that "in truth we are not called only once, but many times; all through our life Christ is calling us" (53), and what he is calling us to, Werpehowski continues in his own voice, is to "become a self" (71) — a particular, engaged, relational son or daughter of Christ. This latter, distinguishable understanding of vocation depends on God's "little" callings to us, day by day and hour by hour, throughout our life, but on a whole lot more, as well. It might depend on the education we receive. It might even depend on incorporation into the body of Christ through baptism.

Werpehowski warns that, when it comes to the idea of the vocation of *the child*, there is a danger "of the self-deception it can foster among those who care for children in societies like our own, and may thus inflict damage in its name" (54). "Yet it is dangerous in a second, salutary sense," Werpehowski continues, "for the notion properly considered imperils that same partly willed, partial blindness through its challenge, through its *calling us out*, truthfully to see real children as they may be called by God." Coons's thesis potentially implicates both of the dangers identified by Werpehowski, a point to which we shall return.

Vigen Guroian (chapter 4), speaking from the perspective of Orthodox Christianity, develops an understanding of childhood in terms of "office" rather than "vocation." In dialogue with Werpehowski, Guroian considers the risk of taking an excessively particularistic approach to Christian vocation. We are (also) called to certain *kinds* of relations, Guroian explains. Office bespeaks the work a child is to do in the categorical relations he assumes, both as son or daughter and as member of the family and the community. "The essence of being a child," Guroian explains, "is to act responsibly toward one's parents, family, and the larger community. . . . The offices of child and of parent are reciprocal and inextricably related to one another. Each, however, has its own set of virtues" (105). And, because it necessarily will be adult parents who catalogue the virtues of childhood for the children they believe to be called to sonship, the dangers identified by Werpehowski are again, if differently, implicated.

Working from within the Lutheran tradition but with her eye on the whole Christian tradition of reflection on vocation, Marcia Bunge (chapter 1) develops a theology of vocation that, unlike many others, refuses to leave the child out. Observing that even many capacious understandings of vocation have supposed that God starts calling people when and if they become adults, Bunge turns to Scripture to identify the specific tasks and relationships to which God

calls the child. Bunge finds that children have work to do *in the present*; they have “offices” to fulfill, and these include learning the faith and modeling it for adults. Of especial salience, in light of the question whether the child’s vocation is invulnerable, is Bunge’s reminder of Luther’s admonition about the social and personal wages of failing to educate the child: “[I]n the sight of God none among the outward sins so heavily burdens the world and merits such severe punishment as this very sin which we commit against children by not educating them” (37).

#### IV. The (Central) Question of “Moral Luck”

Luther is not alone in recking what impoverished education might mean for children themselves. Surveying the contemporary scene, Coons gives voice to a common concern that the involuntary assignments that punctuate childhood — whether to the squalor and neglect of a ghetto school or to the opulence of a too-clever-by-half suburban prep school that has given up teaching the Golden Rule — can arrange a child’s moral tragedy. Does the child with impoverished skills for seeking the good, whether obtained at Sterling Academy or in the ghetto, necessarily suffer a “vocation” to moral mediocrity or tragedy? Raising one’s eyes from the terrestrial to the celestial, a second question arises: Is the ill-instructed, untutored child — the child who does not know the first thing about the faith — destined not to seek, and therefore not to find, the *summum bonum*, and therefore to end up with a “vocation” to damnation?

Modern sensibilities regard this eventuality as unlikely, but the questions are worth asking. Many of the giants on whose shoulders we stand, both pagan and Christian, regard correct knowledge, either of the good or of the faith, as a necessary condition either for moral achievement or for salvation, and they do not exempt the little ones.

In answer to the first question, eudaemonist (or virtue-theoretic) moral theorists offer notoriously bleak news. For Aristotle, to pick the leading example, human goodness just *is* the life of virtue according to a rational principle. Children, if they are lucky, are in training for the good life; without apt training and other luck, goodness is simply impossible, no matter one’s good intentions, best efforts, or most ardent imprecations. By the eudaemonist’s lights, life is a cosmic (but not comical) variation on what the lawyers call “strict liability.” Either luck and effort (which, if you can make it, is again thanks to luck) combine to make yours a happy life, or they do not. In a word, bad biology, or standing in the wrong place at the wrong time, can be a person’s *moral* death knell. Aristotle saw no alternative. In order to capture the “powerful strain of thought that

centers on a feeling of ultimate and outrageous absurdity in the idea that achievement of highest kind of moral worth should depend on natural capacities, unequally and fortuitously distributed,"<sup>29</sup> Bernard Williams coined the oxymoron "moral luck."<sup>30</sup>

Williams had adults in mind, but the *locus classicus* of the phenomenon is the child. Adults, we might suppose, can help themselves overcome some of nature's unequal distributions. But if little children are captives of a cosmic lottery, to whom can they turn?

Williams's world, like Aristotle's, does not include a providential God who could, conceivably, perform a rescue, as by grace. Williams found no way out of the eudaemonist's prison. Some people are involuntarily the stuff of tragedy, that genre perfected by the Greeks and never surpassed. Coons, though, remains resolutely more hopeful, especially for the rescue of children.

It is Coons's conviction that the Aristotle-Williams report is not the last word. Refusing to let morality pivot on the unchosen fulcrum of biology or other luck, Coons distinguishes two *kinds* of good. One kind is all the goods the eudaemonist might mention — health, wisdom, friendship, Athenian citizenship, and so forth. This kind of good Coons designates "second good," in order to distinguish it from "first good." The latter, according to Coons, is "self-perfection," moral goodness par excellence: it crowns the act of seeking or trying for second, nonmoral goods. In sum, first good rewards the simple, though not necessarily easy, decision to seek second goods. The thesis, then, is that involuntary failure to realize or instantiate second goods does not imperil first good. If this be true, highest human achievement has been made invulnerable to luck and the eudaemonist's dilemma.

According to Coons, first good is *equally* available to all rational actors because, *in fact*, from the first dawn of rationality, every child is conscious of an obligation to seek second goods. So long as the child manages rationality, first good is within his grasp, because every rational child has *equal* awareness of the obligation to seek second goods. The "prize" (78) of self-perfection awaits anyone who performs the search, no matter the poverty of his ability or the paucity of his success in determining and instantiating particular goods. The *vocation* of the rational child is to seek second goods. According to Coons, no rational child is left out. The rational child's vocation is secure notwithstanding the poverty, of whatever kind, encamped about him.

29. Bernard Williams, "The Idea of Equality," in *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 230.

30. Bernard Williams, "Moral Luck," in *Moral Luck*, ed. Daniel Statman (New York: SUNY Press, 1992), 35.

So Coons claims. But has the eudaemonist's sting *in fact* been withdrawn? Has the specter of moral luck been successfully dissolved? The thesis is that the division of the good into first and second, combined with rational humans' equal access to first good, rescues the child from the eudaemonist lottery. Is the thesis correct? Does every rational person have a plenary awareness of a primordial obligation to seek second goods? Is the good divisible? Are children morally safe wherever they happen to be assigned?

If one is asking Immanuel Kant, the answer is a clear yes. Indeed, according to Bernard Williams, Kant's philosophy

contains the working out to the very end of that thought, a thought which in less thoroughgoing forms marks the greatest difference between moral ideas influenced by Christianity, and those of the ancient [Greek] world. It is this thought, that moral worth must be separated from any natural advantage whatsoever, which, consistently pursued by Kant, leads to the conclusion that the source of moral thought and action must be located outside the empirically conditioned self.<sup>31</sup>

Writing in 1960, Arthur Adkins asserted that "[W]e are all Kantians now."<sup>32</sup> More recently, Roger Sullivan opined that "The Kantian view or something closely akin to it seems clearly to be the way many people think about morality even today, particularly those reared in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Kant often says what they themselves would say about their moral life, were they to articulate it."<sup>33</sup> Coons's voice can sound like Everyman's.

Many of the authors of this volume, however, along with those whom they study and engage, deny the Kantian premises that lurk largely unnamed in the shadows of Coons's bifurcation of the good.<sup>34</sup> Kant had his Pietistic reasons for making the human good a purely formal category,<sup>35</sup> to be sure, but, as a group, and *pace* the late Bernard Williams, the leading Christian thinkers have resisted the temptation to consider human goodness as disembodied.

Thomas Aquinas's paradigm of childhood, as developed by Philip Reynolds (chapter 6), posits that the work of the child is to grow old enough to be able "to acquire knowledge and virtue" (187). According to Reynolds,

31. Williams, "The Idea of Equality," 228.

32. Arthur W. H. Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility: A Study in Greek Values* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), 2.

33. Roger J. Sullivan, *Immanuel Kant's Moral Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), xiii.

34. Cf. Coons, "Luck, Obedience, and the Vocation of Childhood," 76-79 below, n. 10.

35. Patrick McKinley Brennan, "Arguing for Human Equality," *Journal of Law and Religion* 18, no. 1 (2002): 132.

"Thomas consistently characterizes childhood in terms of deficiency and imperfection" (175). Reynolds explains that, for Aquinas, if the child has a "vocation," it is the modest but indispensable one of developing over time into an adult who is sober enough to become virtuous. Aquinas is, then, what Coons terms a "gnostic," because he holds, with Aristotle (and Williams), that action that makes a person good depends on action informed by correct knowledge, and the child, even the prodigy, is just beginning to acquire the necessary knowledge. Aquinas displays not the least concern if God predestines some to salvation and others to perdition:

Neither on this account can there be said to be injustice in God, if He prepares unequal lots for not unequal things. This would be altogether contrary to the notion of justice, if the effect of predestination were granted as a debt, and not gratuitously. In things which are given gratuitously a person can give more or less, just as he pleases (provided he deprives nobody of his due), without any infringement of justice.<sup>36</sup>

Is it possible to romanticize a childhood from which the possibility of (first) goodness is absent?

Aquinas need not have the last word, of course, notwithstanding his canonical status in the Catholic tradition. If what Reynolds refers to as the "biological child" (164-67) does not prevail in the work of the twentieth century's leading Thomist philosopher, Jacques Maritain (1882-1973), it is not because the good has been bifurcated and a purely formal goodness given priority, at least not quite. As the present author (chapter 7) argues, it is because what exceeds the natural human good has entered and transformed it, namely, grace. Reacting against the moral elitism of the Greek eudaemonist, Maritain explains:

The great novelty introduced by Christianity is this appeal to all, to free men and slaves, to the ignorant and the cultivated, adolescents and old men, a call to perfection which no effort of nature can attain but which is given by grace and consists in love, and from which therefore no one is excluded except by his own refusal.<sup>37</sup>

Maritain appreciates the importance of the development of the biological child and also evinces keen insight into the natural psychological life and development of children and adolescents. Maritain's theology of grace, however, ani-

36. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I, q. 23, art. 5, reply 3.

37. Jacques Maritain, *Moral Philosophy: An Historical and Critical Survey of the Great Systems* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964), 85.

mated by appreciation that "God wills that all men be saved" (1 Tim. 2:4), teaches that even — or, rather, exemplarily — the child can satisfy the universal human vocation to choose the good *qua* good and (at least implicitly) God. According to Maritain, grace makes possible an act of which bare human nature would be incapable, and this act, "the first act of freedom," is, "in a moral sense, an absolute beginning." To make it, with its possibility of divine reward, is the vocation of the child, at least of those chosen children who are "lucky" enough to get baptized, another point to which we shall return.

The conviction that children are capable of, and called to, an act of freedom stakes out a claim against those who, with John Searle, would dissolve children into systems. Among those who join forces with the reducers-to-system are stage and developmental psychologists who, as Guroian elucidates, postulate that children *must* develop in a certain way, after the manner of the oak sapling that necessarily must become an oak tree with a particular shape and type of foliage (107-9). *Pace* the postmodernist social-constructionists at the other end of the spectrum, children do, like oaks, have an essence or nature — human nature, we call it. But, as our cognitional and volitional abilities come alive, we humans become capable, first as children, of freedom. As Guroian explains, "Who we are and what we may become does not depend solely upon natural processes" (112). Freedom is ours, and most Christian teachers believe that, in order to exercise that freedom as they ought, children will need education.

While the Coons thesis downplays the importance of education, by limiting its significance to "second good," most theorists and others, including elected officials and voters, sense that education plays a critical, if not virtually decisive, role in determining whether a child can know and realize his vocation. Much of the implicit theorizing about the vocation *vel non* of the child occurs in the ongoing debate about, and idiom of, education and rights thereto.

## V. Schooling, Open Futures, and the Rights of the Child

"The annual crop of infants is a potential invasion of barbarians." Hardly anyone would dispute this claim. Nor would one find much disagreement with Bernard Lonergan's further observation that "education may be conceived as the first line of defense,"<sup>38</sup> both of society and of the individual infants themselves. However,

38. *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, vol. 10, *Topics in Education: The Cincinnati Lectures of 1959 on the Philosophy of Education*, ed. Robert M. Doran and Frederick E. Crowe (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1959), 59.



to consider the proper aims of education of children is to enter a minefield. The present investigation of the vocation of the child goes forward against a politico-philosophical background that is, as Robert Vischer (chapter 15) observes, a "culture war cacophony" in which "no battle front is more stridently contested than the socialization and value-inculcation of children" (408).

The limit case is the argument of philosopher Joel Feinberg, according to which children have a right to an "open future,"<sup>39</sup> "one in which they, rather than their parents, choose the orienting principles by which they will guide their lives."<sup>40</sup> If most theorists and citizens stop short of advocating a contentless childhood in hope of a future that is entirely of the child's invention, mainstream thought continues to worry the question about the extent to which adults can rule over children, and on what basis they so rule. Children need nurture and education, but who is to provide either or both, and who is to police the providing? Increasingly, the answer is "the state" — even if, as observed above, "the state" provides unequal educational opportunities for children who are equally children.

The chapters by Charles Glenn, Elmer Thiessen, George Van Grieken, F.S.C., and Robert Vischer, along with several others, argue on behalf of children, by arguing, to varying degrees, on behalf of parents and church. Without denying the right of state or civil society to advance the common good, they redirect attention to the child and those who by nature are ordinarily best positioned to know and care for her. They do so against a background that increasingly imagines that the dream child will be almost self-made. They all affirm that the child's vocation includes learning.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted by the U.N. General Assembly in 1989 (and later ratified by every nation in the world, including the Vatican, but excepting Somalia and the United States), embodies the emergent, if not yet dominant, understanding of the concept of the child that vies with Christian conceptions for implementation in social policy and law. Vischer notes that the Declaration posits not only traditional "protection rights" — to property, to physical care and security, and to procedural due process — but also "choice rights." These latter rights, traditionally reserved to adults, "grant individuals the authority to make affirmative and legally binding decisions, such as voting, marrying, making contracts, exercising religious pref-

39. Joel Feinberg, "The Child's Right to an Open Future," in *Whose Child? Children's Rights, Parental Authority, and State Power*, ed. William Aiken and Hugh LaFollette (Totowa, N.J.: Littlefield, Adams, 1980), 124.

40. Shelley Burt, "The Proper Scope of Parental Authority: Why We Don't Owe Children an 'Open Future,'" in *Nomos*, vol. 44, *Child, Family, and State*, ed. Stephen Macedo and Iris Marion Young (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 245.

erences, or choosing whether or how to be educated" (413).<sup>41</sup> Article 17 of the Convention, for example, requires states to "ensure that the child has access to information and material from a diversity of national and international sources, especially those aimed at the promotion of his or her social, spiritual, and moral well-being and physical and mental health."

The idea that parents *must* provide "diverse" reading material is perhaps disturbing enough, but Vischer goes on to observe that in the Convention, the provision of "choice rights" to children combines with another doctrine to situate the primary determinations regarding the child's education even further away from the traditional locus. Article 3 provides that "[i]n all actions concerning children whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities, or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration" (414). "Best interests" are hard to quarrel with, but here the rub comes from the fact that states, rather than parents, are empowered to determine them. According to Vischer, the Convention, by its own description and aspiration, seeks to drive a wedge between parent and child. According to the description offered by the U.N. itself, the Convention "promotes a 'new concept of separate rights for children with the Government accepting responsibility [for] protecting the child from the power of parents'" (414).

What do Christians say in response? Is the vocation of the child to be supplied by the state? Thwarted by the state? Who decides what the child will become?

Charles Glenn (chapter 12) tells the story of "who decides what the child will become," from Plato to the present (327). In their philosophizing, Plato and then Aristotle assigned the state a significant role in educating children. In the course of history, however, it took until the modern period, beginning in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and coming to term in the twentieth, for the state and its schools to grow to be regarded as possessing ultimate authority over the shaping of children. Glenn shows how the philosophers of enlightenment of the eighteenth century had great ambitions for the state to use education to make people better — and, of course, one should start early. But, for squeezing parents out, Glenn fingers above all the professionalization of education, as by John Dewey and other reformers. Vocation fits awkwardly in John Dewey's classroom.

Religious schools, too, felt the squeeze, such that the United States Supreme Court was moved to insist, in the 1925 case *Pierce v. Society of the Sisters*, that "the child is not the mere creature of the state."<sup>42</sup> The American legal public

41. Quoting Bruce C. Hafen and Jonathan O. Hafen, "Abandoning Children to Their Autonomy: The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child," *Harvard International Law Journal* 37 (1996).

42. *Pierce v. Society of the Sisters*, 268 US 510, 535 (1925).

was not the only body that needed reminding, apparently, because Pope Pius XI's 1939 encyclical letter *Divini illius magistri*, "On Christian Education," addressed to hierarchs as well as to "all the faithful of the Catholic world," took the truly extraordinary step of commending the *Pierce* court for recognizing and giving effect to the "incontestable right of the family" to bring up and educate children: "it is not in the competence of the State," the pope explained, adverting to *Pierce*, "to fix any uniform standard of education by forcing children to receive education exclusively in public schools."<sup>43</sup>

Elmer John Thiessen (chapter 14) highlights the vocation of the child to be a learner and, along with this vocation, the correlative "primacy of parental rights and responsibilities to help their children to learn" (397). For Thiessen, there is no avoiding that children are not capable of fulfilling their vocation without help. Nor, according to Thiessen, is the help they need the provision of a childhood analogue of a liberal-arts course catalogue. As one scholar has explained in opposing Feinberg's and other liberals' pleas to keep children's options open, the liberal position misjudges and generally underestimates what children need. Children do not need to pluck values from a tree, come the age of majority. They need to become persons or selves, and that is not a project for another day. As Thiessen elaborates, the time of childhood consists of socialization, initiation, and absorption. Otherwise, children wither on the vine of life.

Thiessen joins Coons in arguing that the young learner's responsibility is to subordinate himself to adult guides, and that ordinarily a child's own parents will be the best, though not necessarily good, guides. Parents ordinarily love their children, and are, therefore, in the best position to discern and look out for their best interests. Parents' authority thus comes from their *presumptive* capacity to meet children's impressive needs for education and enculturation. Coons concedes that "Children get born to adults who have rather different ideas about the good; and it is the ideas of particular parents that the child will hear. Call this providence; call it luck" (95). Obviously, it should matter which of the two you believe it to be. Thiessen is in accord: "Young children are not in a position to choose who influences or teaches them. They are stuck with 'fate' if you will, or a 'divine lottery' if you prefer religious language" (385).

## VI. Education, Salvation, and Other Rights of the Child

Many of those who embrace Christian "religious language," although they affirm that parents ordinarily hold the first right and responsibility to educate

43. Pope Pius XI, *Divini illius magistri*, no. 37 (1939).

their children, are not content to leave it entirely to parents to ensure that children can fulfill their vocation. Almost no one imagines that parents alone have a legitimate claim on deciding who the child will become. Believing that the child's education may have some bearing on the fate of his eternal soul, the church has been at hand to coordinate with parents. Charles Glenn shows how, in the wake of the Reformation, schooling became a priority in Protestant territories. Everyone was expected to read the Bible for himself, and church, state, and family cooperated in countless combinations to alter the probabilities in favor of biblical literacy. If medieval Christianity was largely content with a peasant population that lacked access to written bearers of tradition, for the Counter-Reformation the task was to ensure that the faithful receive the right, not the rebellious, doctrine. Seminary education was reformed, and new orders were founded to be what Glenn describes as "internal missionaries" (336).

The mission of one of the Catholic orders mentioned by Glenn receives extended elaboration and analysis in the chapter herein by George Van Grieken, F.S.C. (chapter 13). It is the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, more commonly known as the Christian Brothers, founded by Saint John Baptist de La Salle (1651-1719) in Rheims, France, in 1681. The Brothers stepped in to educate poor children, youngsters neglected by family, state, civil society, and even church. La Salle's order continues its mission around the globe today, and in 1950 the Catholic Church recognized La Salle as the patron of all teachers of youth, a recognition of La Salle's theology of the child.

La Salle does not use the term "vocation," but his writings everywhere radiate a visionary Christian understanding of the calling of children. According to La Salle, Van Grieken explains, "[t]heir 'vocation' is to grow into the mature fulfillment of who they are, and they are to do so in concert with their educational progress and with the guidance of 'older brothers,' their teachers" (363). La Salle combined a strong judgment of the spiritual reality of the child with an equally strong judgment that the child's spiritual development, which by no means would be automatic, required practical assistance.

The insights of Thiessen and Coons, that children are principally learners whose success depends on docility to a worthy older navigator, find support in La Salle's theology. La Salle, however, professed that children's salvation may depend on their coming to knowledge of and faith in Christian truth, and how, La Salle reasoned, can God will that all people be saved and come to knowledge of the truth, as Saint Paul teaches (1 Tim. 2:4), if children lack teachers?<sup>44</sup> La Salle's missionary zeal derives from his theological judgment that, for aught

44. See Patrick McKinley Brennan, "Harmonizing Plural Societies: The Case of Lasallians, Families, Schools — and the Poor," *Journal of Catholic Legal Studies* 45 (2006): 131, 144.

that appears, a child's vocation to faith and salvation can be thwarted by not being educated.

Would Christians, then, say that children have a "right," a *natural* right, to education? The answer, for most or all Christians today, is yes, and it issues from a long tradition of recognizing that children have — and should have enforced on their behalf, if necessary — *rights*. The second half of the twentieth century is conspicuous for its proliferation of declarations of rights, including on behalf of the child, such as the Convention. However, rights, understood as something claimable and enforceable through legal or other social mechanisms, have a long history, including for the child.

The medieval canonists incrementally but aggressively overturned the doctrines of Roman law and custom that had long permitted infanticide, exposure, and abandonment, in favor of enforceable rights of children to life, support, and education. As Charles Reid (chapter 9) demonstrates, even children born out of wedlock might have enforceable rights against their father. In addition to recognizing the natural rights of the youngest and most vulnerable, the medieval canonists affirmed the rights of older children to marry and to make religious vows. The canonists also insisted upon the right of children to inherit from their parents, a doctrine anathema to the Anglo-American freedom of the testator to do as he pleases. Claims of natural right, though not reducible to or interchangeable with the claim that a person has a vocation, do seem to reveal what people regard the rights-holders as called to do, or to have done for them.

These Christian claims of rights, which run in favor of children, are not confined to history. The current *Code of Canon Law* (1983), for example, sets out, as a matter of the law of the Catholic Church, that "parents have the most grave duty and the primary right to care as best they can for the physical, social, cultural, moral, and religious education of their offspring."<sup>45</sup> In a world in which the Convention on the Rights of the Child would set the child "free" on the basis of a right to an "open future," the canonical tradition continues to teach that Christian children have "a right to a *Christian* education."<sup>46</sup> Commentary on this canon, Canon 217, states that satisfaction of this right is *necessary* if children are to be able to cooperate with God's salvific will.<sup>47</sup> Is God's salvific will for individuals vulnerable to more than their own, personal choice to flout it? Can God save those who cannot, as opposed to will not, cooperate

45. Canon 1136.

46. Canon 217 (italics added).

47. See John P. Beal, James A. Coriden, and Thomas J. Green, eds., *New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law* (New York: Paulist, 2000), 273.

with his will? In the next section we introduce the vocation of children who die before the age of reason and without baptism.

## VII. Baptism, Limbo, and Hope

Among the reasons Christians have for trying to understand the child is the one Christ gave in the Gospel according to Mark: "Amen I say to you: Whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child will not enter into it" (Mark 10:15). The eminent Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar has argued that Christ's treatment of the child is intended to contradict the view — which Balthasar associates with the Jews, Romans, and Greeks — according to which "childhood [is] a stage on the way to fullness of humanity."<sup>48</sup> For Jesus, Balthasar explains, the "zone or dimension in which the child lives reveals . . . itself as a sphere of original wholeness and health, and it may even be said to contain an element of holiness, since at first the child cannot yet distinguish between parental and divine love."<sup>49</sup> Balthasar's contemporary, the German Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner (1904-84), while also insistent that childhood is not a stage of incompleteness on the way to wholeness, stopped short of attributing innocence to children. According to Rahner, "[c]hildhood is openness. Human childhood is infinite openness."<sup>50</sup> It is possible to make this affirmation, according to Rahner, because "Christianity knows that the child and his origins are indeed encompassed by the love of God through the pledge of that grace which, in God's will to save all mankind, comes in all cases and to every man from God in Christ Jesus."<sup>51</sup>

Neither Balthasar nor Rahner is infallible, of course, and it was another, and very different, fallible but brilliant mind that shaped much Christian speculation about the vocation of the child, some of which speculation verged on the dogmatic. "The great luminary of the western world is, as we know, St. Augustine," wrote John Henry Newman; "he, no infallible teacher, has formed the intellect of Europe."<sup>52</sup> And Europe was not the limit.

With respect to children, the crying children whom mothers hastened to

48. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Unless You Become Like This Child*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988), 12.

49. Balthasar, *Unless You Become*, 12.

50. Karl Rahner, "Ideas for a Theology of Childhood," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 8 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), 33, 48. See Werpehowski, "In Search of Real Children," 64n.36 below.

51. Rahner, "Ideas," 39.

52. John Henry Newman, *Apologia* (London: Fontana, 1959), 296.

church to have baptized, Saint Augustine taught that mothers did well to run, not walk, to the baptismal font. As William Harmless, S.J. (chapter 5), demonstrates, Augustine regarded original sin as a disease whose cure was "Christ the physician" operating through the waters of baptism. According to Augustine, "[S]ince infants are as yet held debt-bound by no sin from their own lives, then it must be the disease of original sin that is cured in them, cured by that grace of his which makes them healthy through the bath of rebirth."<sup>53</sup> Harmless shows that, according to Augustine, children's eternal vocation was radically contingent upon their being healed by Christ. There was no "middle place" for those who committed no personal sin but died without forgiveness of original sin; it was either heaven or hell. Baptism was, in Augustine's judgment, the required way of being healed. It is for good reason the mother runs to church with her infant.

Not all Christians have shared Augustine's judgment. As the chapter by Vischer makes clear, members of the evangelical tradition (like Baptists and Methodists) deny that baptism works an "ontological change" that is necessary for salvation. Baptism symbolizes a spiritual rebirth that occurs exclusively through a conversion experience, something that is out of the parents' hands. The covenantal tradition (such as the Reformed and Presbyterian churches), for its part, also denies that baptism is necessary if one is to be saved, but baptism is of more than symbolic value. Baptism brings the child into grace that has already been imparted to the community through the covenant. Children of the covenant have a "right" to baptism, a sign and seal of God's promise of salvation (425).

Does the Catholic tradition still share Augustine's judgment that baptism is necessary? "Sixteen hundred years have passed, and the [Catholic] Church has come to offer hope to the distressed mother in another way" than baptism, writes Anthony Kelly. Kelly continues by quoting section 1261 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994) as follows:

As regards children who have died without baptism, the Church can only entrust them to the mercy of God, as she does in her funeral rites for them. Indeed the great mercy of God who desires all men to be saved, and Jesus' tenderness toward children which caused him to say, "Let the children come to me, do not hinder them" (Mk 10:14) allow us to hope that there is a way of salvation for children who have died without baptism.

One strand of the tradition, exemplified in this volume by Jacques Maritain, has supposed that the most that can be hoped for as concerns unbaptized infants is a sweet repose in "Limbo." The doctrine of Limbo, while never defined

53. Quoted by Harmless, "Christ the Pediatrician," 139 below.

by the church, long enjoyed the support of leading theologians down through the centuries, as Kelly shows. But, as Kelly also shows, "as theology reflected further on such scriptural texts as 1 Timothy 2:4, Vatican II opened the door for the development of hope" (231). The Council had this to say:

All this holds true not only for Christians, but for all people of good will in whose hearts grace is invisibly active. For since Christ died for all (Rom 8:32), and since all are in fact called to one and the same destiny which is divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made participants, in a way known only to God, in the paschal mystery.<sup>54</sup>

At the time this introduction was being written, it was rumored that the International Theological Commission would conclude that the hypothesis of Limbo should be definitively rejected by the magisterium of the Catholic Church. This is some of the "new kind of thinking" to which Kelly believes the child has called the Catholic Church. The conclusions to which the Commission in fact later came are full of hope for all children.

So, Catholic theology has become more hopeful about the vocation of the not-small number of children who die without baptism. But, as Kelly adds, the "question as to the fate of unbaptized infants dying without baptism must seem to many as marginal, to say the least, given the enormity of the evils and oppression facing the human race." However, Kelly continues, "the death of a child means a grief beyond tears and a heart left to its own silence. There is no joy of accomplishment; and the promise of a new life can never be kept. Unless," Kelly continues, "through baptism" (225). And Catholics can now hope that God does not limit it to the ways that are manifest.

Like other Christian parents, grieving Catholic parents now have the consolation of the theological hope that their child, too, has a vocation in Christ. It was the specter of moral death through bad "moral luck" that moved Coons to look for an opening for "first good," especially for God's children. Is it possible "in a way known only to God"? Coons devoutly reminds us "never [to] scoff at fears for dead children," acknowledging that "[his] own answer leaves room for anxiety." Kelly's conclusion includes this: "What faith knows about God invites us in its every lineament to leave to God what is necessarily beyond human determination. A grieving parent can find no other consolation" (239). There will be more to say about the vocation of dying children in the concluding section, but first there is more to say about the work of living children.

54. *Gaudium et spes*, in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (Boston: St. Paul Editions, 1980), no. 22 (discussed in Kelly, "Hope for Unbaptized Infants," 238 below).



## VIII. The Work of Childhood

Adults seeking communion with God have the example of Christ's adult life to study and imitate. Thomas à Kempis, the author of the second-most-published book in history, *The Imitation of Christ*, could meditate on the particulars of how Jesus lived from age thirty until age thirty-three. Those who would shape children's living — and perhaps their vocation? — lack such a model, however.

Christ's childhood is largely hidden from us. Though the Scriptures relate that the child Jesus grew in wisdom and that the grace of God was upon him, they include no particulars about the holy family's life in Nazareth. The lone pericope with any detail about the life of Jesus as a youth concerns his disappearance from his mother Mary and stepfather Joseph as they were going home from Jerusalem to Nazareth. When they returned to Jerusalem, discovered the child Jesus teaching in the temple, and asked the child why he had so grieved them by disappearing, he answered, "Did you not know that I must be about my Father's business?"<sup>55</sup> The Greek that is usually translated as "business" could as well be rendered in English as "things" or, even more colloquially, "stuff."

Our lone, sure glimpse into the life of the holy family reveals a boy who had received from the Father things to do, and was doing them. Without supposing that the twelve-year-old Messiah already enjoyed a fully adult consciousness of the work he had been sent and was called to perform, or suggesting that anyone else's work is terribly like his, we can observe that the child Jesus recognized both the authority of his parents on earth and the exigency of doing the will of his Father, who is the Father of all and who desires all people to be saved. The Gospel of Luke records that Jesus' earthly parents did not understand the meaning of what he spoke to them in Jerusalem, and that he returned with them to Nazareth where he was "obedient" to them, "and grew in wisdom, age, and grace, before both God and man" (2:50-52). Reflecting on the Christ child's admonition to Mary and Joseph that he must be about his Father's work, Balthasar observes "the truth that, even as one who has been sent out, he never ceases to repose in the bosom and will of the Father."<sup>56</sup> The one who would imitate the child Jesus would seek to do the will of the Father.

Abounding in both number and usage over the centuries, and parallel to the *Imitation of Christ* for adults, was a historical medium for teaching the du-

55. Of the four canonical Gospels, only Luke records this incident. A version of it is also included in the apocryphal *Gospel of Thomas*. See Kurt Aland, *Synopsis Quatuor Evangeliorum, editio tertia decima revisa* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1985), 18-19.

56. Balthasar, *Unless You Become*, 34.

ties and vocation of the child. Popular among both Protestants and Catholics from the fourteenth century through the nineteenth, this now largely neglected genre, explored in the chapter by John Witte, Jr., and Heather Good (chapter 10), provides concrete insight into what premodern children were taught by their parents and others about their vocation. These Christian teachers did not imagine that a person's early years are to be a time of idleness or uselessness, a fault Bonnie Miller-McClemore (chapter 11) finds with some modern accounts of childhood. Like La Salle, the authors of the manuals discern a deep connection between children's comportment and their ability to discover and embrace their "vocation," a term of art that carries freight in some of the manuals.

The authors of the hundred-plus household manuals sampled by Witte and Good instruct children that they have duties, the first of which, stated in the first commandment of the first table, is to love, worship, and revere God, and from this follows, in the first commandment of the second table, the duty to love and honor parents. The manualists also identified a second duty of the child to *be* loved by their parents, guardians, and others. While this duty to be loved was occasionally described in some later manuals as a "right" of the child, such usage was controversial, and the overwhelming emphasis rested on the vocation of the child, the child's duty to love and be loved.

In its emphasis on the scriptural statements, along with the practicalities, of the child's vocation both to love parents and to be loved *by* parents, the manualist tradition finds a contemporary echo in Marcia Bunge's voice. Bunge emphasizes that it is the child's vocation to love and honor his or her parents, but also to disobey parents if ultimate loyalty to God requires it (42-45). Bunge discerns in the child's vocation to be absolutely obedient to God a *limit* on parental and other adult authority. It would be gravely wrong for parents or others to divert or deflect children from their calling to obey God. The child's dependence on, and the child's duty to obey, his or her parents, Bunge explains, drawing on the insights of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, coexist with the child's responsibility to discern and act on his or her vocation to be obedient to God. Without undermining the seriousness of the child's vocation, Bunge also brings out that childhood is, in part, a time to play. Miller-McLemore asks poignantly: "Doesn't the imperative to 'become like children' (Matthew 18:3) have something essential to do with prizing playfulness as a part of rejoicing in God's love?"<sup>57</sup>

Childhood is a time to begin discerning the difference between what is real and what is imagined, what will work and what will not work. Children can be fed *Alice in Wonderland*, and thereby be made to believe it. "[T]he land of

57. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *In the Midst of Chaos: Caring for Children as Spiritual Practice* (San Francisco: Wiley, 2007), 150.

'seeming truth,' as Maritain calls it,<sup>58</sup> is no place to live, however. The wondering by which children come to distinguish the true from the imagined, though perhaps natural, is not automatic. Its conditions include being called *by being loved*. "It does not suffice for us simply to exist," observes philosopher Joseph Pieper. While each of us is lovable by virtue of our being created and loved by God, that is, by our simply existing, each of us also needs to be loved by another person if we are to rise above the level of mere existence. The necessary "being loved" means being called out of our pure interiority into relationships of mutuality, Pieper explains: "Being created by God actually does not suffice, it would seem; the fact of creation needs continuation and perfection by the creative power of human love."<sup>59</sup> If this is so, the reader may again wonder whether Coons's hypothesis of a supervening "first good" that is in no way contingent on love received, is imperiled. Does a child who goes unloved have a "chance" to seek second good?

It would be a common mistake to idealize or romanticize these relations of mutuality by which children are called out of their interiority. As a matter of fact, they begin squarely in the lap of the family (or its substitute), where, as Miller-McLemore argues, children make demands but demands are also made of children (319-20). Just as children are not to be indentured, so they are not to be put on a shelf. Unlike cans, children do not have a shelf life. They are called, along with the rest of us, to build up the common good, which begins at home:

[W]hen viewed from the perspective of Christian vocation, children are not an investment or achievement from which one expects a return. They are not slaves to adult bidding. They are a gift which one hopes will flourish. Part of that flourishing involves work, but work of a different sort, done in the best of circumstances for the good of creation and its redemption. Christian theology encourages us to consider children's call to contribute to the common good around them. In the most immediate sense the family comprises the first exposure to a life-long practice of meeting communal obligations and caring for the common good. (322)

Miller-McLemore notes the possibility that a reinvigorated understanding of the vocation of the child might in turn reinvigorate a just division of labor within the family, rendering work, love, and play, all three of them, tasks that men, women, and children share, rather than tasks parceled out on the basis of

58. Jacques Maritain, *Redeeming the Time*, trans. Harry Lorin Binsse (London: Centenary Press, 1946), 203.

59. Joseph Pieper, *Faith, Hope, Love* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986), 171, 174. I owe this citation to H. David Baer.

gender or age. Children are not to be lost and submerged within the family, but neither are they to be imagined into a splendid isolation that is, ironically but perversely, subhuman.

Miller-McLemore's call for realism about the earthen crucible of vocation in the family reinforces "a hard, but enduring, lesson" (290) that Witte and Good educe from the manuals, and to which other authors in this volume testify, as well. The lesson is that the duties of love by and for a child, while mutually dependent, are not mutually conditional. Parents' failures do not absolve — but rather increase — the child's duties to parents. "A Christian child must fulfill her duties to God, including the duty to honor and love her father and mother, even if the parents are undeserving" (291). As Witte and Good go on to register, "[t]his traditional teaching goes entirely against modern views that children are less culpable for their personal failures when they suffer from poor parenting" (291). It is unalterably the vocation of the child to love God and parents, and, as a condition of doing so, to overcome whatever obstacles providence throws in their way. The theme of invulnerability combines with that of unalterability, but awkwardly.

In *The Spiritual Life of Children*, Robert Coles quotes the following statement from a fifth-grader in Lawrence, Massachusetts: "I'm like I am now, but I could change when I grow up. You never know who you'll be until you get to that age when you're all grown. But God must know all the time."<sup>60</sup> The child assumes she will have time to grow up, and "change." Some pages later, Coles recalls a conversation with Dorothy Day:

In many ways I feel I'm the same person now that I was when I was a girl of nine, maybe, or ten, or eleven. You look surprised! I thought you folks [psychiatrists] believe we're "made," once and for all, in childhood. . . . Some of the things I asked then — asked my parents, my friends, and a lot of the time myself — I'm still asking myself now, forty or fifty or sixty years later! I don't think it's any different with my daughter, or with the many children I've known during my life; they all want to know why they are here, and what's ahead as they get older — heaven, hell, nothing at all, or as Tamar once said to me, "Mother, will it be the cemetery, and that's the end?" A natural question. I'd call it her spiritual side expressing itself — and we, as parents, should take notice!<sup>61</sup>

These chapters on the vocation of the child constitute a taking notice, a taking in hand the child whose vocation "calls us out," as Werpehowski signaled it has

60. Robert Coles, *The Spiritual Life of Children* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990), 310.

61. Coles, *Spiritual Life of Children*, 329.

the potential to do. God knows all the time who we are going to become, and the (Catholic) Church's "new kind of thinking" offers hope for children who lose the way, hope to those who love them, and, yes, hope to those who fail to love them as they ought.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus assures his followers that "nothing will hurt you" (10:19). This passage can hardly be given a literal reading, as Jesus was plainly aware that the flesh is fragile (Luke 21:16). "Nevertheless," Timothy Jackson observes, "[J]esus appears to subscribe to a kind of *spiritual* invulnerability."<sup>62</sup> But is it true that those whom we neglect, abuse, or even torture are spiritually untouched, because untouchable? Jackson continues: "Spiritual invulnerability has been a very attractive doctrine to many Christians, and it has often gone hand-in-hand with an insistence on radical individual responsibility."<sup>63</sup> For those in charge, it becomes an ever more attractive doctrine in a world of radical individualists whose sense of responsibility is on the wane. For children, the prospect that they are spiritually invulnerable cuts both ways, perhaps to the quick. "[T]he divine . . . offers itself to defend the human (if the latter does not refuse the aid offered)." Though called by God, and endowed with a vocation, little children are powerless to accept the aid on their own.

62. Timothy P. Jackson, *Love Disconsoled: Meditations on Christian Charity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 145.

63. Jackson, *Love Disconsoled*, 145.