

Unless You Become as Little Children

(Matt. 18:3)

By William F. Kuhn

Adults, of course, look at every revelation as being serious. In a sense this is true. God does not waste time or effort merely entertaining us. The happiness of intimate union with God in heaven is serious but joyful, ecstatically so! Union with Him on this earth is also joyful and serious, through a love that is meaningful and absorbing in both little things and in matters of great import. But unless we have the simplicity of children, we do not know how to be joyful in all things.

At Garabandal, Mary, our Mother and the Mother of God, was emphasizing the child-like faith and trust of the four youngsters by responding to them much in the same terms as a fond mother does on earth. Yet Mary was also pronouncing a serious message, and an earnest plea for us to follow suit after the children to whom she was appearing. Untouched by the

Our Lady chose to appear to these 12 year old children who had an educational development of about eight. From left, Conchita, Jacinta and Mari Loli.



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world, they responded to her eagerly. Our Lady used that eagerness to engage their attention in delightful play, in the kissing of pebbles, in the handling of the Infant, in touching her crown. Our Lady was doing this in full knowledge that adults were watching the children, misunderstanding the effervescence of the apparently meaningless, almost random play of the children.

We were not listening intently to what Mary was telling us. Mary smiled and frowned, gestured and moved about, spoke to the children of both ordinary daily chores and of more serious things, expounding a lesson of many levels. But such apparitions are so overwhelmingly priceless that we strain our minds trying to find deep meanings in everything—deep meanings in the sense of dire warnings, threats of punishments, catastrophes, forebodings and castigations or prophecies.

How obtuse we are! The deeper meanings were indeed present, but they were messages of desperate love, an unrequited love, a love which we sought more to use than to return. We unnecessarily complicated these messages with the overtones of our own human failings and emotional needs, while we ignored the simplicity of the reactions of the girls, which was a truer guide to the meanings that were in the apparitions.

Mary, the Mother of Jesus, in her exquisite humanity, reinforced by her apparitional majesty and beauty, carried a penetrating message to us in her Garabandal appearances. That message was a part of her Son's message. Become as little children, trust in God as children trust in their parents, have faith in God as children have faith that today is good and that tomorrow will indeed come.

A Lesson through Fr. Luis

When in 1961 the girls were granted the return of Fr. Luis Andreu through their hearing his voice, they were excited and happy. Only a short while before he had participated in an apparition with them and they had seen him participating. His being a priest had already endeared him to the girls and his participation in the apparition surprised and delighted them. His sudden death was a shock and disappointment to them; but his return, even if only by voice, was eagerly awaited and thoroughly enjoyed when it occurred. Several times this return was repeated, and the girls learned short prayers and phrases in other languages from him, delighting in the instruction and anxious to please him by their readiness to learn.

What are we to make of this, that the dead can in some way communicate with us? Mary and Jesus and countless souls and saints had given messages this way before. Did we need further proof that the dead are still incomparably alive in the next world? This has been doctrine for centuries.

What we are being taught again by Fr. Luis' conversations with the girls is that in His Mercy, God is aware of all that goes on in this world, the big and the little things, our innermost thoughts and desires. The people of His heavenly kingdom and He are deeply interested in the good things for which we yearn and the attachments of love and kindness that make little things important to us. This makes them important to Him as well.

The love and respect that the children had for Fr. Luis were the occasion for their enjoyment of his care and affection shown by the little lessons he gave them. Could not our love and respect for Mary, for Jesus,

for the Father result in similar intimacy and care for us?

God created us, He knows us intimately. He responds to our love as a flower responds to sunlight, instinctively, positively, always. As a child responds to love, God responds. He is the Eternal Child, Infinite Infant, yet Father immersed and replete with love. So He permits love to be showered upon us by His kingdom, by Mary, by Jesus, by the saints, by a Fr. Luis, only just a few days in that kingdom!

Our Lady's reaction to many childish acts was kind, receptive and caring. The children held up pebbles for her to kiss. What value could a pebble have for an adult such as she? But that holy adult smiled at the utter faith and simplicity which brought the pebbles to her lips and she suggested they be distributed to the faithful who were watching the children. Out of nothing God created the universe, with pebbles our Lady raised the hearts of many to God.

How could a Queen—Queen of Heaven and Earth—perform such an apparently useless act as to kiss a pebble? How easily do worldly values interfere with our own thinking?

"When in Rome..."

We have an axiom; "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." Our Lady was doing just that. She was speaking to and acting with unsophisticated peasant children. Adapting herself to this situation, she did those things which had meaning for the children, keeping their attention on her messages, allowing the continuing message flow to be transmitted much in the children's own language formulas, in their actions, in their happiness and joy. All those continuing messages were statements of love, care and concern.



Those little "Romans" were the means through which much was divulged—and we missed it because we were demanding more serious messages couched in terms portentous and resounding. We did not listen: we had ears but did not hear.

The children must have been affected by adult scepticism, for they kept asking for a miracle which the people could see to support belief. Their chorus of requests for a miracle evidenced clearly that neither they nor the people who followed them up and down the stone-strewn *calleja* ever recognized the 'miracles' that did occur.

Perhaps like Conchita's *milagruco*, they were 'little miracles' but the abundance of signs, the ecstatic walks, their speed, their invariable lack of stumbling in the black of night and in the rain, the unerring distribution of sacramentals that had been kissed, the marriage rings, the rosary beads delivered correctly to owners who were unknown to the youngsters, the jumping over the threshold of the church door by Jacinta, on her knees, the ecstatic falls, the transmittal of messages of very private meaning to strangers, the gliding down steep

stairs on their backs in ecstasy, and all this for more than one and one half years before the signs began to diminish! Is it possible that these signs could have been given without meanings?

The formal Messages of October 18, 1961, and June 18, 1965, were straight-forward, uncomplicated and direct, characteristics of children. They required obedience, docility and belief, characteristics of the innocent young.

One of the lines of the messages, "But first we must be very good" is a line which adults have ignored and misunderstood; ignored because being 'good' interferes with our current life style, habits and fashions; misunderstood because we look at 'goodness' as being unsophisticated, naive, simplistic and childish. But 'good' is another word for God since He is all good. Our Lady, then, calls us to be like unto God to the extent of our capabilities which is little enough for us to do.

We were meant to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect, at least within our natural limitations. The more thoroughly children exhibit unsophistication, naivete, simplicity

In ecstasy and oblivious to everyone around them (including the two doctors checking the pulses of Loli on the left and Mari Cruz on the right), the girls' joyful, spontaneous response to Our Lady was a lesson for all.

and responsiveness, the more we love them, the more indulgent we are of their enthusiasms, the more we appreciate their naturalness. Is it not possible that Our Lady was bringing this to our attention through Garabandal that we might show similar responses to God?

When in August and September of 1961 the Mother of God and Our Mother entered into the spirit of youngsters everywhere and played *Los Tios* (a game similar to 'hide and seek') several times, what is this to say to us? Maria Herrero described the girls playing this game while in ecstasy, tiptoeing along, their backs to the walls of the homes along the stony streets, gliding furtively up to a street corner and poking their heads out along the corner as if to surprise someone hiding from them, then suddenly shouting with joy and running as in pursuit of someone they had surprised.

How much more clearly could the

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Mother of God tell us that children, in their simplicity, directness and enthusiastic response to love and understanding are a recommended model of life? As they responded to joyful attractiveness on their level, adults should do the same on their own levels, in confidence, trust and simplicity.

A Lesson in Compassion

They shame us in compassion as well; on May 12, 1962, Mari Loli visited the dying Jeronimo and Jacinta followed suit on the following day, praying for him. On September 16, 1962, Loli and Conchita in ecstasy visited a mentally disturbed man who had been confined to the house because his irrationality in the streets disturbed the crowds. They gave him the crucifix to kiss several times. Our Lady knew that critical opinion was going to look at that action as irresponsible and degrading. When Conchita was asked about this little drama she responded that Our Lady said, "You despise him; but I love him!" The girls had shown no disposition to avoid or shun the man, but the crowds had done this by sending the man away. The children dutifully and compassionately visited him as they had visited Jeronimo, and as they would visit countless others sick and lonely as the Garabandal event unfolded. Compassion, concern and obedience, characteristics of children, were being held up before our eyes, but we were blind and still may be.

A Lesson in Trust

On August 17, 1961 when Jacinta and Loli were just outside the little village church on the stony path before the door, on their knees in ecstasy, Jacinta taught us a lesson in trust. They were kneeling before the church door and Jacinta was heard to laugh and to pro-

test to the apparition of Our Lady that she didn't dare try to jump through that opening on her knees. Obviously, Our Lady encouraged her to try, and trustingly Jacinta followed that encouragement, jumping over the threshold.

Perhaps the magnitude of this trustfulness escapes us. It did that day when we marveled at the feat and then ignored its lesson.

In July of 1962 for the 15 days before the 'milagruco', July 18, Conchita urged the spread of information about the reception of a visible Host from the hands of an angel; she bruted it about without fear or qualm, totally confident in the word of Our Lady and St. Michael. Trustful and hopeful even in the knowledge that previously such Communion Hosts had never been visible, in the face of the rejection by Our Lady of their innumerable requests for a miracle that others could believe, in the presence of the hostile attitude of Regino Mateo, a Santander lawyer who apparently represented the unbelieving Fr. Odriozola of the diocesan investigating committee, and despite the voiced disbelief of one of her brothers, Conchita calmly and confidently continued to proclaim the coming 'miracle'.

Again, after Bishop Eugenio Betia's stern Nota of October 7, 1962, which forbade priests to attend at Garabandal without his express permission, and demanded that the faithful laity refrain from going to the village, the girls did not object nor complain. In fact, Conchita felt that priestly obedience should be shown to the bishop by their remaining absent. This shows trust in a hostile bishop, obedience to authority, and confidence in Our Lady.

Naturalness

The naturalness of the reactions the

girls showed all through the years of the Garabandal event (and subtle changes occurred as they advanced in years) is a major characteristic of children Our Lady pointed out to us for emulation, a naturalness appropriate to our age and understanding. In her testimony dated April 21, 1962, Mercedes Salisachs wrote of sitting with Conchita, awaiting an apparition, and noted that the girls:

...accept the supernatural with a simplicity bordering on the unbelievable. Seeing the Virgin seems to them to be within the reach of everyone; and what is happening seems normal to them.

This indeed is the secret key to heaven, innocence, trust, acceptance, simplicity, unsophisticated naturalness, the characteristics of children Our Lady was suggesting we adopt on our adult levels that we too might become as little children.

This naturalness includes open frankness; recall Conchita's surprise that the Hosts she had been receiving from the hands of St. Michael were not visible to all the witnesses. And her remark to St. Michael that the visibility of the Host was a 'milagruco,' a small miracle, a gross undervaluation of the impressiveness of the expected 'miracle.' She spoke her mind. Would we adults?

The girls looked at the extraordinary events as normal. On August 6, 1962, Conchita was speaking about the apparitions with three Brothers of St. John on the narrow path coming down from the Pines and related elements of Our Lady's visits. Almost incidentally she said, "They say I came down backwards through here, through these stones." She showed complete sincerity and naturalness; "these stones" covered a narrow path, very steep, directly under the Pines, leading into the *calleja* 50 yards or more further on. Negotiating that path

during daylight facing forward is difficult and tricky. Doing it backwards during daylight would be dangerous (even though one could never do it the way the children did with their heads thrown back) but the girls ran backwards in ecstasy frequently at night, in the rain when mud made the whole slope slippery, and with breakneck speed.

The girls had inquiring minds, seeking information directly; on September 25, 1962, Conchita asked the vision:

What is heaven like? ... In heaven there are no chairs? ... Do they walk there? ... Is there fire in purgatory? ... Do they come out burned? ... One cannot enter heaven even with a very little sin?

Somewhere in the mountain of witnesses the answers to these and many other similar questions have been recorded as the people pursued the girls and pressed for information obtained in the apparitions. In the accumulated details of such answers lies much information on important spiritual values. When these records come to light, the depth of Our Lady's instructions will be recognized.

The tremendous change that a few years made in the attitudes of the girls is exemplified by Conchita's recalling on January 27, 1967, for Sr. Maria Nieves the conversations the children had had with Our Lady:

We said such stupidities ... Nevertheless she never reprimanded us for it; she listened. One day we asked her something serious; what we should do to practice penance. She answered us, "Always do what your conscience tells you."

Conchita, at 16 years of age, after all this exposure to the crowds of adults and their 'mature' concerns was becoming introspective with mature concerns of her own. The answers to their 'stupidities' were being shrugged off. The example that

Our Lady showed through the girls, her patience in handling 'stupidities', the information on heaven and earth, on aspects of relations with God and with each other were not being appreciated or perhaps understood well even by the girls who had benefited through her loving attention.

The Message of Garabandal

The message of Garabandal is simple, that is true. The words are common and ordinary, that is also true. Matched against the centuries of teaching by the Church, the content of the message is unexceptional, ordinary, simple. But this simplicity should not mislead us, for the message was multiplex, of tremendous scope, it was life-wide and reflected the pervasive simplicity of God.

We have been taught from time immemorial that God is simple, that He is One, but this does not guarantee understanding. We do not know God, we do not understand His ways, we cannot even imagine God. Confined to using limited images to visualize the Unlimited, to using material forms to construct a vision of the infinitely Immaterial, we fail to grasp the details of God's nature and we view His essence through a glass darkly.

So too with this message. Its notes are deep and mysterious, filled with Divine knowledge and concern, so large in scope that it flowed all around us, filled all the valleys and nooks and crannies around Garabandal in such profusion that we merely struggled to stay on top of the flood instead of allowing ourselves to be immersed in it.

The simplicity of the reactions of the young visionaries is the true guide to understanding what meaning there is in this unstinting largess of love and concern from heaven. At Garabandal we so often missed the message



Grace does not destroy nature but perfects it. The charming simplicity of the girls was further enhanced as a result of their ecstatic visions.

because we misinterpreted the frank enjoyment of the apparition which the children expressed. Because they laughed and played and sometimes shrieked with childish excitement, we looked down noses made long by age, and wagged our heads. The 'stupidities' were not conceived by the children, but rather by the adults. Our Lady was telling us to respond joyfully, excitedly, fully and wholly to God during life just as the children were responding to her. She was saying 'love God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and with all your mind' enjoying the life which God's providence has awarded to you, and listening to His counsels, through conscience and through authority. She was saying along with her Son, "Unless you become as little children ..." We obviously missed that part of the message completely. □

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