

New wine, new wine-skins: Revisiting Catholic Sacramentality through the Eyes of a Child's Spiritual Being

Abstract

This theoretical paper discusses the spirituality of childhood within the context of Catholic sacramentality, specifically the child's experience of the Sacrament of Eucharist. The authors argue that readiness for a child's reception of the Eucharist needs to take into account the spiritual being of the child, as well as the child's cognitive capacity to grasp the meaning of the Eucharist. Future research directions arising from this theoretical paper are discussed in the conclusion.

A sobering experience

As first author of this paper, I was recently the celebrant for nine year-old children's First Communion Mass. I devised what I thought was a novel approach to an understanding of Eucharist for children of this age. I asked some volunteer children to smell a cake of soap and a piece of chocolate. My question of "*how* do the soap and chocolate smell like soap and chocolate?" attracted a variety of creative solutions. To my way of thinking, the process of understanding was simple. If we can still enjoy the smell of soap and chocolate without knowing *how* soap and chocolate *smell* like soap and chocolate, then we can enjoy Jesus as Eucharist without knowing how the bread and wine becomes Jesus. However, when I asked the children if they understood what I was talking about, one small child looked at me quizzically and said, "sort of". The highlight for the children was not the awakening of some olfactory theology of Eucharist, but rather who was going to get the chocolate. Incidentally, no one was interested in who was going to get the soap.

Later in the day, I reflected on this experience. A nine year-old child is conceptually concrete – "what you see is what you get" – yet the notion of Eucharistic presence is essentially abstract. Empirical models of spiritual development indicate that children lack the cognitive ability to think in the abstract manner required by many theological principles. While an in-depth discussion of the psychological research surrounding child development is beyond the scope of this paper, this area deserves exploration and discussion in another forum (see Oser & Reich, 1996). Though the activity might have been novel for child and adult alike, it contained problems and posed some challenging questions. First, I was *telling* the children *about* the meaning of Eucharist, instead of *listening to* their sense of what Eucharist meant to them as nine year-old children. I was taking what was already a complex, abstract concept and confusing it with everyday concrete experiences of chocolate and soap, presuming that children would jump easily from one stepping-stone of understanding to the next. I was attempting to *teach* children *what* they should know, and *how* they should know. Second, I presumed that the children needed some wise person to clarify the meaning of Eucharist for them. Overall, a misalignment of communication existed between the children and me, and this misalignment was summed up in the young girl's reply of "sort of". It occurred to me later that the fog of non-understanding started to descend when I attempted to generalise from the smell of the chocolate and soap to interpreting and applying this activity to an understanding of Eucharistic meaning. I mused that if had I stopped before this point and listened rather than teach, then I might have progressed a lot further than "sort of".

"Presumption" – the pitfall of the unwary

It was clear that I was attempting the pedagogically impossible. A nine year-old child is very much a concrete thinker, and there is little likelihood that a child of this age will understand the abstract concept of "Eucharist". However, my experience with the children challenged me to consider how much I had been imbued with the expectation that readiness for this Sacrament was defined by the child's ability to describe the theology of transubstantiation, in the hope that one day the lines of teaching and knowledge would

intersect at the “ah-ha!” point of complete understanding. Did my starting point consist of the tenet that knowledge was a synonym for spiritual awareness and feeling? Does theoretical knowledge alone allow children to grasp and savour the “theologically indescribable” in their own way, and in their own time? Children are similar to the woman in the Gospel story who suffered from a haemorrhage (Mark 5: 27-29). She sought the *experience* of Jesus without knowing his teachings. These aforementioned challenges cannot be generalised to everyone who undertakes the sacramental and spiritual formation of children. However, they prompted my colleagues and me to think about the “spiritual child”, and the degree to which a child is encouraged and allowed to simply wonder about the “theologically indescribable”, even in the absence of what an adult would consider to be acceptable levels of knowledge and understanding.

The Relationship between Religion and Spirituality

Our being has the power to enlighten our minds at times of crisis, draw us from despair to hope, and nourish our spiritual yearnings, and this experience need not necessarily occur within the parameters of traditional religious values and rituals (Adams, Hyde & Woolley, 2008; de Souza, 2009; Hood, Spilka, Hunsberger & Gorusch, 1996; Zinnbauer, Pargament & Scott, 1999). Religion and spirituality are not equal referents. Rather, the traditions and rituals of religion provide the focus for expressing one’s spirituality (Hill, Pargament, Hood, McCullough, Swyers, Larsen & Zinnbauer, 2000), as indicated by the following authors. When Hay enquired from his students about their understandings of religion and spirituality, he noted a tendency to define religion in terms of place, ritual, negative perception and emotional response. On the other hand, his students readily defined spirituality as warmth, depth, mystery and personal devotion (Hay & Nye, 2006). Benson, Roehlkepartain, and Rude (2003) view spirituality as a person’s “intrinsic human capacity” to seek “something greater” than that which is presently contained within one’s noetic grasp (Benson *et al.*, 2003, p. 208). Hyde (2008) extends the notion of spirituality and intrinsic human capacity further into the realm of a universal human experience that cannot be contained by any one particular religious tradition. For O Murchu (2000), spirituality offers a sense of inclusivity that extends beyond the bounds of religious traditions and beliefs into the lives of those who have never been formally religious.

Religion and religious ritual is therefore a human construct (O Murchu, 2000). Its traditions and rituals allow one to symbolically express the struggles and discoveries of life, yet religion does not define the limits of spirituality. One can simply be present, alone or with others, in the midst of religious symbolic action without having to justify or explain that presence (Hood, Hill & Spilka, 2009; Tacey, 2003). The action of Eucharist demonstrates this relationship between religious ritual and spirituality. Eucharist is physically expressed in the fundamental action of communal eating and drinking – an action that is basic for human survival. In the expression of this action, a person brings meaning to the Eucharist, and takes meaning away from it, and at this point religion and spirituality meet. Spirituality is not subservient to religion. Rather, religious symbol and action has the potential to take people across the threshold of daily life, and for a while enable them to leave their struggles behind so that they might return to them afresh. Meaning is therefore brought to religious tradition and ritual *through* its communication with the person’s spiritual being, so that ritual might touch what is spiritual within the person. This is something that is felt rather than taught (as with the woman suffering from the haemorrhage). It cannot be confirmed via the mere recitation of learned facts.

Whether inside or outside the confines of religious tradition, it is that spiritual part of our being-in-the-world – that innate reality in every person, religious or not – that prompts us to question, to doubt, to explore, to discern (O Murchu, 2000). At the same time, religiosity is not the antithesis of spirituality. The gathering of like-minded people has the potential to provide a framework around one’s personal search for the meaning, identification, articulation and transformation of what is sacred. As O Murchu points out (2000), the struggle is not about religion itself, but about the person who brings the search for meaning into the arena of religious tradition, ritualistic practice, and belief. From the perspective of childhood experience, children may not “know” the theological principles that define Eucharist (as with the author’s experience), but in their innate capacity for spiritual experience they are able to “be” engaged in the Eucharist as they share with others what the action of Eucharist denotes. Little more in the way of understanding may be expected from them (Boyatzis, 2005).

Traditional religion and spirituality: the spiritual being of a child

The foundations upon which the spirituality of children is engendered must be constantly scrutinised and challenged (Coles, 1990). Hart (2003) speaks of children as having a natural capacity to “listen with their hearts” (p. 86), and those who teach and practice religious beliefs must listen to what these hearts have to say. Hence, what are the pedagogical perspectives of those who seek to create a context for children to find their spiritual selves in the midst of a religious community? What do children bring to this experience from their own spiritual discoveries, and to what extent are they allowed to make this contribution? The author’s experience presumed that there was a “right way” of understanding Eucharist, and somehow the children who listened to him were expected to follow this “right way” to the point of full understanding (as he saw it). The girl who responded with “sort of” was struggling between giving assent to the author’s stance and offering her own reflection. How much, therefore, does the adult’s foundation of influence respect the environment of the child’s life – its people, places and history? Champagne (2003) sheds light on this question.

Traditional religion and spirituality: the influence of children on adults

Champagne (2003) describes three modes of a child’s spiritual being, namely, the Sensitive, the Relational, and the Existential. These modes of spiritual being describe the spiritual interactions between a child and his or her environment, as well as the manner and quality of the child’s human relationships as these might be experienced in space and time. The three modes of being have the capacity to enrich and broaden the spiritual awareness of adults who care for the child when they notice the child’s own spiritual awareness, and then proceed to engage with the child in that awareness. The author might have been attempting to actively engage the children in seeking an understanding of the Eucharist. However, the author’s intention was driven by a domain that reflected his own understanding and knowledge, both of which did not acknowledge the children’s breadth of interaction with the people and events of their environment. Thus the author achieved little more than relate to the children as passive observers who received the “good things” he offered to them. He did not allow himself to become immersed with the children in seeking a new and richer understanding of Eucharist than the one he ascribed to. There was wisdom in the young girl’s response that sought to open the author’s mind towards a new direction of thought and meaning through her experience of life as she saw it.

Children, as well as adults, ponder life

Children are able to positively influence the spiritual beings of adults in their questioning of the world around them. They have the capacity to be comfortable within their world and its surroundings, and possess the ability to actively communicate with it (Eaude, 2005). Hart (2003) writes that it is within the child’s heart that one finds the capacity to simply ride the backs of life’s questions without necessarily knowing where the answers might lie. Whereas adults will seek to pull an experience apart, and examine the parts of its whole in order to arrive at a defensible solution, children are able to sit comfortably with the unsolvable mysteries of life. The questions of children do not rely on answers for their validation, and adults can learn from children’s readiness to ask questions without necessarily finding the answers. In the clinical experience of the first author, children who have experienced parental abuse in their early years possess the capacity to recall these experiences, to feel the hurt aroused by these experiences, and question the justice and hurt that these experiences have brought about. They may not fully understand the reasons behind the actions of those who have hurt them, but they *know* the experience of this hurt, both for themselves and for others. Children’s questions, even those questions about the complexities of life such as the aforementioned example, are found at the heart of daily interactions with people and the world (Coles, 1990; Hart, 2003). The motivation to wonder about life without necessarily working out its intricate meaning has the power to prompt their urgings towards thanksgiving, forgiveness, delight, tenderness and simplicity (Coles, 1990; Hart, 2003). A child has the ability to deeply ponder the mysteries of life, and children will often arrive at answers that might seem quaint to the adult mind but are full of serious meaning for the child. A child can therefore bring depth and direction to theological concepts that are often, in themselves, unable to provide resolution to the questions they pose.

Adults hold an important place of trust within children's questions about the meaning of birth and death (Adams *et al.*, 2008; Coles, 1990); about the meaning of attachment and rejection (Granqvist, 2006; Siegal & Hartzell, 2004); and about the depths of love (Hart, 2003). At times of distress, children look to adults to hold them emotionally. They look to adults for approval, and they seek the company of adults when happiness inspires them (Granqvist & Dickie, 2006; Siegal & Hartzell, 2004). Furthermore, Champagne's (2003) three modes of a child's spiritual being speak of the value of trusted adults in a child's life – adults who share the child's environment. Adults need to be aware that at times children will show their trust in an adult by accepting without question what he or she says or does. Adults who accept a role of influence over the spirituality of a child need to view their influence through the spiritual eyes of the child before them. Where this does not occur, children are likely to accept the adult's words on face value alone, even though they lack meaning for the child. This is not a commendable outcome. The gap between what the adult imparts and what the child comprehends will likely lead to confusion. The child will quarantine this information, will not own the information as a personal value, and will probably reject the information as his or her cognitive flexibility increases. While discussion about the psychological underpinnings of this outcome is not possible here, such discussion in a separate forum would contribute to understanding why this will be the case.

Two issues arise from the above comments. The first issue demonstrates the importance of identifying the adult's own basis of learning from which this knowledge is imparted, as well as the adult's subsequent expectations of the child's ability to both understand and consolidate the knowledge that is taught. The second issue is a question of concern and has already been highlighted. How much does difficult-to-understand knowledge about traditional beliefs such as the Eucharist block the child's ability to make sense of the teaching focus in his or her own way, and within the context of his or her personal history, thus impeding the child from choosing to enter more deeply into the spiritual, unspoken reality that underpins traditional beliefs? If this is so, then perhaps it is better that the child does not learn the facts of a difficult religious concept such as Eucharist until the child is able to consolidate them into his or her spiritual being. As an example of this approach, a child's readiness for Eucharistic participation would be ascertained by the child's expressed desire to do *what* the community does at the Eucharistic assembly, rather than knowing *why* the community does what it does. Over time, the child would then grow into a deeper understanding of the Eucharist through the community's presence and support. In the primitive Church, it was only after baptism and anointing that the newly initiated were instructed in the sacramental life of the Church. It was as if the newly initiated needed time for the meaning of what they had experienced through sacramental encounter to seep into their being (McCallion & Maines, 2002; Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, 1986/2003; Upton, 1990). This period was referred to as the "mystagogia", and it demonstrated that knowledge was not a pre-requisite for baptism. As a final comment for this section, it helps to note that a child's spiritual awareness makes sense of confusion, rather than create it. It can be difficult for adults to allow children to sit with a level of meaning that does not reflect expected factual knowledge. Mystagogia makes a lot of sense within a child's deepening spirituality.

The place and role of intelligence in spirituality

In spiritual research literature, the place and role of intelligence in spirituality has been discussed to great length. Zohar and Marshall (2000) argue that the notion of "spiritual intelligence" is located within the physical structure and functioning of the brain, specifically the temporal lobe (the seat of memory) and the limbic region (the seat of emotional expression). These authors also refer to the notion of the "God spot" located within the temporal lobe, noting that this part of the brain plays a crucial biological role in spiritual experience. Zohar and Marshall further hold that spiritual intelligence is an "internal, innate ability of the human brain and psyche, drawing its deepest resources from the heart of the universe itself" (2000, p. 9). As such, spiritual intelligence has no necessary connection to traditional religion or to any one culture, but rather is a guiding force from within the soul of a person, providing one with meaning, healing, and wholesomeness. Mayer (2000) would view spiritual intelligence as being less defined by "heightened intelligence" and more defined by a sense of "heightened consciousness" (p. 47), as an entity that is formed over time through activities such as contemplation, and as a state of consciousness that is directed beyond the concerns of the present. Emmons (2000) defines spirituality as a type of intelligence, but does not describe spiritual intelligence as merely a problem solving function for daily living. For Emmons (2000),

spiritual intelligence is something unique to each person, and can be defined according to five core abilities. These core abilities include the ability to transcend the physical and material, to experience heightened states of consciousness, to make sacred ordinary everyday experiences, to apply spiritual resources to problems that seek solutions, and finally, the capacity to be virtuous (Emmons, 2000, p. 10).

The scope of this paper precludes an in-depth exploration of spiritual intelligence. However, from the aforementioned research, it would appear that spiritual intelligence involves more than the mere capacity to cognitively grasp and manage what is happening around a person. That is, a consideration of spiritual intelligence reflects the sense that knowledge does not necessarily equate with intelligence. A person can know a lot of facts about the world, and still miss the meaning of those facts. Conversely, a person can be considered to know very little in the way of worldly facts, and still possess deep wisdom and insight about the world. For a child, wonder and awe about the world that does not need to be proven predisposes the growth of sophistication that arises from expanding cognitive knowledge and flexibility (Boyatzis, 2005; Oser & Reich, 1996). A child who is allowed to understand the meaning of some reality through the lens of wonder and awe is more likely to hold that meaning as a value even as he or she becomes more intellectually sophisticated. In this case, wonder and awe are not abandoned, but rather stand comfortably alongside the increased cognitive capacity to understand factual knowledge. Adults would be likely to say that they do not believe that Santa Clause spins around the world in one sleigh bringing gifts to millions of people in one night. And yet, in spite of this factual knowledge, on Christmas Eve fathers and mothers still help their children put out carrots for Santa's reindeer, plus drink and cake for Santa. They bring presents out of hiding places when their children go to sleep as evidence that Santa did indeed visit them during the night. They pretend to hear reindeers' hooves clattering around the roof, and creep to the window with their children to get a glimpse of Santa's sleigh – and even see it! Parents unashamedly find great joy in their children's excitement about Santa's arrival, and in joining the excitement and wonder of their children, they recall and once more enjoy the wonder and excitement *they* felt about Santa and Christmas Eve when they were children. Factual knowledge does not need to destroy the meanings derived from spiritual awe and wonder. Rather, spiritual awe and wonder gives life and joy to the sterility of factual knowledge (De Roos, 2006; D'Onofrio, Eaves, Murrelle, Maes, & Soilka, 1999). On the one hand, parents see nothing wrong in rediscovering their childhood by believing in Santa Claus, and on the other they have no problem in being the "adult" who denies his existence. The joy of childhood wonder can sit comfortably with the sophistication of adult knowledge.

As children develop across the lifespan, they learn to deal more effectively with the evolving complexity of social and worldly events, and their ability to grasp the meaning of these events as they exist rather than as they appear-to-be becomes more refined with increasing cognitive maturity (Boyatzis, 2005; Oser & Reich, 1996; Priestley, 2000). Yet understanding the meaning of worldly events with simplicity does not mean that one must cast this simplicity aside just because there appears on the developmental horizon a more complicated and "adult" way of understanding the world. The enjoyment of Santa Claus can still stand alongside the knowledge that Santa Claus, his reindeer, and his sleigh cannot exist in reality. It is possible to savour a child's interpretation of life, even as an adult, while at the same time struggle with complex realities that demand an analytical approach. It can be a relief to sink back into the simple understandings of childhood when continually confronted with the demands of intellectual interpretation. Why then is it so important for children to understand theological principles that so evidently lie outside their cognitive grasp?

As people grow older, they tend to lose contact with their spiritual being, so that what children experience in the spiritual realm is often invisible to adults (Adams *et al.*, 2008; Pearce & Thornton, 2007). Perhaps adults lose this contact through their need to evaluate the world, seeing themselves as *acting upon*, rather than *participating within* the world. Perhaps adults interpret the potential for spiritual awareness out of their lives, so that their greater capacity for sophisticated thought and meaning surpasses the openness to occasionally accepting unquestionably *what is* in the world around them. Hart (2003) states that the greatest gift a child can offer an adult is the memory of what it is like to be mindful of the present moment; to hold simple yet indefinable moments of life in awe; to behold with unquestioning open-mindedness that which cannot be proven. Perhaps the notion of "use it or lose it", indicative of expanding cerebral capacity,

is applicable to the adult's loss of contact with his or her spirit, and the blindness towards the spirit that ensues from this loss (Hart, 2003; Siegal, 1999). Imagination is one area of a child's life that takes a person directly into the child's world, and that opportunity challenges the notion of "use it or lose it" in an adult's world of meaning.

Imagination and spiritual awareness

The readiness to enter the world of imagination and impose fantasy upon reality is the mark of early child development, and is evident even in older childhood and adolescence. Children touch their spiritual being through imagination, and through play and story leave the material world and enter another realm of reality. Adults often perceive a child's imaginative play as being charming. Yet imaginative play can be serious business for children. Imaginative play can bring inanimate objects to life, or take a child to the furthest ends of the universe. Imagination can also protect a child from the abuse and tragedy of the adult world. In the movie, *Radio Flyer* (Columbia Pictures, 1992), two brothers, Mikey and Bobby, transform their red wagon (referred to as a Radio Flyer) into a flying machine, and with it embark on an extraordinary adventure. The dark side to this deeply spiritual experience for Bobby (the younger one) is that he is continually the victim of his stepfather's physical brutality, which he survives through the symbol of this unwieldy, un-flyable machine. Adult reckoning would declare any notion that this machine might fly as being bizarre, and in fact it takes his life at the end of the movie. Yet through it Bobby enters the womb of a mystical experience, and through this experience Bobby does fly. There is a scene where he is standing on the edge of a cliff, eyes closed, arms out, twirling slowly before the face of the breeze, clearly immersed in its midst as if enfolded within a womb. At no time in the story does Bobby give any indication of suicidal hopelessness. Rather, it is the opposite. For Bobby, his dream of flying away is complete with hope and freedom – and, in a child's world, reality.

Imagination and symbol

Radio Flyer reflects the view posited by Hay and Nye (2006), that imagination is part of spirituality, and that adults who are drawn into a child's world of imagination are offered the gift of peeping through the symbolic window of the spirit of a child. Bobby does not literally escape his stepfather's abuse through his flying machine. Rather, Bobby's flying machine allows him to imagine possibilities that cannot be taken away or diminished by his stepfather. Through his flying machine, Bobby touches the "unseen forces that rest at the heart of creation" (Tacey, 2003, p. 211). In a sense, spiritual and religious symbol is akin to Bobby and Mikey's flying machine. Symbol demonstrates unspoken power through image and action, and in a similar fashion enables a person to step across the threshold of daily life into a world of sensory reality, beyond the breadth of space and time. That is, symbol allows a person to imagine what might not be sensible in reality. When the symbolic is perceived by the sensual, the domain of empirical interpretation becomes unnecessary and even meaningless. In effect, symbol is disempowered by the need to explain and rationalise, and can be rendered mute by analytical scrutiny (Hood *et al.*, 2009). Yet symbol is brought to life by the power to imagine. It is therefore curious that adults become concerned that children need to have factual knowledge about the theology of religious ritual, such as Eucharistic ritual, before they can participate fully in it. The girl who responded with the comment "sort of" felt she had to find the response that aligned with the *right* answer rather than simply express her sense of joy in being part of a special day and a special moment. Like Bobby, who twirled in the midst of a breeze, and was caught up in its hypnotic swaying, she could have simply been caught up in the moment without having to explain *how* or *why*. Here the salient caveat resides in the rather sad belief that the ability of children to communicate freely with the spiritual world appears to diminish and even be lost as adolescence merges into adulthood. Even inadvertently, adults can risk shutting down the two-way communication between a child and the imaginal by responding in ways that invalidate what the child believes to be real, but what is also hidden from the sensory vision of the adult (see especially Hart, 2003, pp. 105-106 for an example). In relation to the specific focus of this paper, children can take the complexity of something like the Eucharist and redefine it through imagination and even fantasy. There is nothing sacrilegious about doing this. Rather this capacity is the acknowledgment that the Eucharist has the power to symbolically communicate with the child in a spiritually imaginative way, and help the child grasp a level of meaning that sits comfortably with his or her stage of cognitive development.

We risk seeing children as little theologians

The context of Catholic sacramentality is embedded within the broader view of children's spirituality, particularly in relation to how children's knowledge and spiritual awareness are formed within this context. The Catholic understanding of Eucharist provides a poignant example of the sacramental formation of children, since Eucharist entails both concrete and theological/abstract notions. A Eucharistic focus also highlights the difference between the approach that imposes knowledge and awareness onto another person, and the approach that allows a person to make knowledge and awareness one's own possession. Cognitive and emotional growth is a reality of child development, and where a concept is imposed upon a child who lacks sufficient cognitive flexibility to grasp its meaning with reasonable clarity, then the child will be likely to shelve the concept without argument or question, and without understanding or clear meaning. This response contains a dormant problem. When a child reaches the stage of abstract/hypothetical reasoning, earlier abstract concepts (such as the Eucharist) that have been imposed on the child, and that have been accepted by the child without question and understanding, might be rejected by the developing abstract mind as being absurd. Where abstract knowledge is imposed without understanding upon a concrete mind, the concrete-thinking child is likely to respond with "I don't understand what you want me to understand, but I will agree to understand anyway, even though I want you to hear what *I think I understand*".

Concluding comments and future directions

When adults undertake working with children in a spiritual sense, it is essential that they develop the openness to understand a child's spiritual world by striving to see that world through the eyes of the child before them. Hence, rather than seeking to impose knowledge and meaning on children, these adults need to guide children towards a level of meaning that sits well with their spiritual being and their cognitive capacity. This openness might be essential, but to what extent are adults capable of exercising this openness if indeed it is true that as we grow older, we lose the capacity to wonder? What do adults who are responsible for the spiritual formation of children expect of them in relation to their spirituality, especially in relation to the applied focus of this paper, Catholic sacramental readiness?

Two terms are relevant here, namely, *fixated expectation* and *flexible expectation*. If the adult's expectation is fixated, so that a child's spiritual response must be in accord with the adult's evaluation of "right" spirituality or "correct" sacramental readiness, then the child will need to adapt to the adult's level of knowledge and understanding. That is, the child's own breadth of wonder will be truncated to fit the adult's expectation. However, if the adult's expectation is flexible, then there is the likelihood that adult and child will be able to communicate spiritually with each other, and grow spiritually within the ebb and flow of each other's understanding and openness to what might be new and different. That is, the child's breadth of wonder will be given licence and space to spread its wings, rather than become stifled. There is also the likelihood that the adult will be challenged to consider meanings within the world from a child's perspective once more.

Adults' expectations of children's spiritual expression do not occur within a vacuum, but rather in various contexts of daily personal interaction. Hence the first step of further enquiry would be to identify what those contexts – or domains – might be. The authors of this paper have therefore commenced two stages of research. The first stage seeks to identify the foundational domains through which adults carry out the responsibility of forming the spiritual and sacramental lives of children. The second stage will investigate the extent to which children and their parents agree that these domains are reliable starting points to evoke the spiritual response and wonder of children. The aim of this further research is twofold. First, the researchers seek to inform the content and structure of Catholic programmes of childhood sacramental formation. Second, the researchers hope to evoke informed discussion about those arenas of traditional religious formation that implicate the spiritual worlds of children. It might become evident that programmes of spiritual and sacramental preparation are fixated in their expectations of knowledge, understanding, and subsequent evidence of readiness. In this case, the challenge will be found in the willingness to accept the expertise of a child's store of knowledge, understanding, and meaning that emerges from spiritual expressions of wonder and curiosity.

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Advance Notice

Seventh National Symposium on Religious Education

Wednesday 6 July 2011 – Friday 8 July 2011

Australian Catholic University, North Sydney Campus, 40 Edward Street, North Sydney NSW
2060

The Symposium, hosted by the School of Religious Education, has been held biennially for the past 12 years and is a gathering of scholars, curriculum advisors and practitioners in religious education from Australia and overseas.

A call for abstracts for the Seventh National Symposium on Religious Education will be made early in 2011. Abstracts should be of two hundred words for either a 30 minute paper or 60 minute workshop relating to the theme of the symposium.