

January 22, 2012
Feast of Saint Agnes
Song of Solomon, 2:10-13
2 Corinthians, 10:17-11:2
Matthew, 18:1-6

“Become like children.”

☐ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A week before Christmas, two old men died. Kim Jong Il and Vaclav Havel were globally significant, but had either become like a child?

The pictures from Kim Jong Il’s funeral procession were eerie and spooky: the thin layer of snow chilled me; the thick, gray, murky fog prevented any light from breaking through; a stillness pervaded. It reminded me of the setting *The Shining*. The creepiness and heaviness was intensified by tightly packed mourners in dark winter coats bawling.

I expect many of those tears were sincere, expressing both fear and emptiness felt at the death of Dear Leader, the supposed source of all order and stability.¹ I also expect in such a repressive regime that there’s mass Stockholm Syndrome: fearful, abused victims empathizing with their oppressors.

Did Dear Leader have childlike qualities? It seems contrary to the carefully crafted persona. Dear Leader didn’t need to be humble child. As a child, reportedly he corrected and chastised his teachers. He didn’t have anything to learn. On his first round of golf, he shot a 38 under par with five hole-in-ones. The first time he bowled he got a perfect 300. According to an official biography, he wrote 1500 books during his three years of university. It also reports that he never urinated or defecated. A perfect, complete human being.

Authoritarian structures, be it a nation or a family or a church, tend toward stasis. Any dissonance, any questioning, any break from conformity seems dangerous and disloyal. Any change, any dynamism is threatening, and the capacity to adapt to change is minimal.

A culture of fear, again be it in a nation or a workplace or a family or a church, diminishes the possibilities of learning and growth. When there’s zero tolerance for dissension, uncertainty, and differences, there’s little room for nurture or creativity or development. There’s little trust, little shared responsibility, lots of coercion.

We don’t know much about St. Agnes. Supposedly she was about twelve or thirteen in 304 when Emperor Diocletian initiated the last and fiercest Roman persecution against Christians. Rome was still enormously important, but beginning to decline. The Empire was weakening, and cultures in decline frighten more easily and act more brutally. Persecutions distract from addressing more serious and difficult problems, problems that require adapting and learning.

Many Romans reacted to their perplexing and discouraging problems by blaming Christians. Agnes was a scapegoat. Presumably, Agnes would not renounce Jesus. She remained steadfast, and the powerful killed her. When adolescent girls are felt to be a threat sufficient to warrant killing, the end is near. Some believe that Agnes’ execution shocked and appalled enough Romans that it helped to bring an end to persecution of Christians.

Agnes' courage bore a powerful witness – martyr means witness, and her witness influenced some people to have more regard for Jesus. Agnes witnessed to the strength that comes in following Christ. Her courage to trust Christ inspired others to take Christianity more seriously.

In today's gospel, the disciples asked Jesus, "Who's the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?" Jesus responded first not with words, but by calling a child into their midst. Consider for a moment this child's experience. Adults are often fearsome creatures for children, especially when the child doesn't know them well. Few children are willing to enter a group of adults unless that child trusts an adult in that group. The child trusted Jesus, obeyed him, followed him, and entered into their midst. The child entered the danger zone.

In a way, it's Agnes... courageously moving forward, going into the unknown. As the Roman authorities prepared to murder her, Agnes trusted Jesus. In persecution and death she continued to identify with him... more than ever.

Today Christians continue to be martyred, and millions more endure persecution because they trust Jesus and identify with him and won't renounce him. As we find inspiration in Agnes, let us look to Christians today in Sudan, Nigeria, Egypt, Eritrea, Zimbabwe, in Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, China, North Korea, and in other parts of the world. Wherever Christians endure suffering and stress, let us hold them in prayer and consider other forms of support, be it advocacy for them, or financial aid, or raising awareness of their persecution.

Vaclav Havel experienced persecution, albeit not for holding fast to Jesus. But like Jesus, Havel struggled for justice and truth non-violently, with wit and dignity and courage. Havel set out to do what seemed impossible, to change what must have seemed unchangeable.

Dear Leader exploited people, grinded them down, imposed his arbitrary will on them, and sought their dependence upon him. In sharp contrast, Havel empowered people, lifted their spirits, shared responsibility and sought interdependence, mutuality, cooperation, give and take. "Truth and love," he often said, "must prevail over lies and hatred."² Havel believed that truth and love prevail when we live it.

Havel came to believe that political renewal begins in our own moral and personal renewal, that we address problems "out there" by starting with problems "in here," in ourselves. While imprisoned by the Communist regime, he wrote in a letter, "Who should break this vicious cycle? The only possible place to begin is with myself... Whether all is really lost or not depends entirely on whether or not I am lost."³ Havel focused on his personal growth and development to change his culture.

As Havel got older, he became increasingly interested a spiritual life. In a speech here to a joint session of Congress, he urged us to live for a "responsibility to something higher than my family, my country, my company, my success."⁴ He later worried that modern humanity was losing our "transcendental anchor." He came to understand democracy as allowing human beings to live in dignity, freedom, and responsibility, but not as a guarantee of dignity, freedom, and responsibility. That guarantee came in our relationship to that which transcends us.⁵

A relationship to God gives us personal growth in an ironic way: we become more childlike in some ways. Spiritual life enhances some childlike qualities. In today's gospel, Jesus said, "Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven."

Havel had several childlike qualities. Children are enormously adaptive; they are natural, eager learners. Havel learned; he developed; he evolved. We see that as he grew older and became increasingly interested in spiritual life. We see it more dramatically in the way he changed as he became President and stopped being a dissident and staying out all night. As he assumed a new identity and new responsibilities, his friends complained that he was no longer any fun. He put away his jeans, wore a suit, and created the institution of the Czech presidency. He became the founding father, a Washington. He evolved from trying to destroy a corrupt, despicable institution to trying to create a just, noble, moral replacement. He developed from destroyer to creator.⁶

Second, when Jesus tells us to become like children, he means be trusting. Havel knew darkness and suffering, but he was a man of hope. "Hope," he said, "is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless how it turns out."⁷ Hope means I can find God, be with God, even when things are not the way I want them. I can trust him that things will be alright.

Third, when Jesus tells us to become like children, he means be humble. Don't put on airs and lord it over others. While leading the Velvet Revolution, Havel sought to break the cycle of violence and retribution by calling for forgiveness of the Communists who had jailed and abused him. In 1991, at a time when Havel was an obvious candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize, he nominated Aung San Suu Kyi, who won.⁸ It drew attention to the battle for civility and dignity still being fought in Burma.

After Havel's death, a friend wrote,

the true measure of Havel's greatness was not the respect he could command from the powerful and famous, but the affection he inspired in so-called "ordinary people" whose lives he had touched and enhanced... His way of treating others, even former opponents, with civility helped to restore [everyone's] dignity... it was through thousands of such small acts, as much as through his writing and his towering example, that he brought his society closer to healing.⁹

When I hear Jesus telling me to turn and become like children, I think of learning and trusting and being humble. I also think of other childlike qualities: living in the moment, living with energy and curiosity and wonder. I think of lightness, a sense of play and laughter. When we have those experiences now, it feels like entering the Kingdom of Heaven; it's receiving heaven now.

So in honoring St. Agnes today, let's welcome and embrace those qualities in ourselves, and let's pray in thanksgiving for our common life, for our parish family because we are growing those ways, more and more letting our patron, St. Agnes, shape our identity.

□ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ For Kim Jong Il, I read: Philip Kennicott, "Kim Jong Il's Death Stirs Genuine Emotions," *the Washington Post*, December 19, 2011.

² Paul Wilson, "Vaclav Havel (1936-2011)," *The New York Review of Books*, February 9, 2012, pp. 4-8.

³ Quoted by Michael Gerson, "Havel's Revolution of Truth," *The Washington Post*, December 19, 2011.

⁴ Quoted by Gerson.

⁵ Carl Gershman, "Vaclav Havel's Legacy to Humanity," *The Washington Post*, December 19, 2011.

⁶ Anne Applebaum, "Vaclav Havel, the Dissident Who Came Out of the Shadows," *The Washington Post*, December 19, 2011.

⁷ Wilson.

⁸ Timothy Garton Ash, "Vaclav Havel: Director of a Play that Changed History," *The Guardian*, December 18, 2011.

⁹ Wilson.