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## **Responsibility in Children's Ministry**

Greetings from the land of the Sámi people, from Lapland! I work there as a pastor for a while, sharing my life with young and old Sámi people. The Sámi are the only indigenous people in Europe and I respect their culture very much. I am there to learn from them. I also enjoy the beautiful and frail nature of the north, where I can wander day and night, blessed by sunshine.

Let us take the midnight sun as a metaphor of hope today when our subject is responsibility in children's ministry. Hope is something essential that needs to accompany, or precede, responsibility.

I am going to concentrate above all on the issue of ecological responsibility. Children and young people in our societies are aware about the increasing destruction of the earth's delicate systems. They are worried, maybe they are afraid like some Finnish young people that "the future is cancelled" - there is nothing in the future but a black wall. Our Christian tradition has something valuable to give them: hope.

It seems to be necessary to approach the ecological problems also through spiritual and theological perspectives. As the orthodox patriarch Bartholomeos has said: The climate change is a symptom of a moral and spiritual disorder. So the medicine must also be found at the spiritual level. At the same time, I hope that these theological meditations have something to give to other important issues too, like our global responsibility for the poor or the issue of violence.

Europe is going through an economic crisis which I see as a spiritual crisis at the same time. As the Bible says: "Without a vision, the people perish" (Proverbs 29:18). How could faith in Jesus Christ provide us with a powerful and hopeful vision today? Together with our many indigenous sisters and brothers I seek a more holistic way to understand the world, the Bible and our tradition.

So let us stay for a while in some central theological themes. I will try to apply their meaning for children's ministry, a bit later. But mostly I invite you, the real professionals in children's ministry, to find out if these theological meditations give you any new insights as to how to approach responsibility in your work with children.

### *The dimensions of salvation in the Bible*

How do you understand the concept *salvation*? How would you explain it to a visitor from a foreign land who does not know Christianity? How would you explain it to a 15-year old critical European

young girl? Does the salvation in Jesus Christ make sense in today's world?

Maybe you are used to thinking that salvation has something to do with the question: Does my soul go to heaven after my death? Yes, it has something to do with that – but this is only a narrow view of the rich idea of salvation in the New Testament. It is also selfish to stop here and not to ask what happens to others, what happens to the earth. Happily, the Bible has a lot more to say.

It is true that in the center of the proclamation of Jesus is the human person's relationship with God. God takes the initiative to approach the human, to heal the broken connection. It is a moment of grace, of being gratuitously accepted by God. This can help the human being in finding healing in the relationship with his or her own being, including one's body. Salvation always has effects both in this life and in the life hereafter.

In addition to this, in the Gospels it is told several times how the encounter with Jesus brings healing to our relationships in our families and other closest communities. For example, when Jesus decided to visit the home of Zacchaeus, everything changed in the life of that man. He wanted to repair the damage he had done to others. He and his family were again accepted as members of the community. Jesus commented: "Salvation has come to this house today." (Luke 19:9)

The next level of salvation takes place in our societies. Jesus' core message of the Kingdom of God is in line with the message of the prophets. It is good news to the poor and the oppressed. The Kingdom comes closer when justice and peace grow in our communities. But this Kingdom cannot be perfected by human effort, it will be whole only in the world to come, in the new creation. But working with God towards justice, resisting violence and cruelty, is experiencing salvation in our everyday lives, too.

Finally, there is the cosmic dimension of salvation. It was clear to apostle Paul: "All of creation groans with pain --- the hope that creation itself would one day be set free" (Romans 8) and it was clear to the great Church Fathers in the early church. But for many reasons, we have gradually lost this beautiful, powerful, integrated picture of salvation. We simply need to take it back and apply it in our lives as Christians. It motivates us to hear the cries of the suffering and to carry our responsibility for their salvation in this life and in the life hereafter.

### *Tradition as spirituality, ethics and doctrine*

We need the power of salvation in Jesus Christ in order to survive. How can we enliven this tradition so that its power would be visible and tangible to children and all who desperately long for it?

I have learned from some old spiritual guides, that Christian tradition is like a rope that has three strands, three parts: spirituality, ethics and doctrine. Only when they stay together is the rope strong enough to hold us above the abyss beneath us. Or our tradition is like a house with three doors. At least many of us protestants have tried to come in first of all from the door of doctrine. No wonder many people think that Christianity is all about the mind and rational acceptance of some "irrational dogmas".

Lately, many have also come in from the door of ethics. They emphasize the responsibility and love

we as Christians have for the poor or the discriminated. There is nothing wrong with this – only when ethics lose their connection with the transforming power of spirituality, do problems arise.

Maybe the most important door today is the door of spirituality. When we approach the totality of tradition from this angle, ethics and doctrine also become more understandable. In other words, we need first holiness and beauty. Only together with them can we find the power to carry our responsibility. Spirituality and ethics need to go hand in hand or they both risk losing their integrity. Spirituality that concentrates only in the well-being and nice feelings of myself is no more connected to Christ. Ethics that loses the sources of spirituality loses its sources of power and direction.

What about the doctrine? Doctrine has to do with the identity of Christianity in the multicoloured world of ideas and spiritualities. Some criteria as to how to understand the Bible in a meaningful way are always needed. I think it is safe to try to be as *Jesus-centered* as possible. We have to maintain connection to the whole life of Jesus: his birth, his life and teachings, his suffering, death and resurrection. This is the ever-relevant Great Narrative that we need in order to survive. In Jesus' company this tradition can stay alive and recognizable and at the same time be renewed.

If some interpretations of the Bible tend to lead to cruelty towards children, women, men, or the earth, we must seriously rethink them. This principle of "no-cruelty" arises from the center of the Bible itself, from Jesus. He was ready to rethink or even dismiss some parts of the tradition that used to be valued, if they no longer worked for life but suffocated life. Responsibility means that we seek insights to the Bible that make our hearts burn with love and compassion.

### *God in the tiniest of leaves*

Let us come back to the issue of the ecological crisis – and our images of God. The ancient question is: who is God, where can we meet God?

I quote a little poem by a Finnish poet and theologian Anna-Maija Raittila. She died last year and is remembered with love by many. This poem is titled *The Short Mass*.

*Silent  
as mushrooms and grass and ants  
in the rain  
were the heavens and earth full  
of God's glory.*

These words tell about our God who is not far from us and who is not a controlling old man somewhere above the clouds. Like the psalmists in the Bible, Anna-Maija Raittila experiences God in God's creation, in every part of it. This kind of image of God is not pantheism (= Nature is god). It is *pan-en-theism* which means that God is in the created things and all creation is in God. God is intimately near us. Martin Luther has said that God is present in every tiny leaf of the trees. God is at the same time this-worldly and other-worldly.

This is not the only relevant image of God. We Christians also always need personal images of God. Personal and cosmic images balance each other. Together they help us remember that all metaphors and words for God are inadequate. God is the greatest Mystery, which we need to approach with awe and respect. The languages of poetry and mysticism are the most appropriate languages then.

In our world with the Western culture's terrible disrespect towards nature the panentheistic image of God is very valuable. With this image in mind we can return to the idea that the earth is sacred – because of the presence of the Sacred Triune God in it. And the sense of sacredness gives the nature inviolability: there are limits to the greed of humans, there is the intrinsic value of animals, forests, and water. The Panentheistic image of God helps us to find again the sacramentality of the world. The sacredness of the earth is a powerful symbol – we need this to change our mind and way of life.

This kind of God-talk is an important tool for us when we try to see the world with new eyes, as an interdependent whole, where every tiny part of creation is valuable and the place of humans is smaller and more humble than it is now. The book of Genesis tells us that God placed the human in the garden of Eden to cultivate it and guard it. It is time to emphasise the responsibility to *guard*. We Christians have been too quiet, too slow to raise our voices when it has been said that humans can take from the nature whatever they want.

We need new sensitivity to the needs of the earth. How can we help this sensitivity grow in our children? One simple step is this: take children to nature. Go to a forest or garden with them. Walk slowly with them and be ready to stop with them. Children have the precious ability to see, to wonder and to enjoy the small details of nature – even in the center of a city. But if you have a possibility to take them out of the city to experience silence and the sounds of nature, all the better.

In ecological issues, children can often be our teachers. I have been told several times how children who learn at school or at Sunday school about recycling, immediately understand how wise it is. Next they insist that their parents at home begin to take recycling seriously. Or children often naturally feel empathy for animals – this is wisdom that is urgently needed in today's Europe where animals, especially those that are kept for producing meat or eggs, are systematically ill-treated.

Nevertheless, there are trends that alienate our children from nature. One powerful trend is the sphere of technology that is spreading to every area of our lives. If you communicate mainly through machines, you don't use your body very much, you don't communicate with your gestures and voice. And you don't experience the connection with nature. For a child who spends hours every day playing with his computer, a night trip to the forest and sitting around a fire, under the starry sky, can be a transforming experience.

### *This bodily faith*

I shall return to the theme of computers and technology soon – they are something that shapes the everyday life of European children a lot. I want to approach this theme after a few words about the relationship of Christianity to the human body.

I claim that Christianity is a faith that deeply appreciates the human body and the wholeness of human person.

The ground of this attitude is in the Old testament thinking and also in the very core of the New testament. Think about the incarnation – God became human in Jesus Christ. Could there be a more powerful way to express the value of the human body? But that is not all, there are also the sacraments. Let us think about baptism and the Eucharist, and the bodily functions they espouse: to wash, to eat and to drink.

In the Gospels Jesus is portrayed as a healer, who healed people's bodies and minds often through touching them. In Paul's letters the church is the *body of Christ* and our bodies are *temples of the Holy Spirit*.

With all this in mind, we ask: Why has our Christian faith *not* seemed to be a bodily faith but has devalued bodiliness and especially sexuality? I would add: especially women's sexuality.

There are historical explanations to this. Very early some dualistic ways of thinking influenced the young Christian communities. With dualism I mean here that people started to separate things that belong together and that should interact. For example, reason was considered more valuable than feeling, mind was to be freed from the prison (!) of the body, men were more valuable than women, humans were above nature. Our Western culture has been thoroughly affected by these attitudes. And women and nature have suffered so much because of them. Christianity has suffered: it lost its integrity as a faith that values bodiliness and matter.

It is amazing that we Christians in the West have not even yet really understood the damage that was done to our faith when it was defined to be a matter of predominantly the mind and the reason. We can learn a lot from sisters and brothers of the Eastern Church in this issue. We should also listen to the wisdom of the Christians in the Southern hemisphere and indigenous peoples. Faith has to do with reason and feeling, body and mind, all senses and our interdependence with all nature.

Our theology of bodiliness and sexuality has been badly wounded. This helps us to understand, why the issues of sexuality cause so much trouble in today's churches. The healing starts with a turn to holistic thinking that can do justice to the Bible and to the life of Jesus. We must become aware of the distortions of history, get rid of the elements that are foreign to our faith, and try to find again the beauty and goodness of our bodies. In our theology of sexuality we need to integrate the positive starting point with an emphasis on love, responsibility, faithfulness, joy and non-violence in human relationships. In one word, we need to find again the sacredness of the human body, or the totality of our body and mind. (I cannot stop myself from mentioning that we Finns have a great resource for this re-thinking in our ancient and still living sauna culture.)

For our children all this means at least two important things. Firstly, we must respect their *peace to grow* in their own natural pace. We must protect them from excessive advertising and other media impacts that put pressure on them about sexuality, mode, consumption, etc. We need laws that protect the weakest, the children.

Secondly, we need to give our children places where they can from time to time experience *freedom from technology*. Where might be the monastery-like places where there is human communication face-to-face, direct contact with nature, fun and feeling of belonging together with other children? Many of you organize children's camps that have these elements. Camps are important! What else could we do to protect the children from the ever-increasing power of technology? Of course there are good things in internet communication, too, but too much is too

much for the little brains and hearts. I am convinced that the increasing problems with depression and other ill-being of children (and adults) has something to do with the process of technologization. It is a fact that we humans need communication face-to-face, with our bodies, and a sense of interdependence with the nature.

Christian faith cannot be moved to the internet – thank you God for that! Some communication and pastoral care can use the net in a positive way, but the core of our bodily faith can be touched only when people come together or when they talk with God in the silence of nature or in other forms of prayer – no machines needed. Baptism and Holy Communion cannot be celebrated on the net, without real water, bread and wine.

### *Tenderness and resistance*

Following Jesus in today's world means at least these two things: tenderness and resistance. The Kingdom that Jesus proclaims in the Gospels can be described as the Kingdom of Tenderness. Jesus was free to show love and caring to people of all kind, over all kind of barriers. And the message of salvation that touches this everyday life as well as the eternal life leads us to find ways to protect fragile life in this world.

Our responsibility as followers of Jesus in children's ministry means that we resist everything that tries to suffocate the life of the little ones and their hope.

Our responsibility together with the children is to change the way we see the world and our place in it. This is a big issue, an issue of *metanoia*. This is the word in the gospels that Jesus uses when he talks about our need to turn – to take a totally new direction, to see the world with new eyes.

*Metanoia* and following Jesus is resistant to the Western belief in progress that has lead humanity and all creation to a serious crisis. We must find the roots of the violence in our societies, bring them to daylight and let them dry in the heat of the sun. We must find the courage to encounter the core of the problems and not just try to cure the symptoms.

Right now the wisest thing is to stop. To stop and contemplate by watching and listening in silence. To stop and evaluate our way of living. People around us – and often we ourselves too – desperately seek meaning from consumerism. They (we) will not find it there. The only source that can quench this deepest thirst is God. One of the treasures of our Christian tradition is the valuation of a simple lifestyle. When life gets simple, the essential things are more visible.

Some years ago my church published a Climate Programme. Its title is: *Gratitude, Respect, Moderation*. Gratitude for all the wonderful, beautiful things that God gives us in creation leads to respect for the earth. These attitudes together lead us to seek a moderate lifestyle so that the coming generations can enjoy the beauty of creation. Our responsibility encompasses the generations after us.

After some spiritual and theological basis for the environmental responsibility of all Christians, the Climate Programme proceeds to suggest concrete ways to protect the creation. For example: protect Sunday as a day of rest, not consumption. Eat less meat, remembering your responsibility for the well-being of your own body and the animals and the climate.

I have many times heard some people saying that children and young people need more information in order to become responsible caretakers of nature. I disagree – what they and we all most need is *hope*. And also possibilities to *act*, to change something concrete in our lives.

The biblical message of salvation – of ourselves, our communities and the earth – is the source of hope. The tender Jesus is in the center of this message. His whole life: teachings, healings, his suffering and death, and his resurrection. There is the source of meaningful life and joy. Christianity is incomprehensible without joy and the proclamation of joy. Responsibility grows from the encounter with God's holiness and beauty.

### *A kind of conclusion*

To summarize something:

We adults have a huge responsibility to leave our children and the coming generations a livable globe. Some scientists say that we have only a handful of years to change our lifestyle before the balance of the Earth's nature gets badly damaged. Where can we find power for such a great change? Let us look at Jesus and this tradition of his followers: our roots must reach the Living Water.

As Christians we have the possibility to reach these sources of survival and life. This is why we can offer our children hope. These issues of ecological responsibility and resistance to all kind of violence concern all of us Christians. The salvation described in the Bible is holistic. It has effects both in this life and in the life hereafter. Jesus proclaimed a Kingdom that can be understood as a Kingdom of Tenderness – tenderness towards every living being. God is present in every part of the creation, making it holy and inviolable.

The sources of hope and resistance are best found when we come in to the house of tradition from the door of spirituality. Spirituality – the grace of God - feeds our ethics, our love. Silent prayer gives us inner peace and imagination, how to love. We can also learn imagination and sense of wonder from children. They have the most direct access to the wisdom of the Kingdom.

Finally, I throw you a question: how can you apply all this in your concrete work with children? May God give you imagination and hope in your work!

