SILENT HOMILIES

Before They Were Tall

Child saints who did not wait to grow up



Silent Homilies

Little Treasures

Before They Were Tall

Child saints who did not wait to grow up

Before You Begin

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This is not a children's page for the back of a bulletin. It is a fact the Church has already decided, and that many of us still find slightly awkward.

She has canonised people who never sat a public exam, never voted, and never grew into the voice we associate with authority. Some of them changed the map of devotion. Some of them only changed a schoolyard. The Church did not canonise their potential. She canonised what they had already done.

If you are a parent, a grandparent, a catechist, or someone who still remembers being young and serious, these pages are for you. The children in them did not wait to grow up. Neither did grace.

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Chapter 1

Heaven Does Not Wait for a Beard

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Adults like a story in which holiness arrives after a career. After the degree, the marriage, the long apprenticeship in being taken seriously. The calendar disagrees. St Agnes is a girl. St Tarcisius is a boy carrying the Eucharist through Roman streets. Dominic Savio dies at fourteen. Francisco Marto at ten, Jacinta at nine. José Sánchez del Río at fourteen. Carlo Acutis at fifteen. Heaven was not waiting for their height.

This is not a slogan about children being naturally holy. Most children are not, any more than most adults are. The point is theological, and it is simpler than it sounds. A baptised child is not a Christian-in-training. Baptism does not give half-membership in Christ. The grace that makes a person able to love God is not held back until the driving test. A child can love God now. A child can pray now. A child can forgive now. A child can refuse a lie now. None of those things require a beard.

The Bible is not surprised by this. Samuel hears the Lord while he is still a boy in the temple, and needs Eli to tell him what the voice is. David is the youngest son, left with the sheep. Jeremiah protests that he is too young, and is told not to say it. A boy in the crowd hands over the loaves that feed the five thousand. The Lord Himself is found in the Temple at twelve, about His Father's business. And before any of that, He says, "Let the children come to me." The Church did not invent the idea that God can deal seriously with the young. She found it in the Gospels.

So if a young person in your house is more in earnest than you find comfortable, do not smile them out of it. You may be looking at the beginning of a feast day. The Magi brought gifts to a Child. The Church, at her best, has kept the habit.

Reflection

A child says, "I want to go to Confession." An adult smiles. "What could you possibly have done?" The smile is meant to be kind. It can also be the moment a serious faith learns to hide.

Adults do this without noticing. We laugh at a prayer that seems too long for a ten-year-old. We call a weekday Mass "a bit much." We tell a teenager that there will be time for God after the exams. We are not usually trying to wound them. We are trying to keep religion in the size we find manageable.

The trouble is that grace is not waiting for our timetable. If a child is already trying to tell the truth to God, the adult's job is not to shrink it. It is to show them the door, and then get out of the way.

A Short Prayer

Lord Jesus, who did not wait until thirty to be God, teach us to take the young seriously. Amen.

Chapter 2

Death Rather Than Sin

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Dominic Savio was born on the 2nd of April 1842 at Riva, near Chieri, in Piedmont. His father was a blacksmith. His mother was a seamstress. At seven, on the day of his First Communion, he wrote a few resolutions in a notebook. The last line became famous: death rather than sin. He meant it without theatre. It was not a slogan for a banner. It was a boy deciding what he would not trade.

Don Bosco, the priest who built the Oratory at Valdocco for poor boys in Turin, knew how to spot a show-off. He took Dominic in and found something else. A child who wanted to be a saint, and did not think that was a hobby. Dominic walked miles to school when he had to. With friends he started the Company of the Immaculate Conception, which sounds grand and was in fact a small pact to keep the house decent and the younger boys kind. Bosco insisted on cheerfulness. Dominic's seriousness sat inside that cheerfulness, which is why the story is bearable. A grim child saint is usually an adult invention.

He became ill, went home to Mondonio, and died on the 9th of March 1857, not yet fifteen. His father wrote to Bosco that the boy had received the last sacraments and asked for the prayers for a happy death. Pius XII canonised him in 1954. People later called him a little giant of the spirit. The giant was a boy who loved the altar, and who did not live long enough for anyone to sand the earnestness off him.

If you need a patron for a child who is in earnest, and perhaps a little unwell, you have one. Do not make him a plaster prig. Bosco would not have kept a prig. He kept a boy who loved God the way other boys love a game, with their whole attention, and with joy.

Reflection

The adult smile is not always cruel. Sometimes it is embarrassment. A parent hears a child talk about sin and does not know what to do with the word, so the parent makes a joke. The joke lands. The child learns that this subject is for later, or for odd people.

Dominic wrote his line at seven, on the day he received Communion. Nobody seems to have told him he was too young for a promise. That is the part worth sitting with. A promise made early is not automatically wiser than one made late. It is also not automatically silly.

If a child in your care wants to take God seriously, you do not have to hand them a notebook of resolutions. You do have to stop laughing them out of the wanting.

A Short Prayer

St Dominic Savio, obtain for us a hatred of sin that does not hate people. Amen.

Chapter 3

The Boy Who Wanted to Console

†

In the spring of 1917, in a poor parish called Fatima, three children said they had seen a Lady brighter than the sun. Francisco Marto was the boy. He was born in 1908. He was not the one who spoke to the Lady. Lucia spoke. Jacinta saw and heard. Francisco saw, and for a long time had to be told what had been said. That detail matters. He was not the spokesman. He was the one who wanted to stay.

Before any of this, the three of them had a habit Lucia later wrote down, and it is too human to leave out. They had been told to pray the Rosary after lunch, and they wanted to get back to their games. So they ran the beads through their fingers saying only "Hail Mary," and at the end of each ten they said "Our Father" very slowly, to make it look like prayer. At the first apparition the Lady said they would go to heaven, but that Francisco must say many Rosaries. He took it literally. After that, if the others called him to play, he would hold up the beads and say he would pray again later. He had been told to, and he was going to.

What he wanted, once he had understood, was not a career in apparitions. He wanted to console Jesus, who seemed to him sad. He would slip away behind a rock, or into the church, and sit. He died on the 4th of April 1919, of the influenza that killed so many that year. He was ten. On the 13th of May 2017, at Fatima itself, Pope Francis canonised him with his sister. They were the first children who were not martyrs to be declared saints.

If you have ever sat beside a hospital bed when there was nothing left to fix, you have already met the shape of his prayer. He was not solving the world's sadness. He was keeping somebody company.

Reflection

Most of us are useful people. We like a problem we can mend. A hospital corridor is hard precisely because the useful part runs out. You can fetch water. You cannot fetch the person back. What is left is sitting.

Francisco's holiness was mostly that. He was not given the words. He was given the company. The Church canonised a boy whose great work was to stay near someone who seemed sad, and not to fill the silence with his own importance.

You do not need an apparition to practise it. The next time there is nothing to say, stay. That is already a kind of prayer, and he would have recognised it.

A Short Prayer

St Francisco, teach us to keep Jesus company, and the people He loves. Amen.

Chapter 4

A Loneliness Given Away

†

Jacinta was Francisco's younger sister, and she was different in temperature. Lucia remembered her as impulsive, where he was quiet. She was born in 1910. The vision of hell, which the Lady showed the three children in July 1917, pierced her in a way it did not pierce the others. She wanted to go to heaven, and she wanted to take people with her. That combination, in a child, can look sentimental. The Church, after a long look, decided it was apostolic.

She offered small sufferings for sinners she would never meet. Thirst on a hot walk. The prick of a rough rope she wore for a while. The loneliness of a hospital bed in Lisbon, far from her mother. She died there on the 20th of February 1920, aged nine, after operations and a solitude she had already given away in advance. When her body was moved in 1935, those present said her face was preserved. By the time the remains were transferred again in 1951, that preservation had not held. It is honest to say what was seen, and not to turn one exhumation into a permanent miracle. The Church did not canonise her face. She canonised the offering.

If you cannot do a great work for the people you love, you can still do what she did. Offer the small thing that is actually in your hand. A parent whose child has left the Church knows the shape of this. You cannot argue them back. You can still pray, and you can still hand the worry over instead of clutching it.

Reflection

There is a grandmother who cannot persuade a grandchild. There is a father who has said the careful thing, and the careful thing has not worked. The temptation is to think that love only counts if it changes the other person this year.

Jacinta could not reach the sinners she prayed for. She did not even know their names. She gave what she had, which was small and real, and she stopped trying to be the one who fixed them. That is not passivity. It is the difference between offering and managing.

If you are holding somebody you cannot save, you are closer to her prayer than you think. Hand them over. Keep loving them. Do not confuse the two.

A Short Prayer

St Jacinta, take the people we cannot reach and hold them out to God. Amen.

Chapter 5

A Boy Who Would Not Stop Saying the Name

†

In the 1920s Mexico lived through a conflict that Catholics still call the Cristero war. Churches were closed. Priests were hunted. In Sahuayo, in Michoacán, a boy named José Sánchez del Río wanted to ride with those who cried out for Christ the King. He was born on the 28th of March 1913. He was fourteen when he was captured. They told him to deny the faith. He would not.

This chapter will not linger on the cruelty. What needs to be said is brief and enough. On the night of the 10th of February 1928 they killed him. His last cry was the cry of his people: Viva Cristo Rey, long live Christ the King. He had not had time to become a strategist or a bishop. He had had time to decide whose name he would say when saying it cost him everything. Pope Francis canonised him in 2016. The photographs that survive show a boy, not a symbol.

Most of us will not be asked for that Tuesday. We will be asked for smaller silences. A joke at work that needs a Christian to laugh. A classroom where it is easier to say nothing when somebody is being mocked. A WhatsApp group where an embarrassing photograph is already going round, and forwarding it would cost less than refusing. Embarrassment is not martyrdom. It is still the room where most of us are tempted to stop saying the name.

Reflection

The ordinary temptation is not a firing squad. It is the pause before you say what you believe, and the relief when the pause becomes a habit. You meant to say grace. The friends were already eating. You meant to say the photograph should not be sent. The joke had already landed.

José had a short life and a public death. Most of the people who honour him will have neither. What they can share is the decision not to trade the name for an easier room. The room may be an office, a school, a family table. The trade is the same shape, on a smaller scale.

You do not have to announce your faith at every meal. You do have to notice the moment you were about to hide it, and ask why.

A Short Prayer

St José, when we are tempted to go quiet, keep the name in our mouth. Amen.

Chapter 6

She Said No, and Then She Forgave

†

Maria Goretti was eleven. On the 6th of July 1902, in a poor farmhouse at Le Ferriere, near Nettuno, a young man who lived in the same building tried to force her. She said no. He stabbed her. She died the next day in hospital, after forgiving him. Alessandro Serenelli was imprisoned. Years later he said he had been converted, and he was present when she was canonised in 1950. That is the story the Church kept. It does not need the newspaper.

She is a girl who said no, and then said I forgive. Both sentences belong to her. If we keep only the forgiveness, we turn an attack into a lesson about being nice. If we keep only the no, we lose the second miracle, which was hers as well. Forgiveness is not saying the wound did not matter. It is refusing to let the wound have the last word.

Parents sometimes fear this story, and they are right to handle it carefully. A child does not need the blade. A child can hear that a girl refused to be used, and that she did not spend her last hours feeding the hatred. Adults can hear the rest, including the long road of the man who harmed her. The Church canonised her, not a theory of childhood.

Reflection

Forgiveness is often preached as if it were a feeling that arrives on time. It is not. Maria forgave a man who had tried to destroy her. Most of us are asked to forgive something smaller, and we still find it slow. A betrayal in a family. A cruelty at school that everybody agrees to forget by Monday.

Saying "I forgive" does not mean saying "it was nothing." It means the evil is named, and then it is not allowed to own the future. That is harder than the slogan, and it is the only version that tells the truth about her.

If you are still angry, you are not failing her. You are at the start of the sentence she managed to finish. Do not pretend the wound was small in order to sound holy.

A Short Prayer

St Maria Goretti, teach us to refuse what is wrong, and still to forgive. Amen.

Chapter 7

The Boy with the Website

†

Carlo Acutis was born in London on the 3rd of May 1991, and grew up in Milan. He liked computers, football, and games. He also went to Mass every day, and spent his spare time building a website about Eucharistic miracles, because he wanted other people to know what he had found in the Host. He died of leukaemia on the 12th of October 2006. He was fifteen. He was beatified in 2020 and canonised in 2025. The photographs show a boy in jeans. That is useful. Holiness had a hoodie.

It is easy to call him the computer saint and then stop. The computer was how he worked. What he kept pointing to was the Eucharist. He said, in words his mother later reported, that the Eucharist was his highway to heaven. He was a teenager who arranged his week around Mass, and who used the thing he was good at to send people toward the altar rather than toward himself.

Let Carlo belong to a laptop that is also used for homework. If the saint can only live in a special voice, the child will leave him in the church porch. The ordinary Catholic teenager already has the materials: a phone, a parish, and a question about whether any of this is real. Carlo did not answer that question with a theory of technology. He answered it by turning up.

Reflection

We unlock the phone to answer one message, and twenty minutes disappear. That is not a sermon against phones. It is a fact about attention. Whatever owns the next twenty minutes owns a piece of the day, and the day is where a life is actually lived.

Carlo did not throw his computer away. He gave it a job. The question for the rest of us is not whether we are allowed a screen. It is who decides what the screen is for, once it is open. A website about the Eucharist is one answer. An hour that cannot be accounted for is another.

You do not have to build a shrine online. You do have to notice when the day has been spent without your consent.

A Short Prayer

St Carlo, keep our attention for the Host, and for the people in the room. Amen.

Chapter 8

The Children with No Names

†

The calendar also keeps the Holy Innocents, the children of Bethlehem killed because a king was afraid of a child. They did not preach. They did not choose martyrdom in the way José chose it. The Church still calls them martyrs, because they died in the place of Christ. It is an old feast, and an uncomfortable one. Holiness, in their case, is something suffered rather than something decided.

Beside them stand the children the Church has not named. A baptised child who dies is not a project that failed to start. The grace was real, and we may entrust that child to God with confidence. A child who dies without Baptism, including a child lost before birth, is in a different place. The Church has not declared each of them a saint. She tells us to entrust them to the mercy of God, and she allows us to hope. God is not short of memory. A canonisation means the Church knows enough to say, in public, that this particular life was a gift. It does not mean He only keeps the famous.

The intercession of the saints is not a competition of biographies. It is the communion of people the Church recognises as alive in Christ, including the ones whose stories would not fill a booklet. For the children we entrust without a canonisation, the prayer is hope, not a feast day.

Reflection

Most of the people God loves will never have a feast day. That is not a loss for them. It is a loss for our curiosity. We like a name, a photograph, a quotation. God is not short of memory.

If you have buried a child, or miscarried, or simply wonder about the ones who left no trace, you are allowed to hope. The Innocents are a hard feast and a kind one. The Church put unnamed children on the calendar. She was refusing to say that a life has to be long, or recorded, before it is held.

You do not have to understand how. You can pray for them without a biography. Where the Church has not named a saint, we do not invent one. We hand the child to the mercy of God, and we hope. Heaven is not waiting for the paperwork.

A Short Prayer

Holy Innocents, pray for us. Lord, receive into Your mercy every child whose name we never learned. Amen.

Chapter 9

Not Plaster

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The danger, once the Church has canonised a child, is that we turn the child into a statue. Dominic becomes a sentence on a holy card. Jacinta becomes a tear. Carlo becomes a laptop. The photographs are flattened, the jokes are removed, and what is left cannot help anyone, because no one can recognise a person in it.

Saints are not merely moral examples, and they are not cute religion. The Church canonises them because she believes they are with Christ, and can be asked for help. The example is real. It is not the whole gift. A child who prays to Jacinta is not being asked to copy a hospital. A child who prays to Dominic is being introduced to a friend.

They were not a rebuke to every child who is ordinary. Most of the kingdom is ordinary. These lives are signs, not a new law. The sign says: do not wait. It does not say: be famous by fourteen. If the fire in a young person is charity, accompany it. If it is theatre, say so gently. Then get out of the way.

Reflection

We do this to adult saints as well, but children suffer it faster. A plaster child cannot be tired, or fond of a game, or slow at his lessons. Once the statue is perfect, the living child in the kitchen concludes that holiness is for a different species.

The correction is small. Tell the weakness as well as the promise, where we actually know it. Francisco rushed his beads before he learned to say them. Carlo played football. Dominic needed Bosco's cheerfulness or he would have become unbearable. When children hear the ordinary things as well, the saint begins to sound like a real person.

If the only version you have is the statue, you have not yet introduced them.

A Short Prayer

Lord, keep us from turning children into statues, or statues into children. Amen.

Chapter 10

How to Tell Them to Children

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Tell the stories without the gore and without the sugar. A child can hear that Dominic wanted never to offend God. A child can hear that Francisco sat behind a rock because Jesus seemed sad. A child can hear that Maria said no, and then forgave. A child does not need the rest of the newspaper.

Tell them in the kitchen, not only in May processions. Let Dominic belong to an ordinary Tuesday. Let Carlo belong to a laptop that is also used for homework. If the saint can only live in a special voice, the child will leave him in the church porch.

Do not use the dead to frighten the living. These saints are friends, not warnings. The aim is not that a nine-year-old become anxious about holiness. The aim is that a nine-year-old discover she is allowed to take God seriously now. And if you are the adult in the room, read the stories once for yourself before you read them aloud. The children in these pages are quite capable of evangelising the person holding the book.

Reflection

There is a way of talking about saints that makes a child brave, and a way that makes a child odd. The second way uses a holy voice, a long pause, and a hint that ordinary games are now beneath them. Children can hear the hint. They file the saint under "not for me."

The first way sounds like the kitchen. You mention Francisco while you are driving to football. You mention Carlo while the laptop is open for homework. You do not announce a lesson. You let a real person into an ordinary hour, and you stop before you have explained him to death.

If the child asks an uncomfortable question about God on the way home, that is not a problem to be managed. That is the conversation these saints were for.

A Short Prayer

Jesus, who called the children to Yourself, let us tell their friends the truth, and nothing extra. Amen.

A Last Word

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If this little book has done its work, you will not wait for a child to become impressive before you take their faith seriously. Heaven did not wait. Neither should we.

Keep the book if it helps. Give it away if it helps a parent, a catechist, or a young person who thinks holiness is for later.

May the small remain earnest. May the tall remain humble. May no one postpone the yes.

Sources and Further Reading

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Scripture: 1 Samuel 3; Jeremiah 1:6–8; Matthew 2:16–18; Matthew 18:1–5; Matthew 19:13–15; Luke 2:41–50; John 6:9; 2 Timothy 1:5 and 3:15. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1261, on children who die without Baptism, 1265–1274, on baptismal grace, and 828 and 2013, on the call to holiness and the canonisation of saints.

Dominic Savio: born 2 April 1842 at Riva presso Chieri; died 9 March 1857 at Mondonio; canonised by Pius XII on 12 June 1954. Don Bosco, The Life of Dominic Savio. The First Communion resolutions, including "death rather than sin," and the Company of the Immaculate Conception, come from Bosco's account and the Salesian tradition.

Francisco Marto, 11 June 1908 – 4 April 1919, and Jacinta Marto, 11 March 1910 – 20 February 1920, canonised by Pope Francis at Fatima on 13 May 2017. The hurried Rosary, and Francisco's later habit of praying many Rosaries, are in Sister Lucia's memoirs. Jacinta's face was reported preserved at the exhumation of 12 September 1935; the remains had begun to decompose by the transfer of 1951. The Church did not treat that as the ground of canonisation.

José Sánchez del Río, 28 March 1913 – 10 February 1928, Sahuayo; canonised by Pope Francis on 16 October 2016. His last cry, Viva Cristo Rey, is part of the witness gathered for the cause. Maria Goretti, 16 October 1890 – 6 July 1902; canonised by Pius XII on 24 June 1950. Carlo Acutis, 3 May 1991 – 12 October 2006; beatified in 2020 and canonised in 2025. The Eucharistic website and daily Mass are attested by his family and by the materials of the cause.

Helping the Next Small Story Be Told

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A child saint can disappear into one line. A name, an age, a feast day. Finding the real child behind that line takes longer than the line suggests. Someone has to read the memoir, check the date, and refuse the story that is only beautiful.

These pages are free to read. A gift is not payment for them. They are already yours. What a gift adds, if you are able to give one through the Silent Homilies website, is time. Time for Scripture, for the Church's teaching, for the writing and the rewriting, the editing, the design, and the ordinary resources that let the next small story be told properly.

I would be truly grateful. It is a practical help, not a condition of reading. If you cannot give, nothing is owed.

And whether or not you can give, pass the booklet to a parent, a grandparent, a catechist, or a young person who thinks holiness is for later. God does not wait for someone to be tall before He asks for a yes. Neither should the story. www.silenthomilies.com

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