

# Children: Close to the Mystery of God

A CESA Stimulus Paper

July 2015

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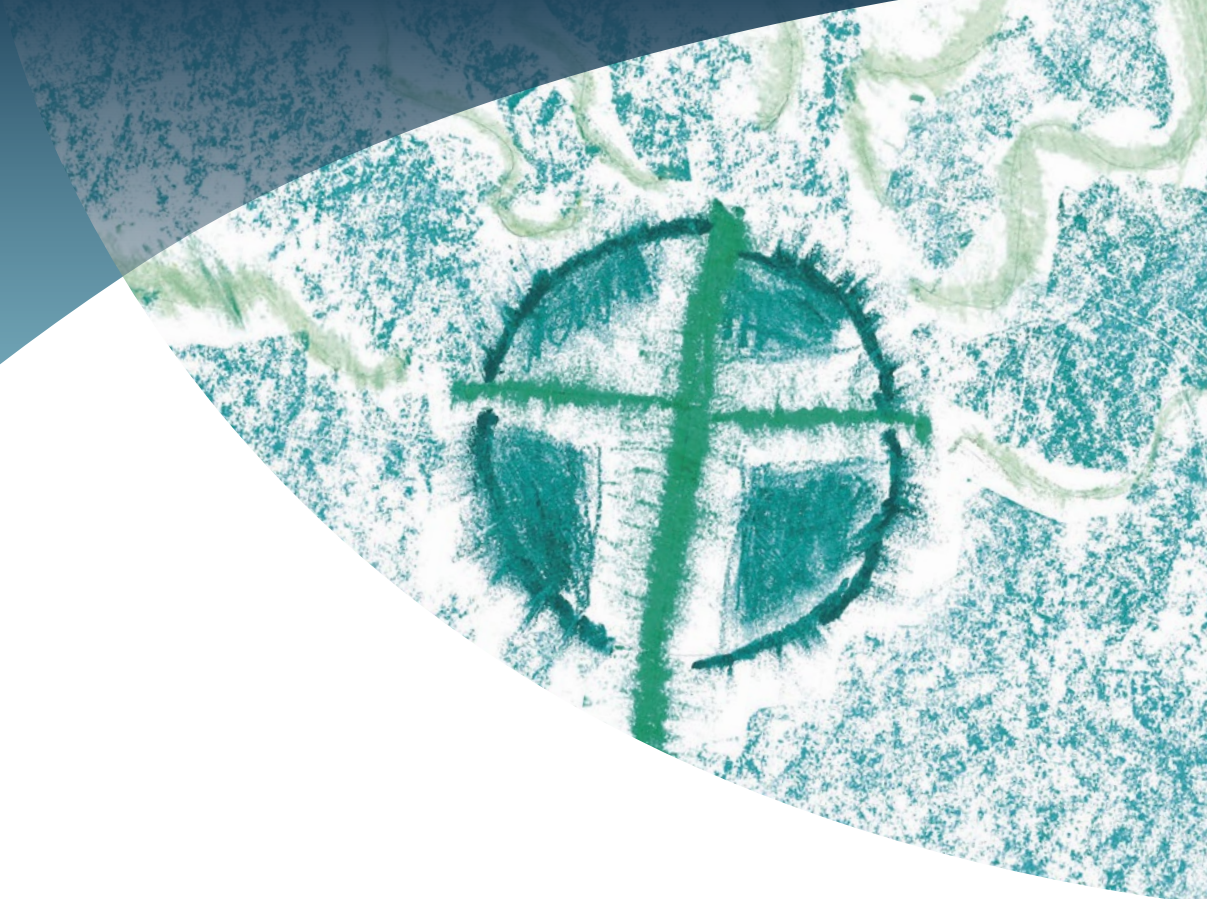


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Dear parents, carers, teachers and all who engage in Catholic education in South Australia

Our children's lives are immensely precious to families, school communities, our Church, and most importantly to our God. This short "stimulus paper" is offered by Catholic Education SA to help us consider again the great gift of children and childhood. As its title suggests, the paper leads us to see that children are close to the mystery of God.

We commend this document to you as a rich resource for all engaged in our schools—parents, carers, educators and parishes, among others. We hope that it will find a place in staff meetings and professional reflection as well as in the homes of our families.

Yours in Christ,

**Bishop Gregory O'Kelly SJ AM DD**  
Bishop of Port Pirie



**Fr Philip Marshall VG**  
Archdiocese of Adelaide



# Preface

This Catholic Education SA (CESA) theological reflection on the meaning of children and childhood is offered to Catholic schools and communities across CESA as a stimulus to reflect on childhood in light of our Christian faith and Catholic Tradition. For the purposes of this document, the age of a child is broadly understood and includes the newborn, toddlers, the young child and the adolescent, all of whom are embraced in “reimagining childhood 0-18”. Prepared as part of the CESA Reimagining Childhood initiative, it is hoped that the reflection will affirm and challenge school leaders, parents, carers and teachers to a renewed appreciation of children’s immense value, and that it will support the ongoing renewal and transformation of learning, teaching and faith formation across schools and the services of the Catholic Education Offices. The stimulus paper is also a resource for building relationships between schools, parents, carers, families and communities.



## Children: Close to the Mystery of God

Every child is held in God's infinite tenderness, and God is present in each of their lives.<sup>1</sup> The significance of children's lives is reflected in the Catholic Church's strong commitment to education in South Australia from the early days of the colony to the present. CESA and its predecessor bodies have sought to educate children not only as participants in Australian society but also as people of faith, and so bring faith and culture together.<sup>2</sup>

CESA's ongoing commitment is expressed in its recent engagement in two particular initiatives. The Enhancing Catholic Identity initiative focuses on Catholic schools as witnesses to faith in a religiously pluralist culture.<sup>3</sup> While religious practice seems to be declining in Australia today, this initiative seeks to foster the love of God in Jesus Christ as the centre of communal life. CESA has also given priority to the Re-Imagining Childhood initiative, developing it in our schools. A catalyst for this initiative was the Premier's Department's "Thinkers in Residence" program, with the world-renowned educator Professor Carla Rinaldi from Reggio Emilia in northern Italy.<sup>4</sup> The Re-Imagining Childhood initiative emphasises the dignity of children, seeing them as competent and accomplished human beings, and citizens. CESA's engagement in the initiative is renewing our commitment to children's education and to the development of educational philosophies and practices that honour an authentic image of the child.

In the context of CESA's long commitment to children's education and of its ongoing work, this short reflection considers the meaning of childhood in the light of Christian faith. We hope that it will nourish theological reflection in our schools—that it will affirm and challenge school leaders, parents, carers and teachers to a renewed appreciation of children's immense value. As a consequence, we hope that the statement will assist our schools in radiating, even more warmly, the love of God.

Our reflection to date on the theology of childhood has led us to revisit the sources of Catholic faith.<sup>5</sup> The gospel accounts of Jesus' interaction with children have inspired us again. We have not only appreciated children's unsurpassable value in the Catholic Tradition—that every child is of inestimable value—but also see again the mystery of God's love revealed in children's experience, even amidst life's brokenness and limits.<sup>6</sup>

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*...every child is of inestimable value*

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# The Gospels and Children

As Christians, we are invited to return constantly to the sources of faith—the Scriptures, the theological tradition, and our own experience of God—to reflect on them again and be led to further understanding. Across our Catholic schools, we continue to find new richness for our educational endeavours in the Catholic Tradition, especially the immense regard that it has for children and childhood. Christianity's deep commitment to children has its roots in the priority that they have for Jesus.

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## *Jesus saw children having a special place and role in the Kingdom.*

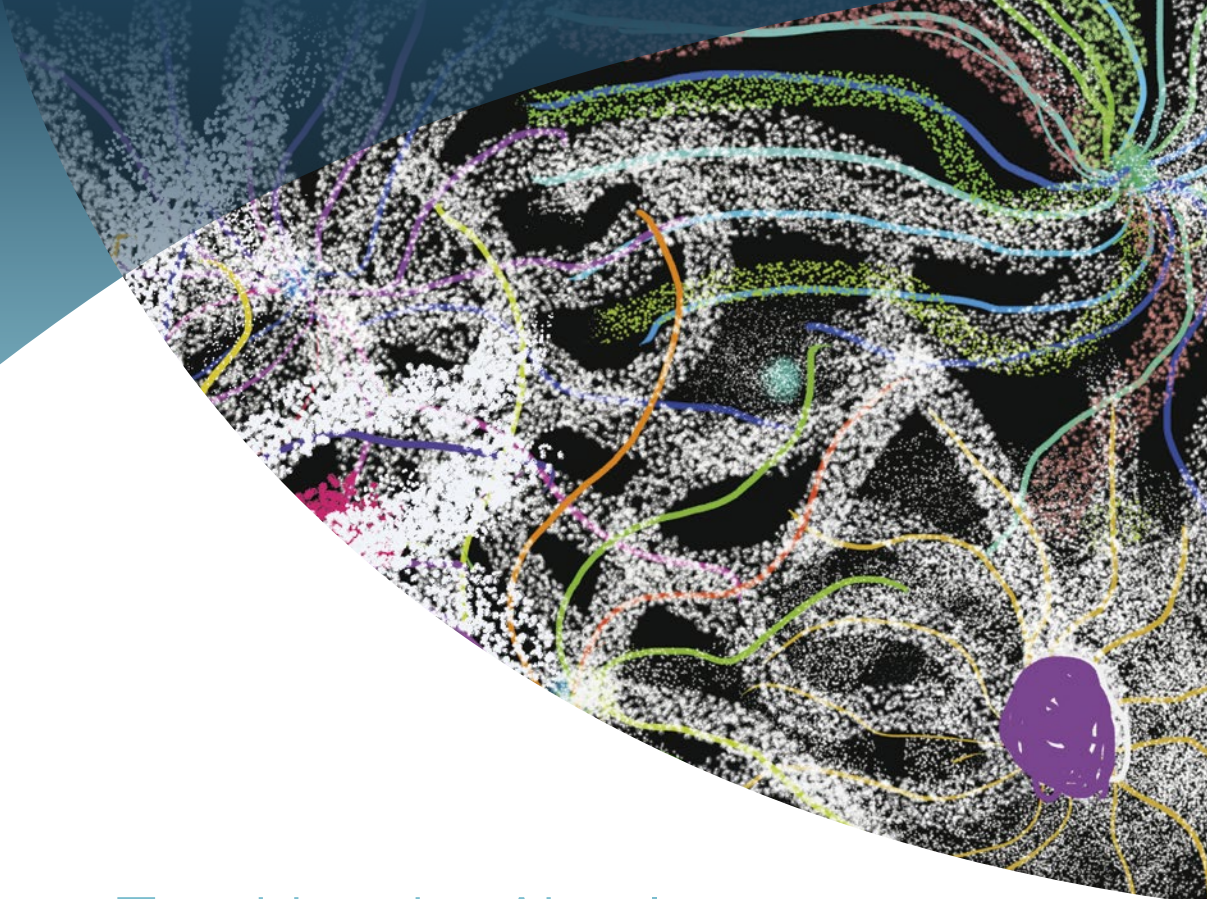
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The theme of the “Kingdom of God” pervades Jesus’ ministry, but this theme has strange resonances for us because, in our day, kings and kingship are usually associated with wealth, power, and prestige. Jesus’ phrase had a far different meaning. For him, the Kingdom of God conveyed

the truth that God’s unconditional, liberating love was breaking into the world, transforming lives, relationships and societies. Jesus saw children having a special place and role in the Kingdom. There are no extended reflections on childhood in the gospels, yet a number of moments are recorded in which we are struck by Jesus’ view of children. He sees children as recipients and models, and even the measure of the Kingdom.<sup>7</sup>

In the Gospel of Mark the disciples attempt to dismiss children from their presence because they see the children as intruding. But Jesus welcomes the children affirming that “the Kingdom of God belongs to them” (Mk 10.13-16)—they are the ones most receptive to the gift of God. Immediately, he insists that the disciples should see children as models of a disciple’s relationship to the Kingdom, models of how to receive the love of God: “whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” In their openness and trust, they offer us a glimpse of what it is to be open to God.





## Children: Touching the Absolute Divinity of God

When considering our relationship with God, we are often tempted to see childhood as a temporary phase on the way to spiritual maturity. While it is true that the earlier phases of life are preparatory for what is to come, and that we would be worried about someone becoming fixed at any particular stage, this common linear understanding of time does not do full justice to the value of childhood and children's relationships with God. Nor does it do justice to our full humanity.<sup>8</sup>

From our earliest moments, every person lives within the offer of God's love. And as we constantly question and search, longing to experience God's infinite love, that love can be found at the core of every person's deepest experiences. This is every bit as true for children as it is for adults. Children are open to God; in the ordinary course of their journey they touch the mystery of God. We see the grace of God at work in their sense of wonder at the beauty of the sea, a landscape, or a flower; we see it in their enquiring minds, their search for knowledge; we see it when they are at play, exploring their imagination; we see it in their uncomplicated affection, trust and warmth; and we see it in their reaching out, in their sometimes surprising inclusion and care of others.

So, children are as close to the infinite love of God—to eternity—as adults. All stages of human life are taken into God's ultimate embrace. And further, the love of God experienced in childhood is never

something that anyone leaves behind completely; it can exercise an influence on us throughout life, if we remain open.

Karl Rahner, a German Jesuit and one of the most important theologians of the twentieth century, puts it this way: "Childhood itself has a direct relationship with God. It touches upon the absolute divinity of God not only as maturity, adulthood and the later phases of life touch upon this, but rather in a special way of its own."<sup>9</sup> And in their openness to God, children communicate that divine love to all whose hearts and minds are open.

So, childhood and children's relationships with God are valuable in themselves, and not simply as a prelude for what is to come. These relationships are already expressions of the eternal love of God present and at work in children's hearts. The child is already a partner of God. And therefore, no less than the lives of adults, the spiritual lives of children are of unsurpassable value. It is for these reasons that Catholic social and moral teaching have always emphasised the dignity and sacredness of every human life from its very beginning to its natural end.

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relationships with God are valuable  
in themselves...*

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# Childhood and Brokenness

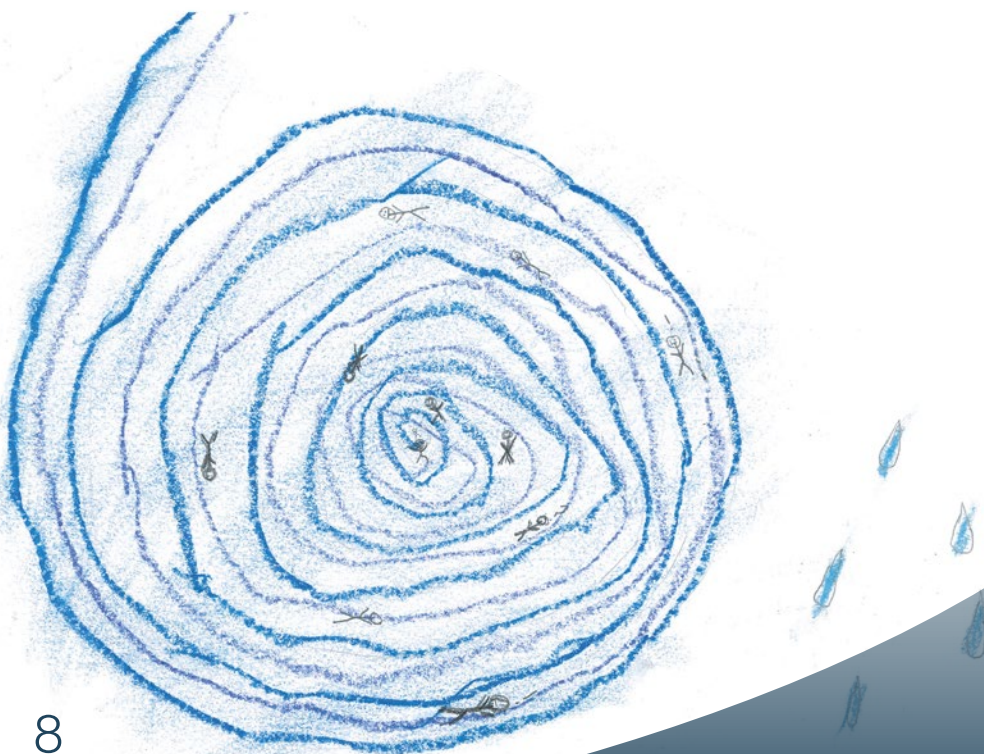
Despite their immense dignity, many children live in poverty, war, violence and fractured human relationships. The forces of western culture, with the market economy as an integral element, mean that children can be treated as commodities and consumers on the one hand, and as burdens on the other—treated as having instrumental value rather than intrinsic value. Child abuse and neglect are terrible examples of violence from which some children suffer. Also of concern are the social forces that promote an inappropriate, early sexualisation of children. This range of social factors not only effects the environment in which a child develops, it also effects children's self-understanding, influencing them inwardly—their sense of self is influenced by the brokenness to which they are subjected. This aspect of life is what Catholic theology has traditionally called original sin: that every person is born into the long history of sinful human choices. Human brokenness radically and interiorly affects children's lives.

Yet, this brokenness does not have the loudest or last word: the loving kindness of God is far stronger. As Rahner puts it: from their earliest days, children are "encompassed by God's love through the pledge of that grace, which in God's will to save all humankind, comes in all cases and to everyone from God in Christ Jesus." Here, the Christian community has an integral role: through schools, parishes and, indeed, the life of every believer, God's healing mercy is mediated.

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*...through schools, parishes and, indeed, the life of every believer, God's healing mercy is mediated.*

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## Learning, Listening and Love

This reflection leads to a renewed appreciation of the God-defined mystery that is each child's life. Children have their origin and fulfilment in an ultimate divine love; each is an "icon" through which the mystery of God shines.

Our recognition of the ultimate value of each child has educational implications; children are subjects and agents of their own learning. Here, we are drawn to what is called the "pedagogy of listening", by which is meant that "an active attitude to listening between adults, children and the environment is the premise and context of every educational relationship."<sup>10</sup> Children bring a world of experience and questions to the learning process, which should begin with that experience and those questions. Here, listening requires us to seek to be open to the variety of ways in which children express themselves. Through our openness, engagement and valuing—through listening—children have the space to fulfil their potential. Of course, this emphasis on children's agency does not deny their vulnerability; nor does it diminish adults' responsibility for the protection and nurturing of each child.

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*The educational endeavour to foster children's flourishing is an expression of God's grace.*

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The educational endeavour to foster children's flourishing is an expression of God's grace. Our love enables children to discover and radiate anew the mystery of God's love. In this way, we witness to the love of God revealed in Jesus; we become the face of Christ as we discern the face of Christ in the children we encounter. All of us together—children, parents, carers, teachers, school leaders, and our communities—can be caught up in the grace of God; we can radiate the mystery of God's love to one another. This is a fundamental aspect of the mission of Catholic schools and, indeed, of families and church communities.

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*...we become the face of Christ as we discern the face of Christ in the children we encounter.*

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## Invitation

Through this paper, CESA invites school staffs, parents, carers and the broader community into a conversation about the great dignity of children and childhood from the perspective of the Catholic Tradition. You are invited to: consider again the high regard in which Jesus held children; to recognise the grace of God continually at work in children's lives; to acknowledge the brokenness that our societies visit upon children, in order that this might be healed; and you are invited to be agents of the mystery of God's love.

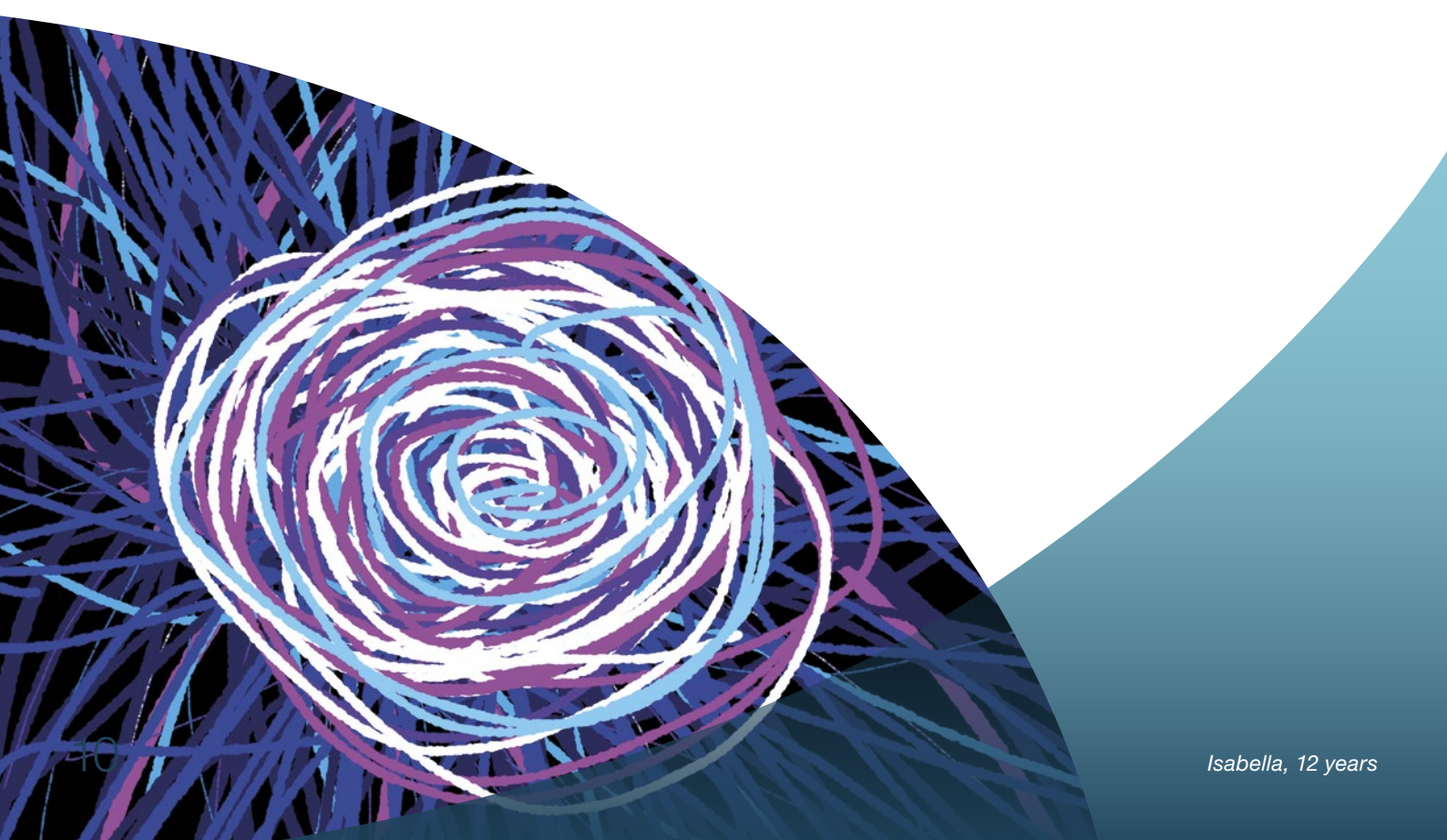
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*...you are invited to be agents of the mystery of God's love.*

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## For reflection...

1. Recall times when you experienced the grace of God in your relationships with children. Who was there? What happened? How would you describe the gift of God's grace at that particular moment?
2. How are you challenged by Jesus' view of children as models of how to receive the love of God? What connections do you see between Jesus' view of children and the Re-Imagining Childhood initiative's vision of children as citizens and bearers of rights?
3. How do you see families, church communities, and Catholic schools best fostering "the eternal love of God present and at work in children's hearts"?
4. How does a disposition of listening affirm and challenge our approach to learning and teaching?
5. How do we honour children's innate sense of trust, wonder and playfulness?
6. How does the theology of this paper help you reimagine your engagement and relationship with adolescents?
7. What are existing and new ways in which we, as educators, can become the face of Christ as we discern the face of Christ in others?
8. In the sometimes difficult day-to-day reality of teaching, how do we act as the agents of God's mercy?





## Acknowledgements

This document was developed during 2014, as part of CESA's Reimagining Childhood initiative, by the Theology of the Child Working Party. The Working Party included parents, principals, APRIMs, and members of the Catholic Education Office's Religious Identity and Leading Learning sections.

The Working Party wishes to acknowledge the significant contribution of Fr James McEvoy with the drafting of this document.

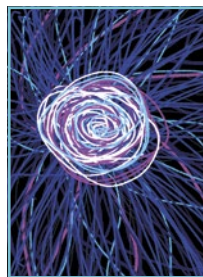
CESA acknowledges and thanks the contributions from students of their artwork, and also their schools for assisting with this publication.



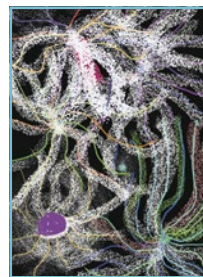
Kaitlin, 8 years  
*God's Spirit -  
Peace, calm, love*



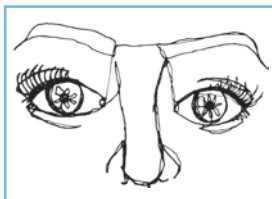
Emily, 12 years  
*Stem Cell*



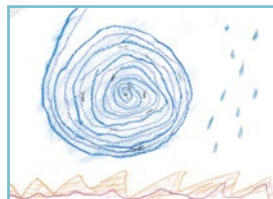
Isabella, 12 years  
*Stem Cell*



Emily, 12 years  
*Stem Cell*



Antonia, 17 years  
*Untitled*



Charlie, 9 years  
*Worry - you get smaller and  
smaller and the worry gets  
bigger and bigger*



Suzie, 7 years  
*People coming to be blessed  
by Jesus*



Jack, 9 years  
*Willow blowing in the storm -  
But the willow's so strong it's still  
able to find peace*



## Further Reading

Jerome W. Berryman, "Toward a Theology of Childhood" (Ch.7), in *Godly Play: An Imaginative Approach to Religious Education* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991).

Annemie Dillen, "Theologizing with Children: A New Paradigm for Catholic Religious Education in Belgium", in *International Handbook of Catholic Education: Challenges for School Systems in the 21st Century*, ed. Gerald Grace and Joseph O'Keefe (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), 347-66.

Judith Grundy-Volf, "To Such as These Belongs the Reign of God: Jesus and Children", *Theology Today* 56, no. 4 (2000): 469-80.

Mary Ann Hinsdale, "'Infinite Openness to the Infinite': Karl Rahner's Contribution to Modern Catholic Thought on the Child", in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 406-45.

Anthony J. Kelly, "Spirituality and the Child", *Interface* 10, no. 2 (2008): 12-22.

Joyce Anne Mercer, *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood* (St Louis, MO: Chalice, 2005).

Vivienne Mountain, "Four Links between Child Theology and Children's Spirituality", in *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 16, no. 3 (2011): 261-269.

Vivienne Mountain, *Children and the Church: Jesus Brings the Child to a Place in the Middle* (Nunawading, Vic.: Christian Research Association, 2014).

Rebecca Nye, *Children's Spirituality: What It Is and Why It Matters* (London: Church House, 2009).

Archbishop Philip Wilson, *You Matter Absolutely: Pastoral Letter to Young People* (Adelaide: Catholic Archdiocese of Adelaide, 2011).

## Endnotes

- 1 Inspiration taken from Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium: On the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2013), no. 274.
- 2 See *Catholic Education SA Strategic Plan 2010-2014* (Adelaide & Port Pirie, 2010). See also CESA, *Continuous Improvement Framework for Catholic Schools* (February, 2014). Available at: [www.online.cesaneet.adl.catholic.edu.au/docushare/dsweb/Get/Document-23200](http://www.online.cesaneet.adl.catholic.edu.au/docushare/dsweb/Get/Document-23200) and <https://cif.cesa.catholic.edu.au>
- 3 See CESA (2014), "Catholic Identity", *Continuous Improvement Framework*, 8-9. See also CESA, *Leuven Catholic Identity Project report* (May, 2014).
- 4 For Professor Rinaldi's report as Adelaide Thinker in Residence 2012-2013, see Carla Rinaldi, *Re-Imagining Childhood: The Inspiration of Reggio Emilia Education Principles in South Australia* (Adelaide: Government of South Australia, 2013).
- 5 Limitations of space prevent this stimulus paper from offering a comprehensive theology of children and childhood, which would fruitfully include themes such as children "created in the image of God," among others. The paper interprets the phase of childhood broadly to cover 0-18 years of age. It aims to speak of children's lives concretely, and uses the term "childhood" to speak of the period and state of life that children share.
- 6 In our consumerist culture, the word "value" is often understood in monetary terms, as in the phrase "value for money." However, in the Christian tradition, "value" has a far richer meaning, with human beings and all creation understood as having intrinsic value, which can't be bought or sold, because they are created and loved by God. It is in this second sense that the word is used in this statement.
- 7 For an extended reflection on the gospel picture of Jesus and children, see Judith Grundy-Volf, "To Such as These Belongs the Reign of God: Jesus and Children," *Theology Today* 56, no 4 (2000): 469-80; and Anthony J. Kelly, "Spirituality and the Child", *Interface* 10, no. 2 (2008): 12-22.
- 8 We are drawing on an important essay by Karl Rahner, "Ideas for a Theology of Childhood", *Theological Investigations Volume VIII: Further Theology of the Spiritual Life 2*, trans. David Bourke (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), 33-50. See also Mary Ann Hinsdale, "'Infinite Openness to the Infinite': Karl Rahner's Contribution to Modern Catholic Thought on the Child", in *The Child in Christian Thought* ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 406-445; and Annemie Dillen, "Theologizing with Children: A New Paradigm for Catholic Religious Education in Belgium", in *International Handbook of Catholic Education: Challenges for School Systems in the 21st Century* ed. Gerald Grace and Joseph O'Keefe (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), 347-66.
- 9 Rahner, *Ideas for a Theology of Childhood*, 36.
- 10 Rinaldi, *Re-Imagining Childhood*, 32.