Living and dying: A window on (Christian) children’s spirituality
Elaine Champagne
Professeure agrégée
Chaire en théologie spirituelle et spiritualités
Faculté de théologie et de sciences religieuses, Université Laval, Québec
elaine.champagne@ftsr.ulaval.ca

Faith and beliefs about living and dying are fundamental constituents of spiritual development. However, children are seldom asked to talk about their experiences of life and death. This article has a two-fold purpose. It first describes children’s expressions on living and dying, as heard during a newly developed programme, which encourages children’s participation as active subjects of their spiritual journey. This programme, the Grande Halte, began in 2004 within the changing context of Christian religious education in a secular Quebec. Secondly, it proposed a theological reflection informed by the social sciences and the social context of the milieu, and based on children’s expressions. It suggests that stories and symbols are needed in order to develop a coherent horizon of meaning in one’s life. The relational dimension of the process is also highlighted.

Introduction

Twenty ten to twelve year old children were sitting in a large circular tent. The only furniture in the tent was a long and low bench, close to the wall, with a white cloth folded and set to one side. The children had been invited into Jesus’ tomb by two adults dressed as the biblical characters Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea. A light smell of perfumed oil and incense filled the space. I was sitting among the children, attentive to what was happening. The children’s faces showed expectation and curiosity. Another adult, standing among the children, started the conversation: “Tell me. Does it happen that you ever think about death?” The reaction was quick as lightning and took me by surprise: hands were up, fingers wriggling, bodies moving, children wanting to talk.

The origin of the experience in the tent traces back to 2004, when in the context of Christian faith education, I was asked by the diocese of Saint-Jean-Longueuil from the province of Quebec to develop initiatory sessions for children, which would include their life experiences and be supportive of their spiritual journey. The purpose of the programme, entitled “the Grande Halte,” was to engage children in an experiential encounter with the Paschal Mystery, that is, the death and resurrection of Christ and its proposed meaning for Christians and all human beings. The essence of the approach was to have children as active subjects rather than passive objects. This was especially relevant in terms of their concern about living and dying. Because of this specific dynamic, it was clear from the beginning that the role adults would take in the actual setting of the programme would be specific to this process. With the aid of a flexible framework, they would need to journey with the children and facilitate the free expression and growth of their spiritual experience. In French, they received the name: disciples-accompagnateurs, which reflects the fact that they are not only walking with the children in their faith journey, but they are also disciples, also recipients of the witness of other Christians.

In creating the Grande Halte, I was supported by a small group of pastoral animators and diocesan representatives. They would take up the role of disciples-accompagnateurs in the

1 In view of the specificity of this term, I will use it throughout the text.
Grande Halte and participate in the formation of others. This committee reacted to the development of the content and offered suggestions. When presented with the idea that children will actually talk about life and death, the disciples-accompagnateurs were hesitant. Would children be able to explore the questions? How would they react? Would parents approve of the process? An American professor of philosophy, Gareth B. Matthews (1994), had already experienced this type of dialogue with children as well as the parental resistance to the questions on death and dying. As he points out, “[Parents were] shocked because the very idea of discussing death with children strikes them as offensively inappropriate.” (1994: 89) However, our programme did not arouse negative reactions either among children or parents.

The programme started gradually in different parishes and at the end of the summer 2007, a specific formation opportunity was offered to the disciples-accompagnateurs, at their request, addressing specifically “how to talk about death with children”. One of the disciples-accompagnateurs’ concerns was a lack of information about children’s development in understanding death. But it soon became obvious to all that the main resistance came from the discomfort the subject raised for their own adults’ spiritual life and journey. In order to lead this type of conversation with children, the disciples-accompagnateurs need to be capable of listening to the questions children raise, and to deal with the effects on them so that they can remain focused at what the children are saying and interact with them.

Children’s active participation in a communicative model of religious education can contribute to its spiritual development (Dillen, 2007). But while faith and beliefs about living and dying can be understood as major constituents of spiritual journeys, they are seldom addressed in conversation with children. Except in crisis situations, parents and religious or spiritual educators seldom listen to children’s experience and their reflection on life and death. Yet, this need was long highlighted by children themselves (Darcy-Bérubé, 1970).

As a result of my involvement in the creation of the programme, my objectives in this article are two-fold. First, I introduce the main characteristics of the Grande Halte and present children’s reactions and expressions when they were given the opportunity to talk about living and dying. In the second part, after a very brief overview of the literature on children and death and dying, I highlight certain socio-cultural issues and initiate a theological reflection on the meaning and the world-views of the children.

Part 1: Observation

In gathering data, I used a process of natural observation to study three groups of children. I entered into the tent with the children and took notes only after the end of the meeting. In this first part, I will describe the Grande Halte and introduce children’s voices.

The Political and religious context

Before presenting the Grande Halte, it is necessary to address the social, political and religious context in which it was developed. Education in the Quebec province of Canada has undergone an accelerated transformation towards a lay configuration during the last ten years or so. The confessional status of public elementary and secondary schools was repealed in June 2000. Religious education programmes in schools – catholic and protestant – are being modified into a programme of ethics and religious culture, in order to be more inclusive both of the broader diversity and the changing culture of
the population. *Pastoral and religious animation* in schools has been officially replaced since 2001 and 2002 by a service called the *Spiritual Support and Community Involvement Service.*

Parallel to this process, the main Christian church in Québec, the Catholic Church, not only adapted to this changing social context, but was also involved in a revision of its foundational orientations concerning religious education. In a letter written in 2001, bishop St-Gelais, then president of the *Quebec Assembly of Catholic Bishops,* indicated some questions needing to be deepened. Those questions included the following two:

- How to change from an approach focused on faith transmission to an approach focused on faith proposal?
- How to promote the experience of meeting with Christ rather than solely teaching truths to transmit?

Beyond the shock wave brought about by these transitions, the different teams for formation within dioceses in Québec began to develop different programmes adapted to the specific needs of individuals. While the dioceses and their numerous parishes had for many years taken responsibility for sacramental preparation, they now engage in a more global catechetical approach where everyone participates in the human spiritual journey and where Christians are called to witness their hope. The new paradigm reflects a major change in perspective: Christian formation is understood as inscriptive and part of a model of dialogue.

### The Catechetical Context

It is in this context that the diocese of Saint-Jean-Longueuil offers an initiatory programme called the *Grande Halte,* which follows three years of religious education for children, consistent with this orientation. The *Grande Halte* consists of a few meetings with children from 9 years old, for a total duration of about 6 hours. It is perceived as a *relay* on the road, a pause during a pilgrimage or a time of *retreat,* and is part of an intensive period of preparation prior to the celebration of the sacraments of initiation—Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist.

The approach used in the *Grande Halte* aims at supporting children’s (Christian) spiritual experience. Hence, children are invited to share their experience and to put forth their questions and insights about their life, their values, the challenges they encounter, their hopes and fears, their personal prayer. The approach is inductive and initiatory: children are invited to become part of a story, through biblical narratives and through gestures and the use of symbols suggestive of meanings bore by the Paschal Mystery and communicated through the Christian tradition.

The *Grande Halte* considers the children, not only as active subjects but also partners in the approach. It requires hearing their voices as well as their parents’ or godparents’. All freely participates in the programme. It is an attempt to actualize a Church experience of shared journey in an effort to deepen faith in Christ. In its process, the *Grande Halte* could also be qualified as liturgical, more performative than explanatory.

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4 “Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope”, (1Peter 3,15)
The Participants

Participants in the first Grande Halte included children and parents, the latter sometimes acting as disciples-accompagnateurs or volunteers. They were from a suburban area with a wide variety of ethnic and socio-economic origins. An estimate of 4000 children have entered the programme in the last three years (2004-2007), approximately 2000 of them in the year 2006-2007. The great majority of children were from 9 to 11 years old. An adapted programme for teenagers is under preparation. All the children had previously participated in a three year’ religious formation, but the secular environment in which they lived influenced them considerably. I will return to this point later. Parent or adolescent volunteers gathered and prepared the needed material, dressed up and featured the different biblical characters that the children would encounter during their pilgrimage. Adult disciples-accompagnateurs led groups of 15 to 40 children. Most of them were pastoral agents, catechists or trainers employed by the diocese. They previously experienced the programme for themselves and received a complementary formation towards it. At least a parent and/or a godparent were invited to participate in the whole programme with each child. On some occasions, they were called upon for a specific contribution.

In the three groups that I witnessed, parents were present and actively participated while also allowing all the space necessary for their child. Approximately a third of them were men. Some of them mentioned how their child was appreciative of the meetings, singing the theme song everywhere all day long. Among themselves, parents talked about their many commitments, while it was clear that they had chosen to be there and showed no resistance. They also talked with enthusiasm about the coming sacramental celebration.

The course of the programme

It is not the purpose of this article to describe at length the course of the programme. A document in use in the diocese is expected to be published in the near future, after a few years of experimentation. The programme is still under revision. However, a brief overview may be useful in order to perceive more clearly the context in which the children shared their experience and reflection.

The Grande Halte includes four phases. In the first one, the children, after having answered the invitation to join in a pilgrimage towards the celebration of the sacraments of initiation, receive a pilgrim’s staff handcrafted by their parents. On the road, they encounter three characters with whom they dialogue, reflecting about the stories of “the good things they enjoy in their lives” with the baker, the stories of “the hard times they experienced and how they were helped out” with the person helped by the Samaritan, and the stories about “the situations where they took care or took charge with benevolent attitudes toward others” with King David. The road leads the children at the bottom of a wooden cross without body. There, they share prayer.

On their return for the second phase, the group meets with Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea. Both men tell the story of what they did at Jesus’ death and the sorrow of their loss. They invite the children to follow them into the tomb where they will bury him. At that point, I once heard a child say “Cool!” with enthusiasm. The children then walk into the vast tent that has been built in the sanctuary, when possible. The parents stay outside. The children in the tent are asked if they ever thought about death. Following the dialogue, a poetical text is heard, from the Paschal Liturgy. The listeners are invited to follow Jesus who went down to awaken all the ones lying in the shadow of death, Adam and Eve, Abraham, Moses, the prophets, and all the ones that preceded us in faith. “Wake up and rise! Let us leave this place! The feast is ready!” From the
outside of the tent, a voice calls every child by his/her name: “Jonathan, rise up and come out!” A parent welcomes the child and shows a water basin where both silently make the sign of the cross. All can read, printed on the outside of the tent: “Buried in death with Christ, with Him we will rise from the dead.”

Through the same type of approach, the third and the fourth phases aim to explore the affirmation of the presence of the Holy Spirit and of Christians’ witness of the Resurrection in contemporary daily life.

**Part 2: Children’s voices**

Let us now focus on children’s expression of the experience of death in their lives. The comments I present here come from three different groups, which experienced the *Grande Halte* during the spring 2007. As mentioned, I used a process of natural observation to study the three groups. I entered into the tent with the children and took notes only after the end of the meeting. I realize the data is small and I do not claim that it is representative. However I believe that children’s comments can reveal significant insights.

**Spontaneity**

It was already mentioned that the *Grande Halte* was designed in order to support children’s experience and their expression of it, while being presented with elements of the Christian faith. A first observation of three such groups points out children’s spontaneity and openness to talk about death. In all the groups I have witnessed, children were keen to talk, addressing the *disciple-accompagnateur*, looking at each other, expressing their sadness, their questions, their hope. There was no heaviness during the conversation, but the children were intent in telling their experiences. The *disciple-accompagnateur* simply listened to them, mirroring their words, being present and gently supporting the flow of their conversation.

**Sharing experiences**

The first comments from one group featured the different losses the children had experienced: grand-parents, great-grand-parents, a dog, a cat. They said they missed them. A child said she missed her teacher who was away because she was pregnant. Another mentioned he had lost a friend through betrayal. In a second group, similar comments were heard. A child had a friend whose brother had died. Another had heard about an adult neighbour who was dead.

In a third group, the first child who talked mentioned:

- Death. It makes you think about suffering. Sometimes, some people suffer and they prefer to die.
- You are talking about suicide?
- Yeah…

In that group, many children had relatives or people of their acquaintance who had committed suicide. They named the people they knew. A little later, a child said:

- Jesus, on the cross. He had suffered.
Many talked about suffering. They were sad, with a little nervousness in their gestures and speech. But they did not verbalise their questions or worry more precisely. In the first group, when sadness was expressed, one girl associated it with fear and began to talk about pedophiles and what she had heard on the news. Other children did not follow her lead but two of them rather expressed their own fears.

The second group mentioned many “small deaths” they experienced on a more daily basis: feeling alone, being sick, having one arm broken. Free association could then be made with the person helped by the Samaritan they had encountered in the previous meeting.

Recognizing universality

When expressing their feeling, a child from the second group said:
- It makes me fearful. I don’t think too much about it.
Their uneasiness was observable, but not verbalised.
- We resemble them [the ones who are dead], we are a little like them.
- It will happen to all of us.
The realization that death is universal and irreversible is part of children’s normal cognitive development at that age.

Questioning the destination

In the same group, the conversation continued about where people go when they die. Some of the children’s comments were that:
- Everyone goes to heaven.
- Some must go the hell because Jesus cannot forgive all the time.
- Some people are forgiven but they do it again.
- You cannot forgive forty times!
- I think that heaven is for everyone.
- There might be a place while you are waiting.
- Heaven is for everyone. Jesus forgives all the time.

Within their hearts

In many occasions in all groups, children alluded to the fact that they talk to the deceased “in their hearts”. It was a source of comfort for many. One child half seemed to make fun of it when he said with a smirk: “They [the deceased] are still there “in our hearts”.” While listening to them, I realized that for most of the children, Jesus was not different from anyone else: One can talk to him “in his/her heart”. The children may or may not have had the experience of talking with a family member or with Jesus within their hearts. Overall, their comments did not reveal any causal association between Christ’s resurrection and the Christian belief that the beloved is alive “in God”. What they expressed sounded more as obvious fact to them: When someone dies, including Jesus, you can talk to the person in your heart.

Part 3: Interpretation
What can we draw from this observation? Before entering into a theological reflection based on
the children’s expressions, it is worthwhile to consider the contributions of social sciences within
the social context of Quebec.

**Literature on children, death and dying**

Literature on children and death and dying is abundant and very diversified. Expertise to support
dying children and their grieving siblings is well developed in health care milieux (Bluebond-
Langner, 1978; Sourkes, 2002). Children’s understanding of death and dying varies according to
their development level and life experience. Facilitating the expression of their grief by drawing,
playing or occasionally by dialogue contributes to their well-being. However, it is important that
we consider children’s awareness about death and dying before they confront the situation in
their lives. Children’s lives are already affected with the deaths of pets or elder relatives as well as
other losses bearing the weight of their significance: A blanket, a favourite toy, a pet, a babysitter or a friend, the closeness of a parent, are some examples. But not all adults take seriously
children’s expressions of loss.

An authentic dialogue, and above all good listening, can support the finding of meaning in
children’s lives. There is increasing documentation concerning dialogue with children on these
issues “Children need to learn to mourn and find ways to recover, but the way is not always
straight.” (Carson, 1985: 316) Spiritual support is essential.

Clearly, death is not perceived in the same manner by a toddler and an adolescent; they
will not ask the same questions or offer the same meaning. (Schonfeld, 1993; Busch and Kimble,
2001; Hofer, 2004) specify the different concepts involved in children’s understanding of
biological death, which evolve according to their cognitive development and their life experience,
namely: universality, irreversibility, finality (non-functionality), and causality. How a particular
child can express his or her perception of death helps us to identify the major challenge being
faced according to their developmental level. While the understanding of biological death is
important, the question of its spiritual relevance for children cannot be dismissed.

Matthews (1994), in his book *The Philosophy of Childhood*, dedicated a whole chapter to
a focus on childhood and death. His reflection examines two pieces of children’s literature on
death that are very well-known to them: *Charlotte’s Web*, and *Tuck Everlasting*. His contribution
focuses on sick children’s development toward the understanding of their own death, while using
data from other authors. He does not report the children’s conversation.

Stories and fairy tales are of significant support for children in their search for meaning.
The theorist Ute Carson pointed out that “children need suggestions in symbolic form [sic] which
help transform their inner needs and struggles into thought and action in the outside world”
(1985: 317). Following Bettelheim, she invited many groups of children to talk about and then
make drawings of different fairy tales involving separation or death. Her article illustrates the
use that children make of the many elements of the stories involving attachment, separation and
relational reinvestment.

Religious stories can also be supportive of this process. Is it necessary to specify that
stories, rather than explanation, bear a significant symbolic power? Symbols and characters with
whom one can identify nourish the imagination (Salans, 2004). The children can then reconstruct
the story from within, playing with the elements and making sense of them. This process is quite
different from the simple affirmation of religious concepts, which Schonfeld warns: “Attempts to
place religious concepts in concrete terms are usually ineffective and provide little understanding
of both physical realities and spiritual beliefs” (1993: 272).
In 1970, within the context of catechetical renewal, Françoise Darcy-Bérubé (1970) studied concepts and attitudes of Canadian children concerning death and beyond. Her aim was to evaluate the impact of religious formation on the children’s capability to face the question of death in a healthy manner. At that time, her work was clearly innovative.

More recently, Marcel Hofer (2004) has written a very practical book *Explique-moi la mort… Guide pour accompagner l’enfant en famille et en catéchèse* addressed to parents and catechists. He describes children’s cognitive development and affective needs in regard to the question of death. He also develops a useful chapter on different religious perspectives on death and related issues. However, his focus is not on children’s voices but rather on adults’ supportive practices, which can facilitate children’s grief or grappling with the reality of death, thus helping them making sense of their loss and finding meaning.

*Cultural ethos*

The fact that children were so keen in discussing this topic confirms the significance and the value of the time taken to listen to them. Death is omnipresent in games and news, along with the more personal experiences discussed above. Children from 9 to 11 are nearing a more reflective period of their growth, beginning to perceive existential questions without yet naming them. This is exemplified in their dialogue about suffering and about forgiveness.

On the other hand, the views expressed in their dialogue are largely influenced by a “cultural ethos” brought about by conversations they might have heard or participated in, but also by media of all kinds: Music, internet, movies, books (Harry Potter), news, as some examples. If Quebec was a society of Christendom up until the 1950’s, it now has the attributes of a lay society. Christianity, along with other religions and philosophies, is but one voice in the discussion. There is not unanimity in the population regarding the relative importance of that voice. The recent Commission on Reasonable Accommodations for immigrants of diverse cultures and religions, held throughout the Province in recent months, convincingly illustrates this reality.

While being aware of this context, I was surprised when I listened to the children, to realize that for some children, “Jesus was not different from the other deceased. We can talk to him in our hearts.” A new belief had emerged from a cultural practice, exterior to a Christian religious coherence. That belief too was questioned by at least one child in one group. I would like to clarify what seems to be at stake here.

*What happens after death?*

In an attempt to offer comfort and support to grieving children, it is common practice to tell them that the deceased is “present in a different manner”, that you can talk to him or her “in your heart.” On the one hand, while the language about heaven and hell has been deleted for decades from children’s books and catechisms, they still discuss it, and even mention “a place while you are waiting.” The transmission of tradition is strong. On the other hand, the idea that one can talk to the deceased within the heart is a common belief, but without any contextual framework. It is presented as fact, a certitude that is not questioned; it is a lay person’s affirmation. It is presented as a truth without a story.

When children are told Jesus’ story, his death and resurrection, when they hear that one can be relating to him “in one’s heart”, nothing can be more factual, nothing can be less surprising. “Jesus is no different from the other deceased.” Within a Christian perspective,
children’s understanding seems to be upside-down. There is no point in Jesus’ resurrection: When someone dies, you can talk to him or her already.

An a-religious world-view

Jean-Claude Guillebaud (2005) offers an interesting reflection on the question of faith and belief in our secularized western societies, which could bring some insight to this observation. In the first part of his book “La force de conviction”, he comments that we have come to dramatic societal changes, which have left us deceived about history and sceptical about the future. The vacuum left by massive rejection of faith has made us more vulnerable to gullibility.

New ideas are more easily believed in as facts, taken for granted. They exist like lonely entities, outside stories, outside the symbolization of experience, outside the shared communal depths of the human quest expressed in religions, which have endured time. The new world-view is thus eclectic and fragile. The request for openness to the unpredictable, as framed by Erricker (2007), which can be associated with faith whether one is religious or secular (Welte, 1984), falls into nothingness if no foundational coherence can be found, when no stories are heard. Worse, the new answers fall into the trap of stopping the quest and halting the journey. Rather than being enhanced, spiritual life is impoverished.

Theological interpretation and Christian spirituality

What can be learned from children’s words and expressions, which can be both significant theologically and nourishing spiritually? The observation opens up many paths. I will choose three, which also bear potential implications in faith education. One concerns children’s needs, according to what was heard from them. The second mainly concerns adults involved in “spiritual” dialogue with children. The third appears to concern all of us. It is both a call and a sign of hope.

Stories and history

The children were spontaneous about sharing on death and dying. They were keen in telling their own stories and experiences, open about expressing their fears, willing to reflect together through free associations: “Jesus on the cross. He has suffered”. They were mature enough to recognize the universality of death, but also to grapple with the question of justice and mercy in an afterlife. They are familiar and mostly comfortable with the view suggesting that they can talk “within their hearts” with the deceased.

While this view is reassuring to them, it is not questioned, nor it is unfurled in a story, except possibly their own. It is taken for granted, but also disconnected from any belief about what happens to the person who has died: talking to the person within one’s heart doesn’t say anything about “where” is the person, or what has become of him or her. Afterlife still remains a question.

I first thought that children would need to ask the question “why” it is, that we can talk within our hearts. But I realize their need might be even deeper. Not only do they need stories and symbols to make sense of what they experience, but they also need history: The history of a people who shared experiences, questions and a transforming faith through time. They would benefit from religious (Christian) stories and symbols, from an experiential (inner) point of view.
Here again, Guillebaud, and Hauerwas (1981) before him, denounce the rupture with our past, the rejection of our roots, letting our identity become more and more fragile, while preventing us from projecting ourselves into the future. Time is somehow lost along with our history. Children, like all of us, need to discover that history. The questions “Where do we come from?” and “Where are we going?” become inseparable from the history of our living faith. The hermeneutical interpretation of our existential quest is indissociable from its collective and historical path.

**Come, follow me**

I deeply believe that children are not only active subjects of their lives and faith, but also that they can participate in this collective journey of (spiritual) interpretation, if we allow them to do so. In the *Grande Halte*, children were first invited to “Come and see”, to follow disciples of Jesus. In doing so, the children enter into the story which adults offer to them. Yet, listening to the children brought us into a different universe than the one we expected or even realized: What does it mean, in a secular world, “talking in one’s heart”? And why is that even possible?

Children’s world-view prompts us to different perceptions of the world. Children require that we also follow them… Hence, we are called to an authentic dialogue. How is it that talking in one’s heart sounds like praying? Is Jesus really different than our grandparents for that matter? Why is it that we believe that Christ has something to do with what happens to us human beings in the afterlife? If our faith is experienced from within Christian tradition and is formative of our spiritual lives, how will we “always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks [us] for a reason for [our] hope”?5 We need to deepen the realization that in faith education, we share the learning.

*A risen community*

In the *Grande Halte*, children are personally called: “Rise up and come out”. However, their initiatory experience also carries a collective tone. When they come out, a whole community is awaiting them. When formation was given to adult disciples-accompagnateurs, they also spontaneously mentioned this communal dimension of resurrection almost as a shocking insight. “It is the first time that I realize that I am not alone being promised eternal life. It is not only a personal thing. We are many,” said one of them. Spiritual life being essentially relational, even more Christian spiritual life, it is also about being part of a people.

But there is more. When we enter the historical journey of interpretation shared by Christ’s followers and when we allow ourselves to listen to others, including children, we learn from the questions. When we share the learning, we experience from within, without knowing it, what it is to be a risen community. We experience what we “proclaim”. The hermeneutical process supports our spiritual experience of the living “Word”.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, it has been noted how uncommon it is in literature, that we hear children’s words on living and dying. The choice has been made to hear children’s experience on the subject during a Christian formation session focused on the Paschal Mystery, allowing for their own

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5 1 Peter 3, 15-16
insights and input. Children’s words have then been reinvested as bait for a theological reflection inclusive of their world-view. I deeply believe in the richness that children can bring to our shared spiritual journey. An open window on children’s spirituality can lead us to a deeper perspective on our common experience about what it means to be alive and to be called a “risen people.”

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Notes on contributor
Elaine Champagne Ph.D. is associate professor at the Institut de pastorale of the Dominican University College (Canada). She has worked for many years in paediatric pastoral care. Her researches focus on children’s spirituality.

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