Wonder is a spiritual gift, a gift of the Holy Spirit. It is the capacity to recognize, appreciate, and enjoy the many gifts of God—the beauty and marvels of Creation and the mystery of the kingdom of God within us and all around us. Without wonder, a rose is just a plant. The smell, the color, and the shape don’t necessarily even bring delight, let alone lead us to marvel over God’s having placed such a beautiful thing in our world. God has created the whole world—minerals, plants, animals, and other human beings—as a gift to us. Without wonder we cannot see these as signs of God’s love. How, then, would we recognize Jesus as Emmanuel—God with us—or receive him as the greatest gift of God’s love for us?

The psalms are full of wonder: “You have set your glory above the heavens . . . all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea. O Lord . . . how majestic is your name in all the earth!” (Psalm 8:1, 7, 9). Filled with wonder and amazement at God’s presence within him and around him, the writer of the psalms exclaims, “It was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works” (Psalm 139:13–14).

Cultivating Wonder

Young children are rich in the gift of wonder. But wonder must be cultivated for it to survive, to grow, and to flourish. What can we do to cultivate this gift in our children?

Wonder begins with simple awareness, with paying close attention to something. Young children naturally become absorbed in what catches
their interest. Sofia Cavalletti, who has worked with young children and their teachers for many years, offers an invaluable guideline for cultivating wonder in young children: Serve children “good food and not too much of it.” In other words, put before the children a few things (only a few) that can hold their interest and satisfy their curiosity.

The capacity to be attentive is developed through activity. A focused activity (stacking blocks, watering the already over-watered plant on the window sill, or washing one’s hands, for example) calls for controlled movement. As the child’s body becomes focused, the child becomes more mentally and even more spiritually focused. We can encourage such focused activity by providing simple toys (appropriate to the child’s developmental stage) that encourage hand movement; by inviting them and showing them how to do simple, daily-life tasks; and by allowing them to spend as much time as possible outside, not only with manufactured toys and play structures, but also with such simple things as rocks, dirt, and water. Gardening and animal care are among the most satisfying and wonder-inducing activities for young children, as are nature walks and camping for older children.

Our desire to cultivate wonder in our children can help us to slow down and simplify our lives. It can help us to take more breaks in our busy day so that we are able to notice and enjoy things with our children: the spider making her web, the feel of sticky dough, the smell of freshly baked bread, or the sound of the bugs at night and the birds in the morning.

But wonder goes deeper than physical or intellectual awareness. Wonder is a way of seeing with the heart. Children, especially young children, need to hear the Good News of the one “who has made all this for me.” They need to hear God’s best “secrets,” the ones that Jesus tells us, about the kingdom of God within us and all around us. Some of the best “food” for nourishing the gift of wonder in young children is found in the short kingdom parables in the accounts of the Gospel. In comparing the kingdom to a tiny mustard seed that grows into a tree (Matthew 13:31–32) and to the leaven that causes bread to rise (Matthew 13:33), Jesus helps us to see the marvelous strength of God. He helps us begin to understand the kingdom as a mystery of growth and transformation, the mystery of life itself. In comparing the kingdom to a treasure hidden in a field (Matthew 13:44) and to a pearl of great value (Matthew 13:45), Jesus invites us to realize how beautiful and precious the kingdom is, how it is intended for our deepest enjoyment.

The mystery of the kingdom is communicated through simple, concrete realities: seeds growing into trees, dough rising, treasures being found. God works in ways that we can see and touch. And so does the liturgy: through the concrete signs of light, bread, gestures, holy oils, water, and wine, we are invited to experience God’s presence and begin to understand the greatest realities. Young children enjoy these signs and have a great capacity to see them with their hearts. We have only to show them the signs and identify simply what they represent.

We cultivate wonder in our children (and ourselves) by helping them to be attentive, by providing them with opportunities for focused activity, and above all by helping them to draw near to God in the word and in the liturgy. The gift of wonder enables us to find and enjoy God every day and everywhere.

For Further Reading