Today in the gospel Christ is calling us to be like children. And this may or may not appeal to us; but we should realize that, first of all, there are two different ways of looking at childhood. One very negative: for example, it is obvious that children do not often make very wise decisions. The reason is clear: they don’t have enough experience. Sometimes I have heard adults tell teenagers, “Why don’t you just grow up?” That’s not very good advice really because the only way we grow up is by making mistakes.

On the other hand, there is a very positive way of looking at childhood, and this is what the gospel is talking about. Children, first of all, are very direct. If you walk into a classroom full of, for example, kindergartners, they are very joyful and they are always looking at you from the minute you walk in; and they’re very open and willing to listen and to learn. This is a gift they have. It’s a gift we lose somewhere along the line. If you look at family pictures, you will see this even in yourself. There is a point where your eyes are very bright and very open, and there is a point where they are no longer. This represents a growing up, which has a negative side to it. Jesus is talking about turning and becoming once again like a child, meaning once again really open, once again really aware, once again really eager to learn. Albert Einstein said that he discovered relativity by looking at life like a child. But Christ is not talking about math or physics or business, but about life and what life is really for.

Now children come by their openness naturally. I once taught a group of kindergartners how to count from one to ten in four languages in twenty minutes—and they did it perfectly. That’s not because they were geniuses; it’s because they were
kindergartners. When we are a certain age we can learn and pick up things; at another age we cannot.

Jesus’ point is that there is a side to us that we can return to, that usually lies fallow as we grow up and take care of the world, learn our businesses, find out how to negotiate. But that side has to be reawakened at some point, if we want to live fully.

The idea of Catholic education involves not only all the subjects in the normal curriculum of school, but one more—life itself! But we can’t learn life itself in the classroom. We have to see the need for our harmonious blending of everything that we can do whether it be physically through athletics or physical training, emotionally through art and music and appreciation of what is refined, or intellectually through the great ideas that intrigue us. We have to see that each of these contributes to the whole and all of them share in the reality of spirit and mind. And if we have the right attitude, we can make the most of our lives. But if we have a wrong attitude, we cannot. So this is a choice, ultimately, whether we turn and become again like a child.