

LITTLE BOY IN POLKA DOTS

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JOSELITO MAINIS was only four years old when I first saw him running down the streets with his pants off, his little buttocks jiggling merrily as he ran with his big sister in full pursuit.

Caught and brought to my catechism class for the first time, he was superbly logical: his trousers irritated his tender skin (they were made from discarded flour sack, probably looted from the American Army depot near the Rizal Memorial Stadium, its contents long sold or eaten). That was all.

Looking up at me with his dark, serious eyes, he explained with the touching simplicity of children that he had run away, not because he did not want to learn his catechism, but simply because going to class meant putting his trousers on, and he definitely did not want to put his trousers on. I gave him permission to come to class without any trousers—as long as he wore his

big brother's undershirt. And that was how he came to class from that day on.

My experience with Joselito were either extremely funny, or extremely pathetic. In the first place I was always "chicher" to join him; his lips could never say "teacher."

That first day in class I asked him: "Do you know how to pray, Joselito?"

I could swear he was grinning from ear to ear as he stood up eagerly. "Opo, chicher," he said. "Inglis, chicher."

Then, without any further ado, he began: "Awer pader, hu artim heben, helod be dai nem, dai kin-domcam. Helmery, pulogres, da Lord is wides, blasedaw mong wimen en blesprutdoai wom Geesus..."

By that time I was laughing so hard the tears were running down my cheeks.

He stopped and looked at me, his eyes widening with disappointment. "Wrong ba ho, chicher?" Then as if to absolve himself from all blame, he continued in Tagalog, "You know chicher, I don't think my mama knows her prayers; she taught me that."

To Joselito when he first came into my class, the three Divine Persons were "Hesus, Mareea, Santo Tokayo." I wondered at first who Santo Tokayo was until he himself enlightened me. "Santo Tokayo," he explained to me very patiently, like an old man teaching a backward child, "is San Joselito." That was Saint Joseph to him.

Once I asked him who his first parents were. "The father and mother of my father and mother," he answered with astonishing logic. Further questioning brought more fruitful results. "Si Adan at si Cueba," he said proudly. Then he wanted to know the difference between Cueba and the "cueva" in which Jesus was born. "Were they the same?" he asked me. I was speechless.

The Children's Mass in the Malate Church was the biggest event in Joselito's week. For that he had a pair of red trousers and a little white camisa de chino with red polka dots which were sacred to that event. As soon as the little bell I had broke the stillness

of the Sunday lull over Leveriza, he would come rushing out of the house, breakfast or no breakfast, and ask me were we going to the church already? Holding my little finger solidly in one firm little hand, he would insist on accompanying me around the neighborhood, ringing the bell with gusto.

"Pamboy," he would call to a neighbor of his, a little boy who was so called because of two prominent front teeth that were all his mouth showed when he grinned, "Sano ka, antukin pa." (You are no good, also a sleepyhead) And Pamboy would rush out of the house, still pulling his shirt on and demanding how that could be when he had spent half the night (so he always claimed) waiting for the teacher to ring the bell.

As I remember, Joselito and his friend Pamboy were two children who never missed Sunday Mass. Together they would sit in church quietly, disturbing their silence only why Father Monaghan was always reading from a book, unlike "chicher who could say her prayers without any book at all. "I think," Joselito would tell me on the way home, "you know more than the priest does." You must really be great, I told myself.

There are many other incidents, other statements Joselito made,

which I think I shall always remember. But from the host memories which he has given me, I shall always remember the time when after a year of teaching, the children were ready to make their First Communion.

There was no doubt in my mind at all that Pamboy would make the grade; he was already seven at the time and knew more than enough to satisfy the taste of Father Monaghan, the genial Columban who a year later was to meet death at the hands of the Japanese military. But Joselito was a different case. Though he knew his prayers and his catechism as well, he was not yet six years old and it seemed to me that he had not grown an inch taller since that memorable day when I had first seen him running, trouserless, down the street.

He passed the test all right. But when I was leaving to take the children home, Father Monaghan called me aside and told me: "I'm afraid that little boy in polka dots can't make his first Communion yet; he's too young. I think we had better wait until next year."

I pleaded with him, of course, telling him that the child knew his prayers and his catechism; that he was a precocious child and even at his age had a distinct sense of what was right and what was wrong. But he was adamant

"I'm sorry," he told me, "but the child must wait."

I remember how hard it was for me to explain that to Joselito and watch exquisite sadness, which only children can feel, creeping into those big eyes of his. But why, he asked me, couldn't he make his First Communion? He knew as much as Pamboy did and Pamboy was going to make his.

"Joselito," I told him, "do you remember how I told you that when Jesus was a little boy and helped Santo Tokayo make chairs and tables, he was able to carry only little pieces of wood because he was so little?"

"Yes, chicher," he nodded at me.

"Well," I continued, "First Communion is like that. It's like a big piece of wood that you can't carry unless you grow big and strong first. You are still a small boy. Next year you will be bigger and you will be able to carry a big piece of wood. Then you will be able to make your First Communion."

Slowly the sadness crept away from his eyes, leaving them clear and playful once again. "Chicher," he said, "I will tell Tatay to let me carry the big pieces of firewood. Next year you will see. I will be as big and strong as Father Monaghan."

I never saw Joselito again after that. As the American advance

neared Manila, I left Joselito and Pamboy and all the other children, and went to the province. After the Liberation I met Joselito's sister and she told me that he had died of meningitis shortly before the Americans entered Manila.

But that does not mean that I have forgotten Joselito. Somehow he has become a part of the meaning of Catholic Action as I see it. Catholic Action has ceased to be a mere definition. It has become the dark eyes of a child, looking at me with sadness, trying to understand the muddled-

headedness of adults that makes them keep the simple joy of First Communion away from a little boy, not because he lacks faith or understanding, but merely because he is young; it has become a figure running, pantless down the street, not because he doesn't want to learn his catechism but because he doesn't want to wear any trousers; it has become the exquisite sadness and the mischief-eyes and the polka-dots of a little Boy's shirt who had to wait till Heaven to become one with His Lord.



GOD DEAD?

One evening Henedina approached her father and asked: "Papa, is God dead?"

"No, my dear, why do you ask?"

"Because you never talk to Him anymore at night like you used to."

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JUST LOOKING

The Cure D'Ars noticed that one of his simple parishioners remained motionless for hours in front of the tabernacle.

"What are you doing at such a time?" the priest asked him.

"I just look at Jesus, Jesus looks at me."