

“Seeing Things Through a Child’s Eyes” : *Ade Bethune’s Art for Children*



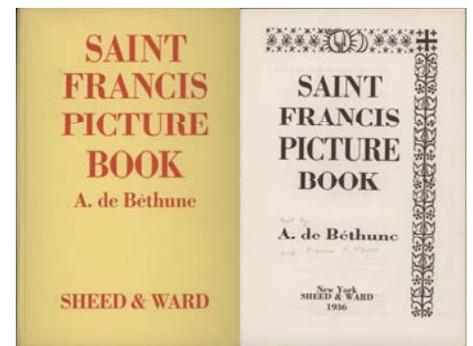
Illustration of St. Genevieve
from *Saints and their Animals*

Throughout her prolific career, the liturgical artist and writer Ade Bethune created many works of art for and about children. Although Bethune never married, she delighted in the company of children, maintaining close relationships with her nieces and nephews and actively getting to know children she encountered through her work over the years. She was proud of her role as a teacher as well as an artist, creating many artworks and activities aimed at families or specifically for children. The simplicity and directness found in all of her work is evident in her work for children and, indeed, the concept of “seeing things through a child’s eyes,” perfectly completed her artistic vision and beliefs.

Bethune’s early contributions to the *Catholic Worker*, which began her career as an artist, included short articles as well as the illustrations that she is well known for. Her articles would sometimes provide explanations or a scriptural connection to her illustrations, and sometimes tell about her experiences as a young artist in New York. In one, she describes a children’s art class she taught in Harlem. Even at this stage in her career, Bethune felt that an artist should be a teacher, and that all art, particularly religious art, should have a clear didactic purpose. It is not surprising, then, that she found great reward in producing art aimed at children.

Books for Children

At the same time that she was producing her earliest work for the *Catholic Worker* newspaper in the 1930s, Ade Bethune was writing and illustrating drafts of children’s books. She had tried to get two children’s picture books published while in her early twenties, but it was not until her illustrations for the *Catholic Worker* became well-known that she was able to secure a publisher for one of them. *The Saint Francis Picture Book* was published in 1936. Printed on inexpensive colored paper and simply bound, *The St. Francis Picture Book* combines simple images and text to tell the saint’s story. As in all of her work, Bethune used clear, straightforward imagery in order to convey a message; it was her firm belief that too much extraneous decoration or elaboration would muddle the message that the artist was trying to convey.



Front cover and title page of
Saint Francis Picture Book

“These figures naturally are literary ones. However, many of them can be represented pictorially, and thus may become ‘visual aids’ as well...there are, however, some difficulties that go with this.... A realistic rendition might be distracting in unessential details and cause confusion. In many such cases, therefore, it is better to draw only some essential object related to the original story. The result may often be a ‘visual aid’ that is just as effective, if not more so, and certainly more universal.”

Many of the gently whimsical animals found in *The Saint Francis Picture Book* would appear again in Bethune’s later work.



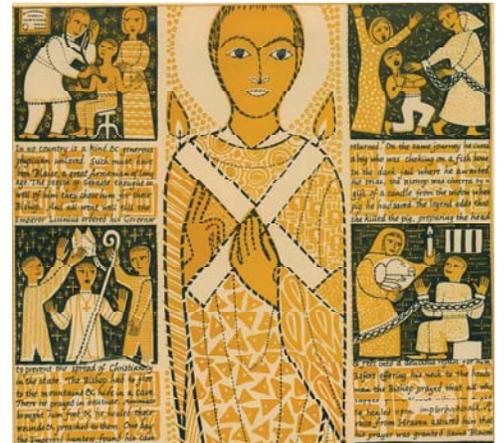
Illustration from *The St. Theresa Picture Book*

Ade Bethune's second book, *The St. Theresa Picture Book*, published in 1937, was similar in subject and in format to her first. However, Bethune was disappointed when her publishers insisted on including a singsong rhyming text based on an existing biography of the saint. In the words of Bethune's biographer, Judith Stoughton, "... ever respectful of children, she wanted them to have the real words, not a doggerel substitute. To communicate with simplicity and clarity with adults or children was her constant aim. She had no patience with esoteric 'learned' language nor with words brought 'down' to the level of children." For the illustrations in *The St. Theresa Picture Book*, Bethune drew on fond memories of her own childhood for inspiration. The plant border in the book contains flowers, vegetables and birds that she observed in her native Belgium, and the drawing of St. Theresa's father bears a striking resemblance to her own beloved grandfather.

Around 1943 Ade Bethune illustrated a third book for children, *St. Martin's Mice*. Her drawings accompanied a text written by her friend Sister Mary Marguerita, from the Convent of the Ascension in Minneapolis. Although the book was never published, the original sketches show Bethune's gently humorous drawings combined with the nun's simple, uncomplicated text. Based on the story of the South American saint, Martin de Porres, the story focuses on a saint's kindness toward animals—in this case, mice. As in Bethune's other works, she conveys her meaning simply and directly; adults and children alike would understand the dismay on the other monks' faces when they discover their mouse-nibbled robes!

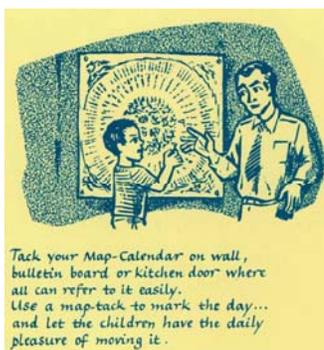
Magazines

Throughout her career, Ade Bethune provided illustrations for many national Catholic magazines. Many of these works were aimed at families and were meant to make Christian concepts and stories relevant to modern family life. For instance, in 1955 she produced a double-page illustration of Saint Blaise for *Jubilee*, the Catholic equivalent to *Life Magazine*. The scene is a picture of the saint, surrounded by vignettes of his life. The editors published a portion of the letter that Ade sent with the drawing, in which she good-naturedly suggesting that perhaps mothers could use her drawing as template for a wall hanging in children's rooms:



Detail of Saint Blaise from *Jubilee*

"The sight of Saint Blaise working his miracles should remind mothers to give their kids cod-liver oil, orange juice, and whatever, thus keeping those nasty winter colds at bay. Saint Blaise's legend unfortunately says nothing about his curing a child with sniffles, but as the sniffles can easily work their way down the throat, surely they must come somewhere near Blaise's competence."



Tack your Map-Calendar on wall, bulletin board or kitchen door where all can refer to it easily. Use a map-tack to mark the day... and let the children have the daily pleasure of moving it.

Bethune produced other work for *Jubilee*; one issue contained "Daniel and the Lions Den," a full-page color image with accompanying narrative text. Children were encouraged to cut out the figure of Daniel and move him around between the ferocious lions in the paper "den." In later years, Bethune published work in the *Catholic Digest*. Often, these were projects designed for families. For instance, the January 1957 issue contained her complete directions and two-page model for a "Do-It-Yourself Madonna." Bethune's later work for children would increasingly focus on encouraging children to be active participants in creating art.

Directions from a wheel calendar, which marked Catholic seasons and feasts

Working with children

In addition to creating art for children, Ade Bethune coordinated many projects that involved working with children. For instance, in 1939, Bethune made a cross-country trip to speak at the annual Catholic Art Association meeting being held at the College of St. Catherine. While on the way, she took time to visit St. Dominic's School in Detroit, Michigan. In the space of a few days,



Children from St. Dominic's School painting murals in one of the hallways

Bethune had designed a new mural for the school's hallways, marshalling the students to help her paint it. Based upon scenes from the lives of the saints, many of the images are variations on themes that appear elsewhere in her work; both the St. Francis scene and St. Theresa scene echo pages from her published books.

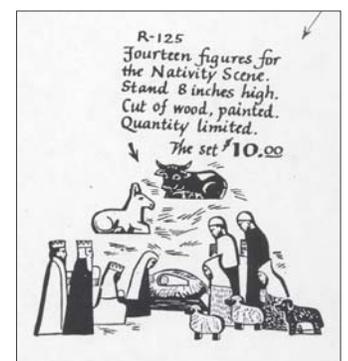
It was common for Bethune to involve others in the creation of her work; she had done the same with murals painted for several Catholic Worker houses and in many of her church designs. She used this tried and true method of connecting people with her work—and connecting herself to people—while working on a unique commission. In 1949, Bethune

was asked to design the façade of the church of St. Joseph, built at Victorias Milling Company, Occidental Negros, in the Philippines. She arrived there, unsure of what to expect, just after the church had been completed. Bethune quickly discovered several impediments to her work in the Philippines, including moldy walls, termites and the torrential rains of a tropical climate. Not least of her problems was the inability to communicate with her workers, and their hesitancy around the foreign artist. Ever practical, she quickly set up daily portrait sessions with the local children. In exchange for language practice and a song, Bethune would sketch portraits of the children. She describes their agreement, and its result:

“Of course, I didn't know a word of the local language.... I felt completely lost among a strange people. In all countries, however, it is easy to make friends with children. You can buy their affections with a trifle, and in their own way they take you to their hearts. Soon we had our daily sessions. They came after school, instructed me in Visayan words and sang their songs for me. In return, I sketched their portraits for them to take home to adorn the walls of their houses. It was not long thereafter that grownups—pleased parents, presumably—whom I might meet along the road, were smiling at me. In no time I was enjoying true Filipino hospitality and feeling, though still an ignorant outsider, entirely at home.”

Learning by Doing

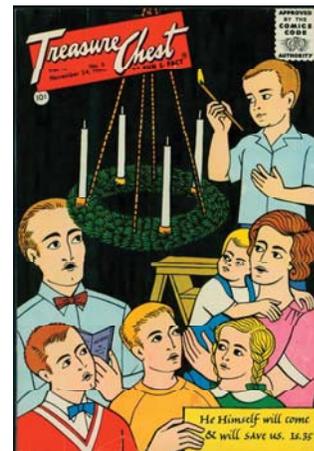
For some time Ade Bethune had been selling cards based on her illustrations for the *Catholic Worker*. Much of this work was distributed through a small religious goods shop that Bethune opened in Newport Rhode Island. The shop, initially run out her house, was a useful outlet for distributing her artwork as well as other high-quality religious artwork selected by her. Many items produced by Bethune for children and families were sold through the shop over the years, including advent calendars and wreaths, crib sets, puppet kits, holiday coloring books and puzzles. More than just a retail enterprise, the St. Leo Shop offered guidance and encouragement toward a Christian lifestyle. Bethune firmly believed that by creating meaningful objects, Catholic families



Advertisement for a crib set sold by the St. Leo Shop

could gain a greater understanding of God. She therefore provided step-by-step instructions for building crib sets, crucifixes, candleholders and any number of other religious household objects. Similarly, from 1948 to 1956, Bethune wrote and illustrated a wide range of “how-to-do-it” articles for *The Catholic Elementary Art Guide*.

The educational, creative focus of this work came to fruition in Ade Bethune’s work for the Catholic comic book, *Treasure Chest*. Distributed solely in Catholic school classrooms, *The Treasure Chest of Fun and Fact*, as it was known in full, was the church’s response to the popular secular comics of the time. Designed to teach students about the tenets of the Catholic faith in a new and appealing way, the comic involved stories focusing on themes of faith, family and patriotism. From 1949 to 1962 Bethune provided a variety of full-page comics, “how-to” articles and cover illustrations for the comic. One regular series, “Jesus Spoke in Parables,” illustrated a new parable every week. Biblical characters such as the prodigal son are rendered in modern dress and situations; for instance, the son flies off on an airplane to squander his fortune in a city of skyscrapers. Many of the drawings are humorous takes on human weakness, and the moral of the story is clear but never forced. Bethune’s beliefs about Catholic art, as well as her simple and direct style, were clearly well suited to this relatively new medium.



November 1960 *Treasure Chest* cover illustration by Ade Bethune



Several panels from Ade Bethune’s depiction of The Prodigal Son for *Treasure Chest*

In all of her endeavors, Bethune did not want children to simply look at art. Instead, she wanted them to be engaged, active participants, able both to create and understand Christian images. She wrote:

“For a small child all of life is full of signs and wonders. But in certain signs he comes to experience more closely something of God and of the Church, in terms he can grasp—in terms not of people or of words, but of images, smells, colors, lights, myths. His first impressions are lasting. The prime images her forms—in art or nature—must thus be such as can remain valid for life.”