These Little Ones
Leo R. Ward

Poor, dear little ones, lean and hungry, seeking,
not knowing they seek stray wisps
of wisdom to make sense of their burgeoning lives.
That was the fix with many at the Sorbonne
in my native and gracious Paris when

I entered the University a long, long
time ago. It was the way at colleges
and universities then, and, God help
the innocents, it is the common fix now, little ones
quite unaware of what their hunger means. Yet

wasn’t Paris itself long ago said to be
the city of letters and the “workshop
of wisdom”?* In my day the busy and
productive people were in the School
of Sciences, one surpassing another,

and soon to be surpassed, few
of them likely to be distracted
by a search for wisdom.
They play games with us. Lo here,
lo there? It was as if they took us
by the hand and led us up a high

*Pope Gregory IX, 1231: “officina sapientiae.”
mountain and then hurried us down
the other side still blindfolded. Searching
for that deep-buried treasure, my
dear fiancée Raïssa and I were offered

savorless ersatz: "Scientist and
phenomenalist philosophy," "biological
materialism"—too chaffy and fluffy.
We sought wisdom, and the eclat of science
correcting science and soon to be corrected
and superseded by science—this we thought
a sort of doodling. Youths seeking wisdom
were displaced persons. The pabulum
offered them! A cruel and unbearable
punishment then and now, youths too

immature to know they are starving, their
tongues lobbing out for a sop to lift up
their minds and hearts and anchor their lives.
Come to me all you who hunger and thirst.

Some compassionate angel led Raïssa
and me to Bergson, "The first to answer
our deep desire for metaphysical truth,"
and some extracurricular souls,
among them the poet Péguy and the merciless

Léon Bloy, kept daring and challenging us.
Five years later I went to school
to Thomas Aquinas, a difficult master bold
enough to ask himself ten thousand questions.

Bergson, Bloy, Aquinas. Yet the wisdom-hunter
must work out his own salvation, and I
spent years—thank God I did—sifting the truths
in our Western heritage from the dross,
cultural prejudices and hastily formed

imagery, attempting to dredge up at last
matters worthy of intelligence—scarcely
a primrose path to some grains of wisdom.
Yet the process led me to sympathize
all the more with the researches, agonies
and discoveries of modern thought, our
own minds, with the help of God and work
and many collaborating friends, finally
at home in a wisdom resistant to
seasonal ups and downs. Question after question
raised in this our long day by humanity’s
hopes and fears and suffering, the world-wide
impasse in regard to freedom, truth and love,
technology, hot and cold wars. “To
know”—what is that? what its basic forms?
The mystic’s “hearing”—is this also a form of knowing?

Prodigiously enriched by an affluent past,
East and West, by science and by living
in a Christian climate, we must nevertheless
wrestle with questions as they arise in our
day and our experience. Philosophy lives

Or dies today, and philosophers are not
allowed to suppose that the search for
wisdom is a closed book. Christ is forever
fulfilling His Father’s will. Little ones
are yet coming and for an endless
tomorrow will keep coming to universities,
youths scarcely knowing that they are
unwise, and hungering, all the same,
for depth, belief, and knowledge.

Around the globe in the 1960s, at
universities in France, Japan, Israel
and America, youths were starved, stumbling,
even more impoverished in matters of political
wisdom than were the French workingmen,

not one in a hundred youths guessing that
their revolt was really for faith. Clusters
of youths must themselves keep rediscovering basic values,
reasons for living. But will there not some
day be a new type of revolution,

one of truly Christian inspiration, "an integral
Christianity alive with a pure faith
and lucid intelligence planted
in faith guiding us toward
an integral humanism," philosophy,

the work and wisdom of reason,
awaking, particularly in the scientist,
the sense of mystery stammered
by the atom and the universe!

This bright afternoon in springtime France
they are readying to dig a grave for me,
and I am autographing a book,
"Raïssa et Jacques," for a man just out of jail.