

## THE SPIRITUAL CHILD

**Anne Delsorte**

“The Child as Builder of Humanity” Conference ~ 26-28 September 2003, Sydney, Australia

In September 1996, I participated in a Level One training course for those working with 3-6 year old children in the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. I had no idea that it was going to change the direction of my life, nor fill me with such joy, nor teach me what it truly means to “become like a little child” and that “to such belongs the Kingdom of Heaven”.

I had been involved for the previous ten years in a retreat ministry for adults. The heart of the call that I experienced from God about this work was God saying to me, “Create the opportunities for my people to come to Me, and I will do the rest”.

As the course for the catechesis unfolded, the call of God on my heart resounded once again. Not only was He saying to me to create the opportunities for my people to come to Me and I will do the rest, He was also saying, “Create the opportunities for my children to come to Me, and I will do the rest.”

This is what I want to share with you today: God at work, meeting with and revealing Himself to His little ones, calling each of us, child and adult alike, into relationship with Him and inviting us to work together with Him to bring forth His Kingdom.

The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd comes out of the Judeo-Christian tradition. It began in the Catholic Church although it is now in many denominations throughout the world. I am a Christian. I am also a Catholic and so, of necessity, I must speak out of my own experience and my own tradition. However, what I believe is that this work, begun by Maria Montessori and carried forward and developed by Sofia Cavalletti and Gianna Gobbi, seeks so completely to go to the essence, that it reaches right into the heart of the mystery of the mystery of God and the mystery of the child.

This is common to all. Because of this essentiality, this work can cross denominational boundaries, adapting itself to the riches of each tradition, offering to the child the opportunity to enter into relationship with this God they innately know and perceive.

The spiritual child is a child in relationship with God in some degree or another. Maria Montessori says, “Religious education is an aid to spiritual life, which unfolds of itself.”

One of the joys, for me, is working with those of other traditions, enjoying the ‘most essential’ which we share and discovering that our differences need not divide us but can become a richness that we revere and respect in the other.

Beyond the Judeo-Christian tradition what are the possibilities?

I know of two Buddhists who visited the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd atrium in the Franciscan Montessori Earth School in Portland, U.S. and, using the same principles, adapted it for themselves according to their particular beliefs and traditions. I am also aware that in this school there is a large cross-section of religious belief, including Jews, Hindus and Muslims. Although specifically Catholic in its set up, all are invited to attend the atrium. Many from other religions choose for their children to participate because of the spiritual presence of God in that place.

In looking at both the Judean-Christian tradition and beyond, some questions that we can ask are

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Who is God to you? What is your experience of God? How does He reach out to you? Who is the child? How can the child encounter God?

Creating an environment where God and child can meet, opens doors for the child to come to know God and to experience His Love. Creating an environment such as this, is essential to the work of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd.

How then can we begin, as Christians, to describe firstly the mystery, the nature of God and secondly the mystery, the nature of the child?

What images do we have for God? Light, Love, Goodness. One who reaches out to give life, to nurture, to strengthen, to heal, to guide. Creator, Redeemer, Saviour, Friend. These words scratch the surface only. There is so much more.

What images do we have to describe the child? Joy, simplicity, trust, wonder, contemplation. An overflowing of life. An openness to love and to be loved. An ability to move easily between the natural and the spiritual. Once again, though, we have only touched the surface. We have only stepped ankle-deep into the mystery. There is so much more.

What happens when these two mysteries meet? When the mystery of God and the mystery of the child come together? What type of environment can we prepare to provide for this to happen? What is our role in this process?

Starting with the last question first. Maria Montessori speaks of the guide or directress as the humble servant, so too with the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. We come to serve the child.

However, we also come to usher the child into the Master's presence.

Imagine being a servant in a great mansion. We open the door that the child might enter in. We bring the child into the presence of the master of the house and then simply step aside out of the way so that God and child might be together without our interference. Here, the child is taught by the true teacher, 'the inner teacher.'

We can also liken our role to that of a matchmaker. Having brought God and the child together, it is a privilege then to observe the encounter and the relationship blossoming forth. We know that we have the privilege of standing on holy ground. As outsiders, we are only given glimpses of this intimate encounter. In these moments we are filled with deep awe and great rejoicing at what we behold. Maybe it is observing a child at prayer, eyes closed, silent, still, peace on his or her face, rapt in communion with God. Maybe it is a glimpse of the light that shines in their eyes after an 'aha' moment, when they have discovered something new, something more about this God who loves them so deeply.

Maybe it is in a piece of artwork that we see an expression of the meditation of the child and their understanding of God. I remember a drawing by 3-year old Joshua. He had drawn a line of candles, half were lit and half were not lit. In the centre of the line was a face which had a big smile but also had tears falling. Joshua explained to me that the candles stood for people. Jesus was happy because some people had His light shining in their hearts, but He was also sad because some people didn't have His light shining in them.

Sometimes it is in their prayers that we get an unexpected glimpse of the relationship between God and child. I had an older child who was really struggling with many issues in his life. His prayer, one day when things were particularly difficult, was "I love you, O Lord, because when I'm lost, you find me."

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In a multitude of ways, if we observe with care, we are given glimpses into the mystery of God and child together.

So, in the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, what specific images of God do we offer the child, that invite the child into this encounter with God?

Sofia and Gianna, in their almost 50 years work and observation of children, have found that, as Christians, certain themes have consistently aroused deep interest and great joy:

- Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who protects His sheep and calls them by name;
- Jesus Christ, as Light of the world, and how we receive this light at Baptism;
- The powerful parables of the Kingdom of God - the mustard seed, the precious pearl, the leaven, the hidden treasure and the grain of wheat; and
- The Eucharist, as the greatest gift of the Father, which invites a response from us to God.

The 3-6 year old environment is filled with works that centre around these themes. Each set of materials allows the child layer by layer to enter deeper into the mystery of God. The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is not a catechesis of definition but a catechesis of invitation.

The idea of setting up an environment set aside specifically for religious education came first from Maria Montessori. She says, "When, at Barcelona, we began religious education in the "Model Montessori School".... our plan of action [had] been long and well considered."

She goes on to say,

*The result was the opening of the "Children's House in the Church" and a new life began there..... The Montessori Method was furnished with a long sought opportunity of penetrating deeper into the life of the child's soul, and of thus fulfilling its true educational mission. The first step was "to prepare a place" for the bambini.... The chapel, which had to be the most beautiful room in the house.*

Maria Montessori goes on to describe this environment in chapter two in the second edition of Child in the Church.

Maria Montessori was well aware that her work in Barcelona, although it continued into the thirties, was merely a beginning. In 1927, she shared with E.M. Standing in a series of published conversations about how this side of her work might develop.

When asked if religious apparatus should be mixed in with the ordinary didactic apparatus of the Montessori school or kept separate she says:

*I would keep it separate. I would have a separate room dedicated to the supernatural. Everything in this room would have a bearing on the spiritual life, and the general effect would be that here the soul of the child and all his activities would be centred in the life and personality of our Lord. The work in this room would of course include: Bible History, Church History, the Lives of the Saints and the Liturgy.*

She goes on to say, "This room, then, which one might call the Atrium, would be set apart for the preparation of little children for their full participation in the life of the Church."

We do not know a great deal more about Maria Montessori's continued involvement in the development of religious education. We do know that she wrote several books: The Child In The Church (1929); The Life In Christ (1931); and, The Mass Explained to Children (1934).

She also gave a series of lectures on the teaching of religion in London in 1936, and, on the eve of her death, she wrote a letter to a gathering of Catholic teachers in London saying:

*Never, as in this moment, has the Christian faith needed the sincere effort of those who profess it. I would like to ask all of you, who are gathered in this meeting, to consider the great help that children can bring to the defense of our faith.*

*Children come to us as a rain of souls, as a richness and a promise which can always be fulfilled but which needs the help of our efforts for its fulfillment.*

*Do not consider the child as a weakling: the child is the builder of the human personality. That this personality be Christian or not depends on the environment around him and on those who guide his religious formation.*

*Do not think that because the child cannot understand in the same way that we ourselves understand that it is useless to allow him to participate in our religious practices. The staunchest and deepest faith is generally found among unsophisticated people whose women take their children to church while they are still breastfed: the child's unconscious absorbs divine powers ....*

*You who enjoy the great gift of belonging to the Catholic faith must intensely feel the great responsibility you have for the future generations .... Take then, as help in your task, with faith and humility, "the all-powerful children" (Benedict XV). Take as your special task to watch that their limpid light be not dimmed. Protect in their development those natural energies implanted in the souls of children by the guiding hand of God.*

*May God be with you at this meeting and may God guide you in your conclusions and decisions.*

Although, Maria Montessori herself was unable to see the fulfillment of this part of her work, The Child in the Church (second edition) records others who took up her work and carried it forward. One of these is Sofia Cavalletti. Sofia, a noble woman by birth and a renowned Hebrew scripture scholar and adviser to Vatican II in the area of Hebrew/Christian relations, began working with children in the field of religious education in 1954. She teamed up with Gianna Gobbi, a Montessori educator, who had assisted Maria Montessori in courses in 1951. Together Sofia and Gianna developed the work that is now known internationally as the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd.

Sofia sends these greetings to us here in Australia:

*Dear Participants at the Montessori meeting,*

*The ocean is too wide for me to cross it physically, but I can do it easily with my thought and heart, when I think of you, of the Montessori work and of our catechesis that is so amazingly spreading in your country.*

*I think of you as if I had met you personally, because I think that the link that unites us in our common work with the child is so strong that it nullifies distances.*

*I wish you to discover with increasing joy the mystery of the child.*

Love  
Sofia Cavalletti

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Sofia and Gianna have worked tirelessly for almost 50 years applying the same principles as Maria Montessori herself in the observation of children. I had the privilege of visiting their original three atria, which are set up in Sofia's own home in Rome. Gianna has since gone home to heaven, but Sofia continues the work and her greatest joy is being with the children.

The name atrium, which Maria Montessori originally suggested, has been adopted by Sofia and Gianna and there are now atria of the Good Shepherd in five continents of the world.

One of the central characteristics of this work is the cry of the heart of the child, "Help me to come close to God by myself."

For the 3-6 year old child, the focus is on "being" in God's presence and "enjoying" God. It is about relationship between God and the child and so the materials available for this age child invite the child to enter the mystery of God, to draw close to God, to fall in love with God, to listen to His Word and to be fashioned and formed by Him.

The materials that you would see in an atrium are divided into three categories: Practical Life; Scripture; and, Liturgy. You can see some of these in the display outside.

It is the children who have shown the way in the choice of these materials. Over many years, many materials were presented to different groups of children. Only those which aroused great interest and deep joy remained. Each set of materials then has been shown to meet a vital exigency within the child relating to the child's spiritual development.

Sofia says, "All works in the atrium are either a passage to prayer or prayer itself".

Whether a child is working with the Good Shepherd materials or setting the altar or arranging flowers, each activity can be an encounter with God.

The children in our atrium know that, when they arrange a vase of flowers, they can then take it and put it in a special place. One day I was taking some guests on a tour of the atrium, and I opened the diorama of Mary's house, and there was a tiny vase of flowers. Next I opened Elizabeth's house, and there was another tiny vase of flowers. A little further around the atrium, I opened up the Tabernacle. Inside was another tiny vase of flowers. What thought and meditation, what reverence and care had gone into the placing of these flowers. We can only guess at the depths of prayer hidden in these moments.

You might ask the question, "Are such young children capable of understanding the words of Scripture or the words of the Liturgy?" Maria Montessori says that this age child is "in the sensitive period of the soul".

I remember 3-year-old Kate, who came to visit the atrium with her friend. I was describing and demonstrating the gesture where the priest extends his hands over the bread and wine, asking the Father to send the Holy Spirit to transform it into the Body and Blood of Jesus. At the end of the presentation she looked at me with eyes open wide and said in a hushed voice, "This is so special." I will never forget the look on her face or the words that she spoke. She taught me never to underestimate the depths of a child's understanding or intuition.

Regarding the Scriptures, I remember an experience with 4-year-old Thomas. He had been working at length with the materials for the parable of the Kingdom of Heaven and the Precious Pearl. Suddenly, he lifted the merchant in one hand and the pearl in the other. His whole body was quivering with joy and excitement as he gave a shout, "I've got it! I've got it! I've got it!" I began to understand the depth and passion of joy experienced by a young child. I have begun to experience in my own life this wonder and this emotion, this passion especially for God's Kingdom.



Another lesson that I learned from the children came from a 3-year-old Charlotte. Charlotte was painting, and I just happened to be in the vicinity to hear her speaking about her work as she was doing it. She lifted the yellow brush and covered the page with yellow. As she did she said, "This is Jesus when He was born". Then she lifted the green brush and covered all over the top of the yellow with green. As she did so she said, "This is Jesus when He was growing up." Next she took a blue brush and covered all over the page with blue and she said "This is Jesus when He was baptized in the River Jordan." Finally she took a red brush and covered the page once again. This time she said, "This is Jesus dying on the cross." In the end, all that was on that page was a big brown blob. If I had not been privileged to hear her words I would never have known that it was a meditation on the life of Jesus. I learnt never to judge by external appearances about what is happening when a child is at work and also to trust God that He truly is at work. It is He who inspires and invites and leads the child to Himself.

You can see that the principles of Maria Montessori truly do enable us to create the opportunity for the child to come into relationship with God. If we create the right environment and provide the specific materials designed to meet the spiritual hungers of the child, God will do the rest. He is there always reaching out, desiring to reveal Himself to us and to pour out upon us His Love.

Simply being with the 3-6 child day-in and day-out has transformed my life. As I serve them, I cannot help but become like them. They enthuse me with their joy and their insight. I too, am filled with wonder and delight. Every leaf, every blade of grass, every breath of air sings to me of my Creator. I begin to see with their eyes and to be filled with thanksgiving. I am led to trust more deeply and to "be" with great simplicity in the presence of my God.

All this I learn from the 3-6 year old child, but what of the 6-12 year old child? For the 6-12 year old child a new dimension is added. Not only does this age child continue to be invited to be with God, the child is also invited to make a response to this God of love. There are now two moments of learning Cthe moment of falling in love or "being " and the moment of responding or "doing".

The True Vine, which is the central theme for children aged 6-12, beautifully incorporates these two moments. Here the child considers how we are invited to remain in the Vine, to be with and enjoy God, to experience the sap of the Holy Spirit flowing through us. We also recognize the call to respond to this gift of life, to bear fruit, to offer our lives in service to the One who gives us life and to take our part in the wider community.

We also introduce the Plan of God, a series of timelines to inspire reflection on the vastness and time involved in creation, the variety and magnitude of God's gifts and the discovery of our own place in this plan. How does God personally invite us to become collaborators with Him in the building of His Kingdom? What will we write on the blank page of our tomorrows? These timelines focus on the three moments C Creation, Redemption and Parousia. We introduce the child to an understanding of what it will be like when 'God will be all in all.'

We study the Scriptures, particularly the parables and the maxims, which give us guidelines for living. In a sensitive period for moral development, the child seeks understanding of how to live out this life and naturally desires to follow the example and wisdom offered by the Beloved.

What would our world be like if every man, woman and child obeyed the laws of God? What if we simply took one of the maxims of Jesus C the Golden Rule? "Always treat others the way you would have them treat you." (Luke 6:31) Words of wisdom that translate across many religious boundaries. Imagine what it might be like if all people lived by this code, and we get a glimpse of what kind of a world might exist on that day when God will be all in all.

Fired with this vision, the child's response to God comes first out of a heart that is overflowing with love and with thanksgiving, a heart filled with hope and purpose, a heart responding not out of duty but out of joy.

And so I too am caught up in this moment with the children. I am daily filled with new vision and new hope, with an awareness of the transforming power of God. My littleness magnifies God's strength as His life and love pours out through me to transform my world. His life empowers me to serve. A desire to see His Kingdom come rises stronger in me each day. All this comes from my working with the 6-12 children.

There is a prayer shared by a 10-year-old boy named Stefano in Sofia's latest book, The Religious Potential of the Child C 6-12 Years Old. I would like to share it with you. Sofia says:

*Stefano attends catechesis in the parish but comes from a family that is somewhat hostile to religious expression. He returns to the atrium after being away for some time and writes...*

*I am on my way to you O Lord you speak to me in the darkness. I hear an angel's song.  
Maybe I am being deceived by the voice of Satan, I am not a hero. I do not seek glory.  
I am a man seeking to walk in God's pathway.  
I am standing at a gate I think and think I have decided.  
It feels like there is a fire in my heart the gates open I enter I see God.  
I have arrived.  
Praise God.*

God is at work in the lives of His children. He calls forth, from within each child, their own particular and unique response. He desires to inspire and empower them to transform our world and in the process they too are transformed.

The challenge given to me, the call placed on my heart by God, I offer to you: "Create the opportunities for My Children to come to Me, and I will do the rest."

I promise you that if you take up this call, you will find yourself on a journey that will change your life forever.

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