

Inspiring Art Expression in the Atrium

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*Aubrey, age 6
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Water and wine cruets under
the rainbow. On the rainbow
is the oil lamp from the prayer
table. Is she expressing that as the
light of the sun refracted into a
multitude of colors when passing
through the rain, the water and
wine conversely become one when
touched by God?*

In our “Characteristics of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd,” characteristic three beautifully describes the atrium as a place where children and adults live a religious experience together and only Christ is the teacher, and a place of prayer where “work and study spontaneously become meditation, contemplation, and prayer.”

Sofia defines prayer as “response.” In the atrium, there is much for the child to respond to, and various ways in which the child can respond—through the work of his or her hands, through song, through words softly uttered or boldly proclaimed; or by simply sitting, looking, and reflecting on what is seen and heard. Art expression is another way for the child to respond. In this brief article, I share how I introduce the child in Level I to “another work—how to keep thinking about what we have heard.”

Beginning with the second or third week, I usually introduce art expression by using what we have heard and seen at the Prayer Table as the reference. I carefully demonstrate selecting my art materials and carrying them to my workspace. I sit and ask aloud, “Hmm, what did I hear today?” Then I apply yellow to the page—and lots of it! Next, I hold it up and ask, “Can you guess what I heard at the Prayer Table?” “The light!” is the typical

response. “Yes, I heard that Jesus is the light of the world! When you hear something about Jesus, you can put it on paper, too.”

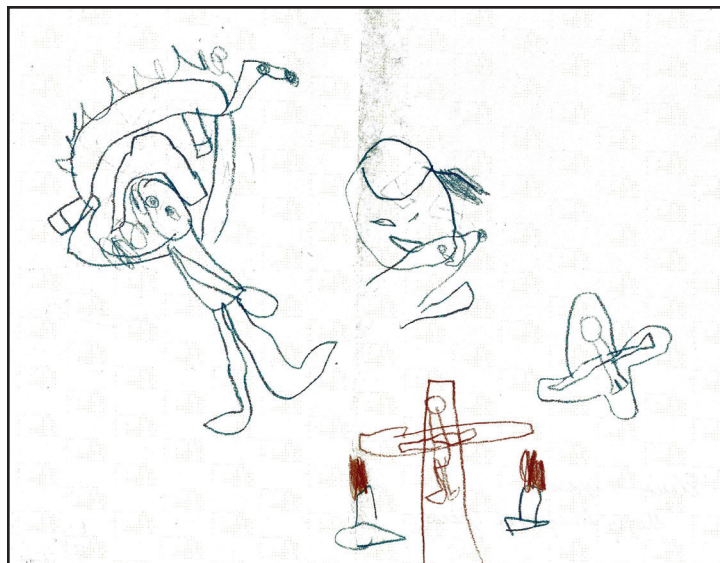
As we move further into the catechetical year, I invite art expression by asking, “How can we keep thinking about what we have just heard/seen?” or “How might we put it on paper?” I avoid suggesting that the child “draw a (name of object).” This wording seems to invite a static response and may hinder the child’s imagination. However, if I do use the word “draw,” it will be phrased as a suggestion to “draw about” the theme we have just pondered. This wording invites an open-ended response by the child as opposed to one that has defined limits.

In the Montessori community, there is a range of sentiment regarding the preferred media for drawing and art expression as well as for the best time to introduce it to the child.¹ Dr. Montessori believed a drawing’s primary purpose is to illustrate work (e.g., botanical sketches) and that this kind of work should come only after the child had developed the proper skills to produce accurate drawings.² According to Montessori, work with the Metal Insets material was foundational for fostering the hand control necessary to produce precision drawings. It is understandable that Montessori, a physician at her time in history, regarded precision in drawing as important.

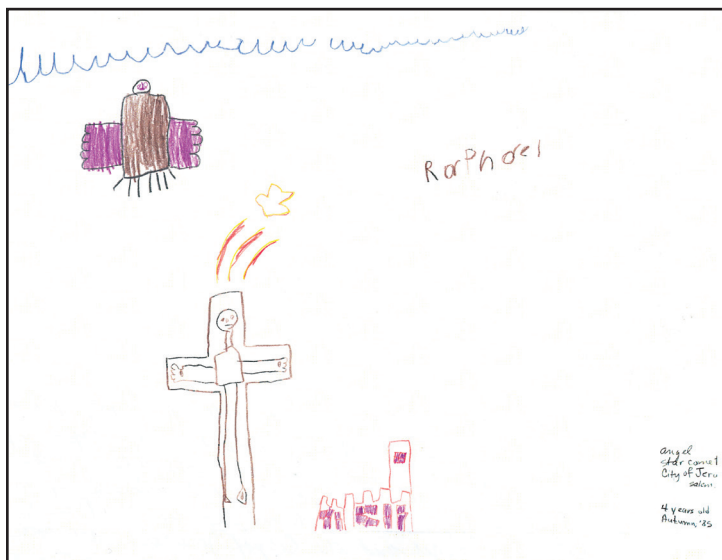
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In the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, however, the primary purpose for the art materials is to engage the hand, head, and heart in meditation and contemplation—in other words, to serve as an aid to prayer. As prayer is a core spiritual characteristic of even the youngest child, the conversation in our work should focus on the materials for art expression that best serve the littlest ones.

There are many art materials available for hands that have yet to master the three-finger pincer grip that is helpful for holding a pencil. An online search will produce a myriad of products, from triangular pencils and crayons to palm-grip crayons, crayon blocks, and crayon rocks! I was delighted many years ago to have been shown what were described as muffin tin crayons. These are half-moon-shaped blocks of crayon made from melting old crayons in muffin tins, allowing them to cool, popping them out, and then cutting them in half. The rounded “tops” fit snugly into the palms of the littlest hands, and the flat “bottoms” produce lovely, broad strokes of color.



*Elejio, age 5, Holy Family Catechetical Center
Phoenix, Arizona
Images of the Good Shepherd and the Altar*



*Raphael, age 4
Holy Family Catechetical Center
Phoenix, Arizona
After the Topographical Map of Israel—A synthesis of the symbols from the map. He combined the star comet with the cross before he or his catechists had been exposed to this combination of symbols that signifies the moment of Redemption in the Plan of God material. The angel and the City of Jerusalem are both filled with purple, the color of royalty, waiting, and expectation*

Paintbrushes and watercolors offer the child a broader medium through which to “place on paper” what he or she has heard and seen. Children’s paintbrushes come with easily gripped handles, and watercolors provide that expansive medium through which the child can express what has touched him or her.

Broad media such as those mentioned above seem to correspond more appropriately to the open-ended nature of our meditative questions. Unlike pencils that will require fine motor development before the littlest ones can use them with ease, these crayons can offer children a more immediate and direct access to their expression through art.

In summary, the manner in which we introduce art expression to the youngest ones can deeply affect how they regard the art materials in the atrium. It has the potential to form the child’s whole attitude toward meditation and contemplation via the medium of art. By taking the “open-ended” approach in our choice of words (“drawing about” things; “putting what we have heard on paper”) and by providing art materials which engage the youngest child, we assist the child’s prayerful response to what he or she has seen and heard.

¹ Angeline S. Lillard, “What Belongs in a Montessori Primary Classroom? Results from a Survey of AMI and AMS Teacher Trainers,” *Montessori Life* 23, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 25–26.

² Ibid, 30–31.