

Observation as Prayer

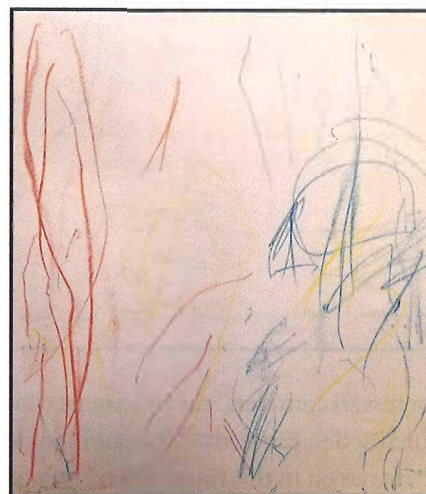
REBEKAH ROJCEWICZ

When I went to Rome for my catechist formation, I was a trained Montessori primary directress with five years' experience; and yet, one of my first assignments was to do weekly observations in a Montessori school! Maria Christlieb and I were sent to Flaminia Guidi's school. What a blessing that was! Flaminia was a contemporary of Maria Montessori's; her school was in a poor quarter of Rome, very similar to the setting of Montessori's first *casa*. In her eighties and legally blind, Flaminia was still riding the bus to her school to be with the children as often as she could. Maria and I went there every week and spent a whole morning observing in the *casa* and in the elementary classroom.



From left: Flaminia Guidi, Patricia Stenton, and Gianna Gobbi.
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One morning, as I sat observing in the *casa*, I suddenly felt a little tap on my shoulder. I turned to see a boy of about four years of age. He stood very erect, wearing an apron, and holding a little silver tray on which there was a small espresso pot, a small cup, and a sugar bowl with small tongs. *Caffè?* he asked. I was almost too stunned to answer *si*. Then, having poured the coffee, he asked, *Zucchero?* (Sugar?). I never take sugar in my coffee but I could not say no to him. He asked how many. By then I had at least learned to count in Italian, so I could answer *uno* with relative ease. Heaven! I knew I had already entered heaven when Maria and I arrived at the school and had to bend to step through the child-sized doors, but to be served a mid-morning



Cecilia and Gianna,
both age two,
● *Our Lady of Perpetual
Help Toddler Atrium,
Scottsdale, AZ*
*The two of them worked
quietly together for over
ten minutes at the easel.*

espresso by a gorgeous little Italian waiter was almost more than I could bear.

Observation is a gift to us. It allows us to receive and enjoy the treasures of the child's world. It can also be an antidote to the fatigue that comes from feeling overly responsible for everything that goes on in the atrium or from the never-ending list of materials to be gathered, or made, or mended. In my early years as a catechist, I was struggling with that very sort of fatigue and discovered a practice that still serves me well. It was the simple discipline of sitting in the atrium for three to five minutes before the children arrived and just looking around, appreciating, enjoying all that *had* been accomplished on the list.

Observation is also a necessary discipline if we are going to be true servants of the relationship between God and the child. It allows us periodically to step away from our catechist duties and to remember that we are merely servants of the child's relationship with his or her own inner Teacher and not religion teachers who are responsible for everything they learn. I must *make time* to observe, even when the atrium session is busier than usual; admittedly, this becomes even more difficult if the session is not at least an hour and a half to two hours long. In observing the children, I move from a fixation on my plans for the atrium experience to where the Holy Spirit is leading—from within an individual child as well as in the atrium community. Through observation, I become more like a good accompanist to a singer;

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a good accompanist follows the singer's lead, not the other way around.

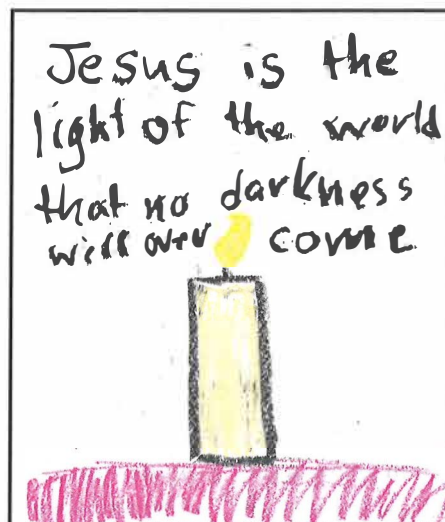
Our Characteristics of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd have described the atrium as "a place of prayer." Does this apply only to the children? Are we as catechists not also called to prayer in the atrium? We know that prayer is both listening and responding to God. When we observe, we listen deeply to God in the child; our response to God, besides our gratitude for being allowed to journey with the children on "the road of holy joy," is to serve the child's relationship with God by seeking to offer a particular presentation or work that is a match for the child in that moment or stage of development.

One of the things Sofia Cavalletti and Gianna Gobbi most helped me to see was that the covenant relationship is always established through gift. To pray, then, is first to be open to the gift, always open to the gift. In the atrium, we must, above all, remain open to the gift of the children and their marvelous religious richness, which must have been what prompted Jesus' saying that we "must change and become like [them]." Our first task is to pay attention to that gift, to honor it and learn from it, to better serve the child's relationship with God. And, wonder of wonders, as we become better and better at observing, we discover that in "[God's] right hand [and in the atrium] are pleasures forevermore" (Psalm 16:11).

I will close with two of the many pleasures I have been blessed to experience in the atrium. The first is my initial atrium experience after my two years in the Rome course. It was the early days of the atrium year and I was already feeling tired from the big push to get everything ready. One morning, I came into the atrium area (a little room that adjoined the Montessori classroom) and found four-year-old J. W. standing at the prayer table. He was small for his age, so his head reached only slightly above the tabletop. He was engaged in blowing little puffs of air at the table where a pot of dandelions had started to shed their feathery seed pods. When he realized I was there, he quietly informed me that he was "just blowing the pringles

off the prayer table." I realized that the child's freely chosen work might not be anything we have on our list of atrium works!

The second was five-year-old Max, full of energy, a child who liked sports and things that are loud and fast. I was always "on to him," trying to preempt his wildness. One day, a catechist brought in a container of pink carnations. I had the sudden inspiration to ask Max if he might be willing to arrange some flowers for the prayer table. Surprisingly, he said, "Sure." He proceeded to the flower-arranging station, donned an apron, and dove into the work. Every time I glanced in his direction, I saw that he was working. I was mildly shocked that he was so engaged. Finally, my curiosity got the best of me, and I ventured over to where he was



*Cristina, age eight,
Our Lady of Good Counsel Parish School,
Livonia, MI
Cristina ponders on the meaning of the Light.*



*John, age four,
Holy Resurrection Russian Orthodox Cathedral,
Kodiak, AK
Jesus the Light protects Sts. George and Theodore.*

working. Looking down, I saw that he had assembled only the smallest vases we had and was placing one bud in each vase, leaving all the fully bloomed ones in the original container. When he realized I was standing there, he looked up and said, "They're just babies; they need a quiet place to grow."

What if I had missed those moments? The children did not need for me to witness their work, but I needed the beauty and delight of those observations. And once again, I see that God never calls us to a mission without giving us all that we need to carry it out—and so much more!