



All About the Atrium

A Newsletter for Parents

The Model Altar

The young boy knelt beside his mother at Mass and pointed toward the priest at the Altar table and whispered loudly, "I see the chalice!" There is great joy in the expression of the child who experiences at liturgy those articles of the Mass that they have encountered in the Atrium. A simple presentation in the prepared environment allows the child to grasp the name of the cup that holds the wine at Mass, and to participate more fully in the Mass.

Sofia Cavalletti and Gianna Gobbi, the founders of *The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd*, write about what the child taught them about the gift of the Mass:

"Are young children capable of grasping and enjoying the significance of the Eucharist, or is it perhaps too great a mystery for them? Would it be better to wait to introduce them to it until a more mature age? Regrettably, this was our opinion at one time, until the children taught us differently. The young child gravitates toward what is simplest and most essential, and also deepest. It is we adults who tend to complicate things. There is nothing simpler or more essential in its greatness than the Eucharist, and the young child is well equipped to perceive and enjoy the gift it is."

We saw early on in our experience with young children (as Dr. Maria Montessori had previously witnessed) how attracted they are to the physical, sensorial aspects of the Mass: the liturgical colors, the beauty of the altar, and the pleasurable activity of setting up the model altar for themselves. We also saw how drawn they were to the silence and the solemnity and to participating with dignity and in processions and prayer celebrations."

- *The Good Shepherd and the Child: A Joyful Journey, Revised and Updated*, p 63

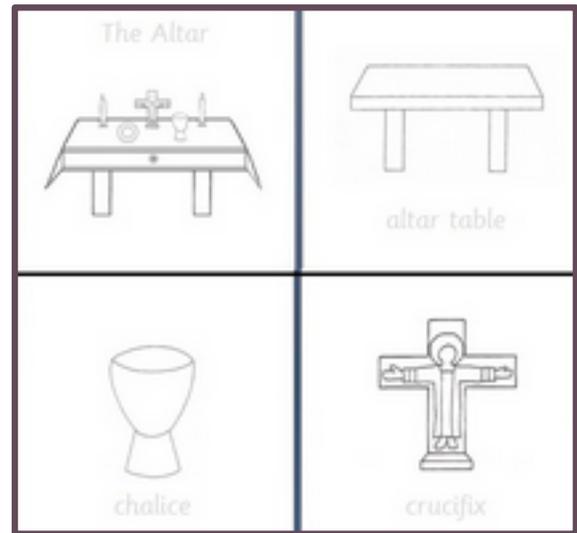
For the youngest children, the Model Altar materials include:

- A Model Altar Table – this small table is smaller than child-sized and sits on a lovely rug or a wooden platform to indicate its specialness.
- A White Altar Cloth – sized to fit the Altar Table
- A Crucifix – a San Damiano crucifix is preferred

- A Chalice – a small chalice in proportion to the Altar Table, usually made of brass or silver
- A Paten – a small paten in proportion to the Altar Table, usually made of brass or silver
- Two Candleholders with Candles, made of beeswax, like on the Altar in Church

These early presentations of the Altar have a sensorial character because they strike the senses: sight, hearing, and touch. Sensory awareness is the base for all knowledge for the younger child.

The children of the second plane (ages 6-9) have acquired or are working toward the ability to read. The Altar material for the older child consists of series of fourteen picture cards and fourteen text cards that describe in detail the meaning or significance of a particular article of the Mass. The children enjoy matching the correct images with the text. While some children may gravitate towards writing, others enjoy drawing and free art. The older child may eventually copy the words of the text cards and trace or draw their own illustration to make a booklet.



The oldest child (ages 9-12) will have the opportunity to go even deeper into the Eucharist. The older child has come to know that The Mass is so great that we think about it in many ways, over and over again, we continually come back to it in the Atrium. For the youngest child we begin with presentations that will deepen the child’s interest and attraction to the liturgy, as well as help them be at home in Church and prepare them for these later presentations on the Mass which focus more directly on the core mysteries of the Eucharist.

The Mass is a great gift to the child, to each family, and to the Church. In *The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd* we allow the child and the adult to enjoy this gift and rediscover its richness through work with simple materials. It is in the atrium, this place of prayer, in which the child’s work and study spontaneously become meditation, contemplation and prayer.