

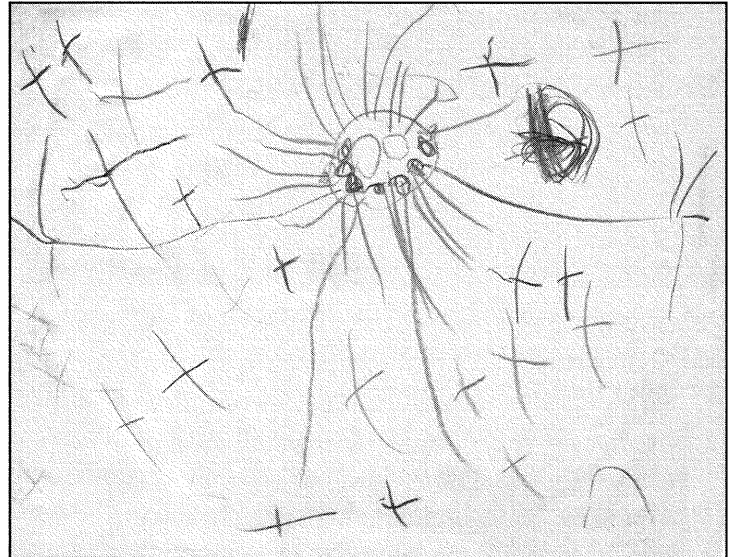
# Blossoms of Joy: The Youngest Children

ELIZABETH CALANCHINI

We have come from near and far to lift up and celebrate the new child and the new adult and their life with the Good Shepherd. The greatest journey is not that of the distances traveled, nor even that of the child growing in the sacred darkness of the womb for nine months before birth into the world; it is the journey that begins with God's plan for each one of us, the journey that begins when the Good Shepherd calls each human soul into being by name. "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I have appointed you a prophet to the nations" (Jeremiah 1:5). We are deeply indebted to all those souls throughout human history who have already responded to God's voice, to those who have answered the young prophet's cry. We know God called Maria, Sofia, Gianna, and Silvana to serve the child in this special way, and in doing so, to serve the adults who share their lives with the child. As they sought to know the mysterious will of God and serve him, they also began a lifelong journey of looking to the mystery of the child so that they might know and serve the children of the world. What did they discover when they made themselves present to the child in their prayer, observation, and work? They discovered a new child, a child of dignity, a joyful child, full of peace, one not yet fully seen and understood by the world—a prophet, a priest, a prince of peace. They discovered a new adult, one who is transformed by beholding the child and by kneeling in humility before the greatness of the smallest human being and their Creator.

Who is the youngest child? There is only one place to find the answer to this question, it is in the child. As we are made in the image and likeness of God, he shares the gift of himself, of his infinite Light, in a new and never to be repeated way every time a child enters the world. The Great Gift Giver shares his greatest gifts with those best able to receive them, the very youngest. Who are these youngest children of light who shine forth from the darkness of their mothers' wombs?

A mother shares this story: When I was about 6 to 8 weeks pregnant, I had an incredible experience of how spiritually aware my baby already was. My husband and I were at Mass one Sunday and as the time to receive Holy Communion approached, I began to tell baby how in a few moments Jesus was going to come into me and be very close to both of us. As I returned to the pew after



*Josie, age 4*  
*"God loves us." The figure at the center is red with yellow bursts of light surrounding the head. The blue arms reach out to cover the page. The figure is surrounded by multi-colored crosses."*

receiving Eucharist, I felt an overwhelming joy flood through me, emanating from my womb. I knew I wasn't feeling something that came from me, but rather from the little being inside of me. She was expressing her delight, and I could feel it in my body. This experience happened several times over the next month or so; even when I was distracted from the wonderful reality of what happens at Communion, my baby would remind me with her joy.

The youngest children proclaim themselves already in relationship with God in their joyous responses to his name. God is the human person's first and last environment. The young child has an innate understanding of this. The child knows there is One greater, who is the source of all life. Even before God is named he is a "felt reality" to the child.

Another story from a new mother: One evening when I was about 6 months pregnant, my husband was resting his head on my growing belly and talking to the baby. He was telling her how much he loved her, and how when she was born he would take care of her, protect her, provide for her, teach her . . . Joy had been holding very still (unusual for her!) as if she were listening,

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and as he finished speaking, she very gently tapped the spot where his cheek rested.

The child's deepest desire is a longing to remain in relationship with the One who gives life. The catechesis responds to the young child's sensitive periods for relationship and language by offering the language of the soul so the child can continue to remain and grow in relationship with God. Because the human person "is rooted and grounded in love" we are oriented toward the good, toward love, it is our home, our environment. Love seeks love. The youngest children are formed by this love; it is the clay of their being. The loving care of their parents helps them understand the love the Good Shepherd has for the sheep, a love that is everlasting, a love that gives life. Love responds to love. Consider these examples:

The almost 3-year-old boy is leaving the toddler atrium for his first tour of the Casa dei Bambini. His catechist has barely begun the tour, when he sees the Bible. He walks over and hugs the Bible and the golden cushion into his arms and places it on the barren prayer table, kneels on the cushion, opens the Bible and remains there for twenty minutes in quiet contemplation, occasionally speaking softly to the Good Shepherd.

A two year old tells the catechist that today she will read the Good Shepherd parable when the Bible is opened. The catechist offers the Bible to the child who then proclaims the parable verbatim with certainty.

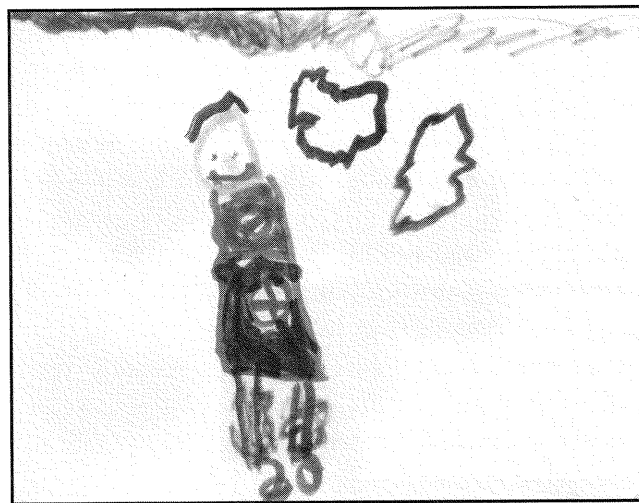
Are not these children like the prophets of old who listen and proclaim that God is coming, God is here! The security of being grounded in love not only forms the youngest child morally, but psychically and physically as well. The beauty of the Kingdom calls to the young child, and he or she responds by engaging with all the senses in an experience of mind, body, and soul acting as one.

In the young child, movement and speech develop as parallel languages; one ebbs while the other flows in the great dance of life, isolating the difficulty of the great achievement of the human mind, communication. For the youngest child there is no separation, everything they behold, everything they experience, is absorbed as reality. They begin to venture forth wriggling, crawling, standing, walking, running, and skipping to find and

enjoy the sights, sounds, touches, tastes, and aromas of life. They have sensitive periods for movement, language, and motor development that are only fulfilled and refined by their interaction with the environment that is safe and free for exploration. The child is constructing a personality from all the unique diversity in the first few years of life.

What kind of hunger is this that engages 100 billion neurons, as many neurons as stars in the Milky Way? How to find the delicate ingenious answer? Could it be that the secret of childhood lays within the child, awaiting discovery? Rather than waiting for the adult to impart all knowledge to the child, the child already has within a power so great it will never again be equaled in his life, that of the absorbent mind. This secret is only revealed to those with eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts to wonder, to those most like the child.

Once it was revealed by the child that she constructs herself by acting in her surroundings, by literally drinking in the environment and eating it up, like all good Italian *mammolinas*, our *quadrivium* of geniuses set about preparing a feast to match the child's appetite. The feast we call the prepared environment, the home, the toddler community, the *casa dei bambini*, the atrium. Maria, Sofia, Gianna, and Silvana became matchmakers



Sammy, age 5

"God knows what is in my heart. He knows what is in my stomach too." The figure is outlined in red, the chest is purple, and the abdomen is green. Both sections have a red circle with a red cross inside of it. The legs are blue, the feet purple, and there is a big red smile on the face.

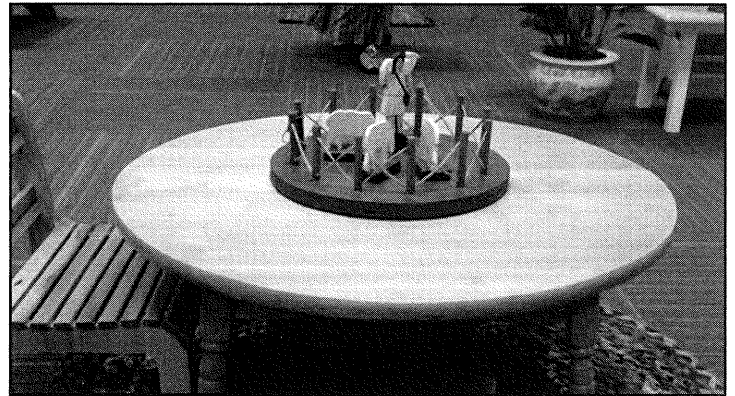
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between the child and the Kingdom of God. But, how to offer a grand feast of so many courses to the smallest? Slowly, by only offering the best, most essential food, they aided the child's palate in appreciation so that the child might sing the praises of the Master. As Sofia reminds us, "Rich food and not too much."

This radical simplicity means that every offering to the child is just a taste. If the gift is to be connatural with the one receiving it, the taste must be pure, unpolluted by anything that is not true. It must be given as a gift to be enjoyed over time and relished with every sense. A gift left to grow, just as the sower knows not how, as he sleeps, the seed grows. Our intrepid Italian *quadrivium* ventured forth and offered many tastes. If the taste was rejected, the search began anew. Maria Montessori called us to see the child as a new child every day, to look again, to listen again as the only way to come to know the child. Every time an offering, a material is a fit, the child teaches the master more about who the child is. We know it took Sofia and Gianna twenty-five years to offer a presentation on the Eucharist to the child in the most essential way. It took Maria many attempts before the children worked with the plane geometry figures she offered. After trying many different widths, it was a success when the 10 cm diameter was used, matching the human mathematical mind and the measurements of our homes, the earth, and our very bodies. Who are the children who know these secrets?

Did not Jesus thank his Father thus, "Thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes. . . . For such was thy gracious will" (Luke 10:21). The young child is full of vital life force, 30 trillion cells worth, awaiting their cosmic task of being and doing. Even the youngest child needs to perform precise useful actions with an intelligent aim. They have a need to engage in concrete real experiences, repeating them often as they discover how things work. Each repetition builds memory in every cell: muscle cells, skin cells, heart, and lung cells and then sends forth branches in the mind. For the youngest children, it is the process, not the product, that brings them satisfaction. They will happily scrub a clean table over and over again for the satisfaction the work cycle offers. The young child exerts maximum effort in his work.

The youngest child encounters everything as a reality of being and makes it his. Just as he is called by name, he wants to know the name of each new person and object. They want to know how things are used and how they are done. They want to do the work of the adult. Their cry is one of physical



independence, "Love me enough to help me to do it myself so that someday I, too, may do it for others." They ask the adult to "help me to draw closer to God," to "help me to be fully who I am, that I may have life and have it abundantly." The beauty of the environment calls to the child, inviting her to work. When the child becomes still or reaches out to touch something, he has made a choice, an unconscious choice. The child collaborates with the internal voice of his Creator to construct himself.

We know that to aid the child the adult must come to know who the child is, trust the child's internal guide, prepare an environment that meets the child's needs, and leave the child free to work while providing any necessary support. If offered too much, the child becomes incapable of choice; if not offered enough, their development is hindered. Because the child's work is internally motivated, when a work cycle is completed, an integration has been achieved and there is a newly acquired peace manifested as joy.

This joy comes from saying yes to who they are, saying yes to the Good Shepherd. The child first says yes because she desires what is being offered, it conforms to her will. Second, the child will say yes to please those she loves even if it doesn't conform to her will, and finally, the child will reach the third level of obedience and say yes to the good, even when it is difficult because her will has been developed through love, choice, order, and work.

In our sixtieth year, we celebrate a desert blossoming with joy as we ponder the mystery of the youngest children. In our sixtieth year, we stand at the canyon rim as we reach out to embrace the height and breadth and width of the catechesis in the adolescent, and in the mystery of the adult. We remember, we celebrate, we believe that the Good Shepherd loves us with an everlasting love and that we are his.