

# The Continuum of the Catechesis

Sofia Cavalletti

*An excerpt from The Religious Potential of the Child Six to Twelve Years Old by Sofia Cavalletti (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications: 2002)*

If we were to succeed at making of catechesis a symphony, the themes of ecumenism with other Christian churches and dialogue with other religions would be heard in the overture and developed throughout the entire symphony. Ecumenism is not just a branch of catechesis; rather, the spirit of ecumenism must permeate the whole of catechesis. Before we reach the point of discussing specific ecumenical issues, we must first make room for it on the ground level of the “building” we are constructing in catechesis. Ecumenism must be given a “spacious room” at the beginning of the religious formation of the person. Then, when it is confronted later on the more practical level of specific issues and application, it will not be seen as alien or extraneous, no matter how attractive and interesting a subject it happens to be in its own right.

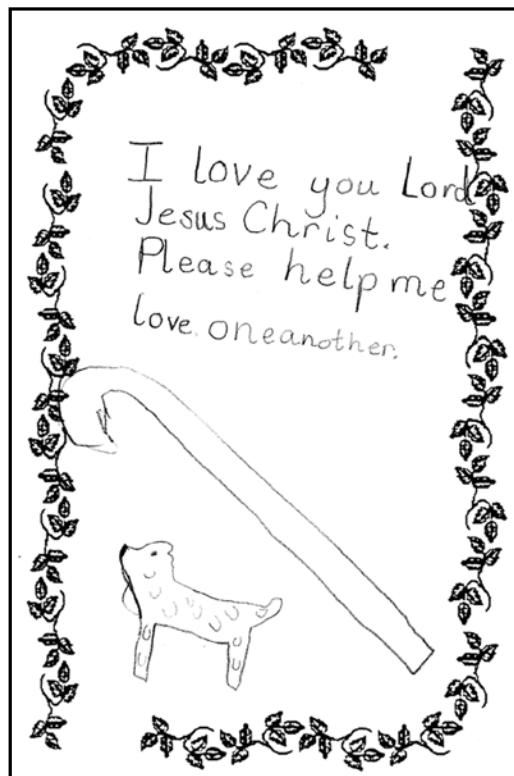
The subjects of ecumenism, interfaith dialogue and solidarity with all of creation are integral to what Maria Montessori names “cosmic education” or “expansive education” and about which we have already spoken. It is an education that seeks to discover the unlimited interconnections that exist, not only between human beings, but throughout the entire universe. Cosmic education aims at orienting one to reality and helping the person discover and “occupy” his or her rightful place in reality.

Ecumenical elements are already present in our work with the youngest children. Let us recall the parables of the kingdom we present to the 3 to 6 year-olds. The parable of the mustard seed and the parable of the leaven lift up the kingdom of God as the mystery of life itself, and both parables have a strong, theocentric focus. The mystery of life is the mystery of growth and transformation, the mystery of a great strength constantly at work within us and throughout the entire universe. “The kingdom of God is within (*entos*) you” or, as it can

also be read, “The kingdom of God is among you” (NRSV). The reality Jesus proclaims concerns our solidarity not just with our fellow human beings, but with all the other elements of creation that also participate in the powerful life force – God’s own strength – which is constantly drawing all of creation towards “the more.” Hence, we find in these parables the platform on which every subsequent discussion of ecumenism will rest.

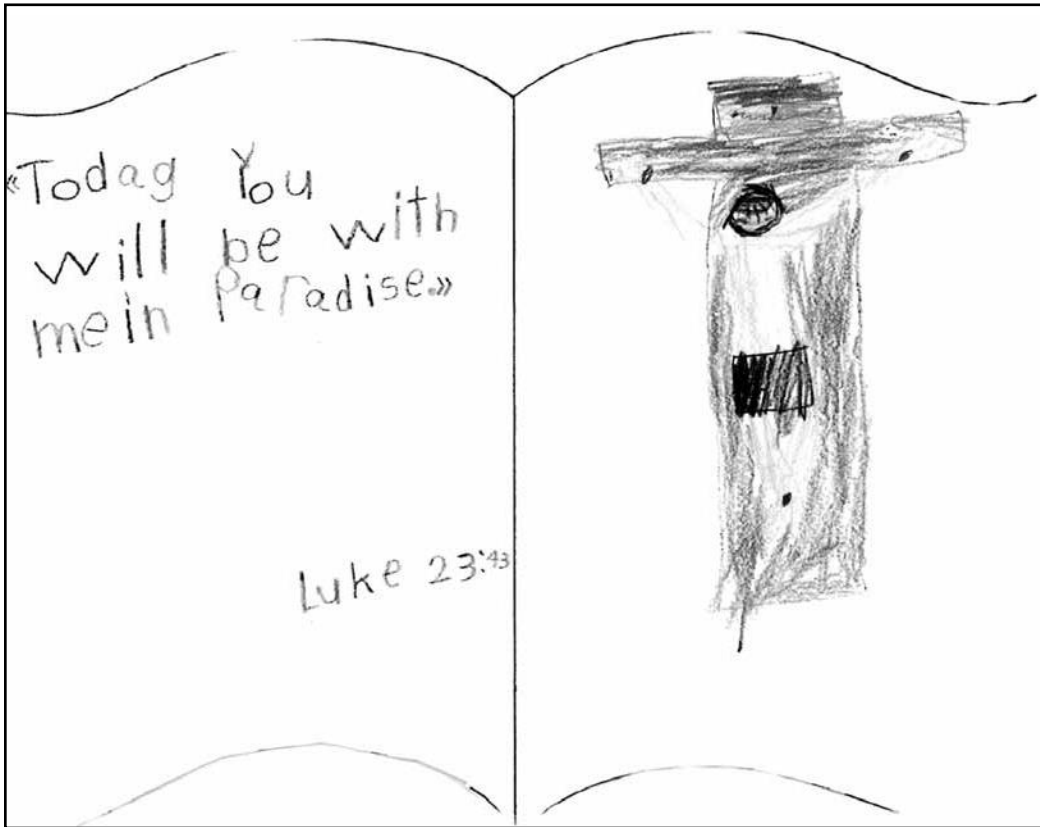
The subject of our solidarity with all of creation has important moral, social and ecological implications. (The biblical expressions, “cry of the earth” and “the cry of the poor,” are interchangeable.) . . .

We begin to ponder the kingdom of God in its historical dimensions with the children six years of age and older. What stands out is the One God



*Catherine, age 8  
St. Michael School  
West St. Paul, Minnesota  
(This prayer was written after the Mystery of  
Faith presentation.)*

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*Jacob, age 6  
Atrium of the Annunciation  
Sacramento, California  
(This drawing was done in response to the Fettucciapresentation. Jacob picked the quote and asked his mother to help him find it in the Bible.)*

who makes one history and reveals to us the underlying unity in reality, a unity that opens out onto a universal fellowship among all people and all creation. [We ponder] the history of the kingdom as a history of God's gifts – those of the mineral world, plant and animal kingdoms, other humans and our various kinds of relationships with them, and the supreme gift of God's own self in Jesus.

We are drawn into a personal relationship with God and to his plan of love. Pondering who God is and what God's plan is like by focusing on God's gifts allows us to recognize God as "the God who gives," to enjoy the gifts as well as the giver, and thus to respond with wonder, praise and thanksgiving.

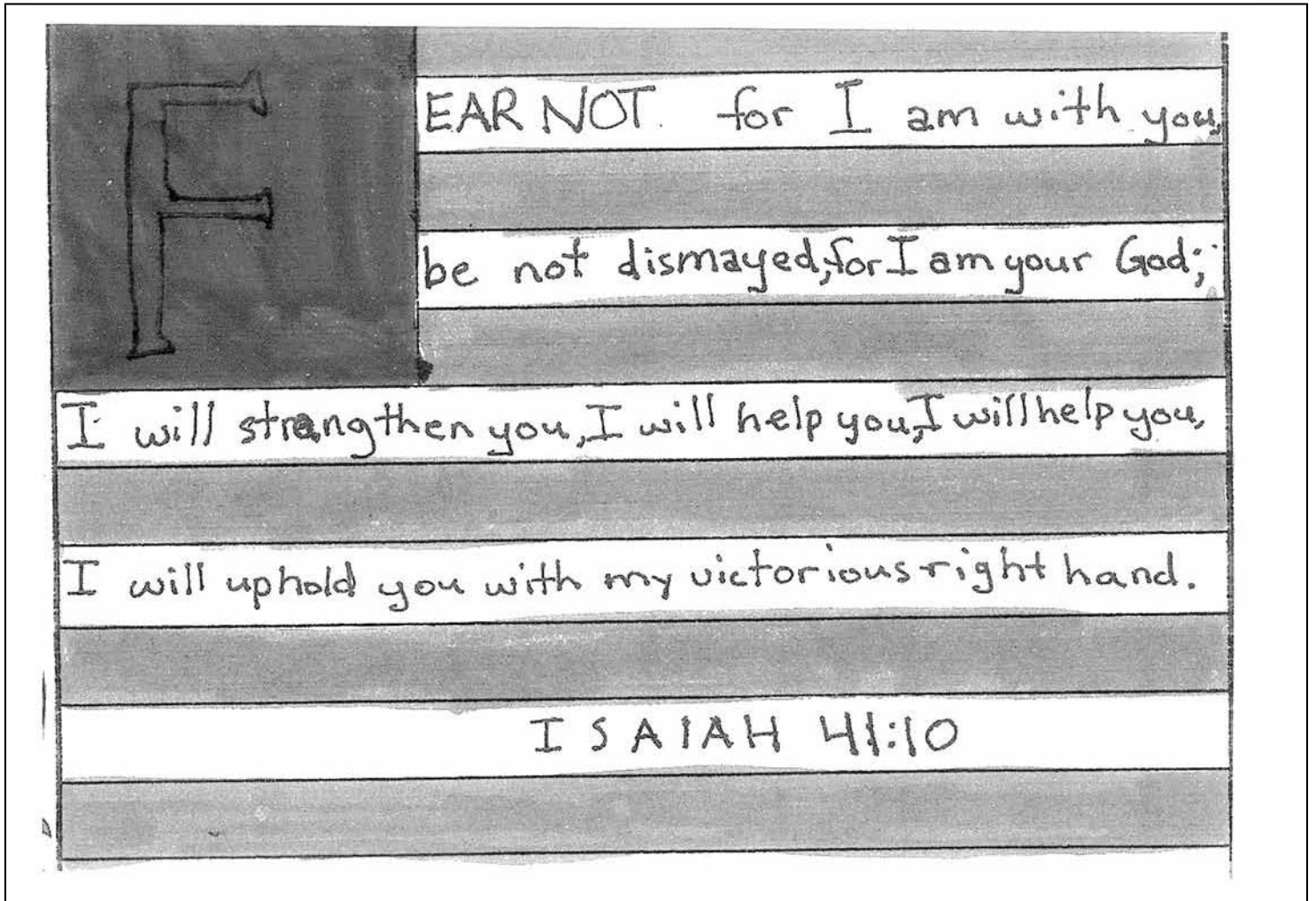
The covenant that inspires history contains within it an urgent solicitation to unity, while also providing the ecumenical discourse with its broadest possible base. God's plan being unfolded in history is to create communion, a communion that involves all of us – regardless of our personal position regarding the transcendent – and all of creation. Waiting for the moment of "the revealing of the children of God," the same moment for which "the whole creation has been groaning"

(Romans 8), creates a solidarity without bounds. It calls us to commitment and a particular way of life, both in regards to the natural world and to the history of salvation of which we are all a part.

Against the backdrop of this history, whose deepest urging is for communion, the divisions that exist at the heart of the Christian church cry out the loudest. On our timeline, The Plan of God, which depicts the history of the people of God, two bright red marks call attention to the major schisms of the church – that of the Eastern church and that of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation.

In looking at the liturgy, we also find the actualization of a history of communion, and thus a great wealth of ecumenical content. Eucharist, the sacrament of "the new and eternal covenant," is a celebration of the cosmic "uni-totally" of God's plan that is being revealed to us. In the eucharistic prayer, the prayers of intercession invite us to contemplate the far reaches of the communion we share in Christ's eucharistic presence. Our prayers *for* the dead, the saints, God's "pilgrim church on earth" and her servants are, in fact, our prayers *with* them.

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Because of the eucharistic presence, the prayers of intercession involve the whole church – its members who are living and those who have died – in a common prayer for the “peace and salvation of all the world.”

Precisely because the eucharist is the supreme sign of unity, it is also the moment when the wounds in the body of Christ are felt most intensely. In the eucharist we experience most acutely the contrast between the boundless “space” to which the liturgy invites us and the very real limitations and barriers imposed by our present situation in the church. This is the point that, so far, we have not found easy to explore with the children, even though they have had frequent and rich contact with people of other Christian churches. Nevertheless, it is clear that in developing the ecumenical discourse with children, we must apply the principle of “the hierarchy of truths”

*Lacy, age 11  
 Christ Church Cathedral  
 Nashville, Tennessee*

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(*Unitatis redintegratio*, 11), basing our overall plan of instruction on this principle and focusing with the children on the essentials.

A declaration of the Second Vatican Council on October 28, 1965, attested to the particular tie that binds the church with Israel, a bond that is discovered in “scrutinizing the mystery of the church.” This reality was further clarified in successive documents and has been articulated by John Paul II on more than one occasion. Among other things, he has affirmed that our two religious communities – Jews and Christians – “are linked at the level of their very identity.”

This is the underlying truth which must preside over all ecumenical work, and thus over all catechetical endeavors in ecumenism. Maria Vingiani writes that every ecumenical initiative must proceed according to a syllabus whose starting point is *a recognition of Israel’s identity and role* (author’s emphasis) and which is formulated on the assumption that we share with Israel the same “rich root of the olive tree” (Romans 11:17). Furthermore, all inter-confessional confrontations must be grounded in their common quest for the biblical-theological recovery of Jewish-Christian relations.

The essentiality of the child has been our guide in approaching the point made above. Accordingly, beginning with the youngest children, we have paid particular attention to the fact that Jesus was a Jew. The infancy narratives of Jesus, found in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, provide us with the best place to start highlighting this fact. He was born in the land of Israel, and his mother was also a daughter of that nation. Around his crib were gathered shepherds, the first to be called, and also the magi, who had come from faraway places and from other peoples, because this child came not just for his own people but for all the world.

This same universality, which begins in Israel and is sounded forth in the birth narratives, can be heard again in the account of Jesus’ death. Around the cross are the Roman soldiers, the Roman centurion who recognizes Jesus as the Son of God, the mother of Jesus, and John, himself a Jew. When Jesus celebrates the Last Supper, he is celebrating a Jewish rite that was and still is central to the religious life of the Jews.

After six years of age, when the children are presented the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, they are at an age when they can readily recognize that pharisaism is a universal phenomenon that, to some degree, can be found in each of us.

Our reflections on the liturgy bring us to consider how Jews and Christians alike celebrate history in the memorial.....In the memorial we both live the same, deep level of religious life. Even though the events we are celebrating might differ, both Jews and Christians share the same perspective of the mystery of time in the history of salvation. Past events are never closed within themselves; rather, they are re-actualized in the present and are projected toward a future fulfillment.

Still, it is the children, with their particular sensitivities, who receive the message in a whole-person way, specifically here, the message of our deep ties to Israel. For example, their sensitivity to language gives them a sharp ear for liturgical language, the language of prayer. Thus, we call their attention to certain words we hear in the liturgy that don’t sound English or have the usual English spellings, words like *amen*, *alleluia*, *hosanna*. The children are very interested in these words and are delighted to discover that they are Hebrew words which both Jews and Christians pray during their worship.

When we enter the study of biblical history with children of 9 to 12 years of age, we look at Israel’s own history, as well as its place in the whole of history. We ponder its small beginnings and its development right up to today and even until the end of history, the time we are awaiting and about which the prophets have spoken ..... Moreover, it is important to clarify that when we speak of the bond between Israel and the church, we are referring to something that exceeds our common biblical roots and has led to the Jews being defined as “the elder brother” of Christians for the past two thousand years. . . .

We realize that [these] points we have highlighted only pertain to a platform for developing more thorough and detailed endeavors in ecumenism, particularly those concerning our relations with other Christian churches. The road of ecumenism is a long one, which we have only just begun. It is a fascinating road that takes us from our own “country and kindred” and carries us, in company with Abraham, to “the land that I will show you” (Genesis 12:1)



