

Do You See What I See?

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The atrium is a place prepared for the religious life of children in the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd (CGS). There are simple yet beautiful materials available to the children to help them absorb the most essential proclamations of the Christian faith. Maria Montessori named this prepared environment for the space in a basilica between the entrance and the sanctuary where catechumens in the early Church were prepared for a full life in the Church. As those of us who are blessed to be a catechist in CGS have witnessed, the atrium is a place between the world and the church where a child can encounter God.



The atrium is also a chamber of the heart. We have found that the heart of the child is deep and open to the loving call of our Good Shepherd. We know that when given time and the space of an environment prepared for their religious life, children are quite content to contemplate the mysteries of the Kingdom of God. They have a great capacity to understand the transcendent nature of God; and their natural spirituality is revealed in their joy, awe, wonder, prayer, and stillness. Like Mary in the second chapter of the Gospel of Luke, they keep all these things and ponder them in their hearts.

We have observed as well that children's spirituality is often manifested in their artwork. We pay special attention to this artwork of children because it can profoundly articulate their relationship with God.

The National Association of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd (CGSUSA) has developed a traveling art exhibit and short lecture event named *tHeART of the Child*. This exhibit offers a glimpse into what children ponder in their hearts, their

conversations with God. The national premiere of *tHeART of the Child* was held in November, 2016, in Scottsdale, Arizona, at the Old Adobe Mission. It seemed the perfect environment to house this exhibit which was showcased on four floor-to-ceiling screens shaped in a rectangle in the middle of the church.

The exhibit took three years to prepare, and we eagerly awaited this night. We began in prayer seeking to be together with Jesus, our Good Shepherd, who praised the Father, the Lord of heaven and earth for revealing to little children what remains hidden to the learned and the wise because he is pleased to do so! We pondered Jesus' joyful proclamation: "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see . . . , for prophets and kings desired to see what you see . . ." (Luke 10:23-24).

What do we see when we look at the art of children? Do you see what I see? Do you see what the children are proclaiming? Those who came to the exhibit had time to see a glimpse of the relationship God can have with the young child as evidenced by the artistic expression of children. The discovery of the ability to express oneself is for every human being a great joy. To be present when children begin to make this discovery is also a great joy for the catechist.

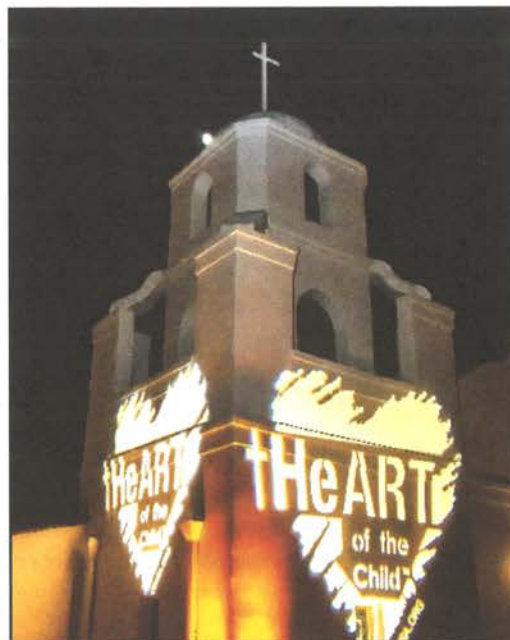


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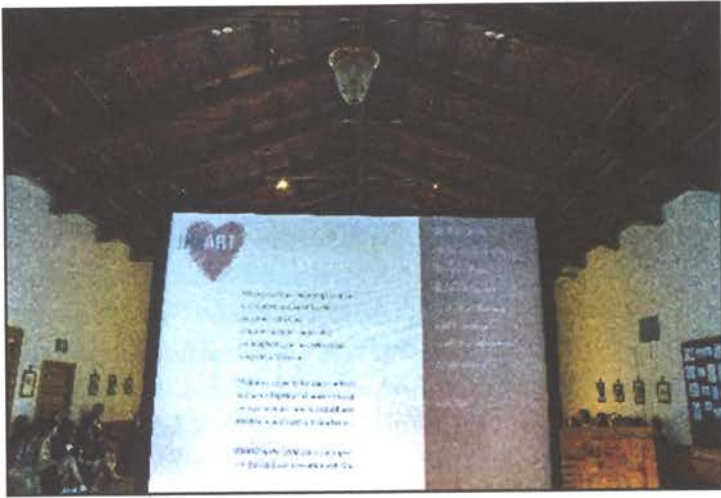


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Tilde Cocchini, catechist and collaborator with Sofia and Gianna, reminds us that we are spectators of a very special concentration in the atrium when a child chooses to draw what he or she conceives as a response to what the child has heard. Through drawing, the child demonstrates a particular listening with God, a way of contemplative prayer.

We know how important it is that the catechist gives children all the time needed to receive the Word of God, absorb it, make it their own, and enjoy it. When this time is given, responses come forth spontaneously. Just as we can put care into ensuring that prayer is not a mechanical repetition of formulas, we also need to take care that children are able to express themselves as spontaneously as possible. The artwork presented in the art exhibit highlights the free expression that articulates the children's profound theological depth. We, as catechists, never tell children what to draw, we simply provide the best materials we can and the time and space for the children to enjoy their relationship with God.

At the premiere of our exhibit, I asked those present, "Do you see what I see?" The first piece of artwork I shared was from a child whom I had observed. She was five years old. We know that observation enables us to better serve children's relationship with God. I chose one little girl to "see." The catechist proclaimed to the children the parable of the hidden treasure found in the Gospel of Matthew (13:44): "The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure buried in a field, which a person finds and hides again, and out of joy goes and sells all that he has and buys that field." As customary, following the presentation, the children freely

chose their work for the day. This little girl went to work with the materials from the Nativity. This is a favorite work of the children, so I didn't think anything of it. The assistant read the account of the Nativity from the Gospel of Luke to the little girl while she moved the figures of Mary, Joseph, Jesus, and the shepherds in the diorama according to the Scripture reading. She was peaceful and recollected in her work. From this material she moved on to the art materials, choosing her colored pencils carefully. Then she made the drawing.

Looking closely, we can see that the child drew more than a description of the Nativity. She synthesized in one drawing the Christian message she had heard proclaimed that day—the birth of Jesus and the parable of the hidden treasure. Visually this child meaningfully interpreted both scriptures.

Look at the light radiating around the infant Jesus! Isn't it true that the yellow colored pencil is always the shortest one in the atrium? Notice the mark on baby Jesus' head. It is the same color as the little girl's flesh and shows the indelible mark of the One who claimed her in Baptism. Notice, most importantly, she added something not usually found in a typical rendition of the



*Hannah, age 5
Atrium of the Little Flower at St. Anne
Gilbert, Arizona*

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birth of Christ—a treasure box with a key! From the moment this child heard “a treasure hidden in a field,” she had been contemplating the greatest treasure that just happened to come to us hidden in a manger. Until that day I had never connected the Incarnation to this parable! Sofia often said that the parables of the Kingdom of God cause the children’s eyes to shine with light and to glow with wonder. They help the child to contemplate the mystery of life itself. It is easy to see this in the artwork of this child.

I shared some art pieces from the book *The Development of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd: Inside the Atria in Rome*, along with Sofia’s commentary from the book. Each time they looked at a piece of art, the adults were invited to “see.”

I described one final piece of artwork, and told the story surrounding it, even though I did not have the art piece at the exhibit as it is now held in our archives in Rome. This child’s art spoke of the deep love of the child. José Santos was five. He lived in the dense green mountains of Honduras. I was with the Franciscan Friars of the Renewal (CFRs) for a Level I course. José had hepatitis. So he came down the mountain along with his mother and aunt. It was a two-day journey. When they arrived in Comayagua, they found the hospital staff was on strike and there was no one to care for José. Someone told them to go to the Friars. They have a compound called Casa Guadalupe where much good work happens. We were staying there. The three arrived at night. They were hungry and tired. The Friars immediately took care of them. I was amazed at how many beans José could eat! He was so hungry. The Friars warned me not to expect much interaction with José since I was an Anglo. The next morning, I was preparing the atrium for the catechist formation when I saw his little face at the door. I invited him in; we could not speak with words but spoke in signs of friendship. I gave him a tour of the atrium and did my best to invite him into the work. When we got to the art materials his eyes lit up and I made it clear he could use whatever he wanted. For twenty minutes he drew peacefully and happily. I continued my work. When he had finished, he brought his drawing to me. He had drawn two houses and a small figure moving from one house to the other. The first house was very small and colored green as was the small figure that emerged from it. It was plain to see that the figure moved from this small house to the larger one on the right that was colored yellow and had a cross on top. There was a large yellow figure

standing at the door welcoming the smaller one who now was also yellow. Do you see what I see?

It was very beautiful. It was a reflection of José’s journey down the mountain to this place of Christ. He was very happy with his work, and I was too. I tried to make that known to him. He kept handing me his artwork and I realized he was offering it to me as a gift. This is who they are, these children of God. This is how well they love, offering such a precious gift to a stranger. This is how closely and deeply they know God.

Bishop Thomas Olmsted of Phoenix joined us that evening and was captivated by the children’s work. He said of the exhibit: “Thank you for this wonderful *tHeART of the Child* exhibit. It was well done. What struck me again, as it has when I was with you before, is the way that God speaks to children; and then, how through the children, God speaks to us. They awaken us to the mystery of God’s presence and love in refreshing ways. The art itself has a freshness to it; many of us who don’t work daily with children appreciate you helping us see all that is there.”

Over the next two days, when the exhibit was open to catechists and the general public, many adults came and shared how seeing the exhibit had deepened their own walk with God as they caught a glimpse of the theological depth of children expressed through their art.

Tilde has said, “We are spectators of a special concentration in the atrium when a child chooses to do a drawing of what he or she conceives. Through the drawing, the child expresses a particular listening that God has engaged the child in, a contemplation that we can compare to another free expression of the child—prayer.” This work of the child takes time and space and an adult prepared to serve the child. This is what the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd can offer the children, the families, the parishes, and the Church.

It is the mission of CGSUSA to support catechists, parents, and others in the Church and beyond, as they grow in their understanding of the religious potential of children. We hope that this exhibit will invite many into understanding our noble mission. We hope that this exhibit will also deepen and share our understanding of the child’s relationship with God. CGSUSA would like to see *tHeART of the Child* travel so it can be shared in regions around the country where CGS is thriving.