

Remembering Gianna

through Listening to God with Children:
The Montessori Method Applied to the Catechesis of Children

Introduction

Many of us were introduced to Gianna Gobbi and Montessori philosophy in a wonderful treasure, Listening to God with Children. In the author's note, Gianna reminds us of Maria Montessori's prayer, which seems appropriate for us to use now, as we walk through the pages of our beloved core text as we Remember Gianna.

THE ENVIRONMENT

Gianna shared with us about preparing the environment: The Atrium is a place for the proclamation of and response to God's Word. The Atrium is an environment which is carefully prepared to foster the religious life of the child. The materials and images placed there help the child to concentrate and reflect: thus, they nurture the child's natural capacity for contemplation.

R. Help us, O God, to enter into the secret of childhood, so that we may know, love and serve the child in accordance with the laws of thy justice and following thy holy will.

THE ADULT

Gianna told us that the environment and material would be insufficient without a prepared adult. And how do you prepare an educator, catechist? Gianna tells us about the catechist, that he or she "must have the quality of the spirit of the scientist ..."

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THE MATERIAL

The material placed in the prepared environment is, first of all, not to be seen as the teacher's aids, that is, as aids to the teacher's lessons or presentations. The material is designed for the personal work of the children. The materials prepared for the children's use in the atrium are meant to facilitate meditation and lead to prayer.

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THE THREE-PERIOD NAME LESSON

The three-period lesson is a technique that Montessori adapted from her earliest experiences with children and used for each presentation in the Children's House. We apply this technique in catechesis, because it respects the stages of the child's psychological maturation. Besides leading to an understanding of the subject being presented, the three-period lesson is a reminder to us that in all communications, even with older children, it is important to speak in a simple way.

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ORGANIZATION OF A CATECHETICAL CENTER

The catechist creates the physical environment, but above all, the catechist must create a spiritual environment. The spiritual environment is one which should be conducive to helping both the children and the adults within that environment to be attentive and responsive to God's presence.

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WELCOMING THE CHILDREN

Gianna lifts up for us how the catechist may assist the child in becoming acclimated to the atrium environment and the atrium community. Why have we come here? What will we do here? Talk about God, listen to God, work, and sing, and pray are some of the things we will do here to come to know God better.

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FIRST PRESENTATIONS TO INTRODUCE THE MASS

During the altar presentations when we are admiring with the children the beauty of the articles, we are also saying that the real articles (the ones in the church) are even more beautiful.

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TWO LINES OF EDUCATION

The phrase that synthesizes the Montessori method of education is, "Help me to do it by myself." Likewise, as catechists we attend to the silent plea of the child, "Help me to draw close to God by myself."

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THE FOUR PHASES OF DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION

The Four Planes of Development offer the catechist a framework for understanding the development of the child. Although the four phases are distinct periods of growth and development, preceding and following one another, they are also interlaced and form a unity in the impulses that compel human beings toward the goal to which they are attracted.

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THE SENSITIVE PERIODS

Although Montessori did not name or identify a specific religious sensitive period, she did observe and speak about a particular interior sensibility in young children which she referred to as a "religious or spiritual sense". It is manifested in the awe and enjoyment of the children when presented the Christian Mystery, when engaging in the silence exercises, and when participating in simple rituals like carrying a religious article in a procession.

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FREEDOM, INDEPENDENCE AND DISCIPLINE

In the atrium, the concentration which springs from discipline and work leads to meditation and prayer. This is the goal toward which the child strives in order to encounter God.

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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF WORK

Gianna allows us to see that if the hand has been the instrument of the development of humanity, then education ought to take it more into consideration, because we know that the human person is constructed through the work of his or her hands. The child who works with his or her hands has a stronger character.

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THE RELATION BETWEEN THE CHILD'S WORK AND COSMIC WORK

When children have the possibility of a freely chosen work which allows them the opportunity to explore and discover things in detail and the secrets they hold, the children are drawn to the educational environment as the bee is drawn to the flower.

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HELPING THE CHILD TO PRAY

Prayer is first of all, listening to God. Prayer is initiation to the mystery of God and is, itself, mystery. It is a means of knowing God. It is a means of God's self-revelation to us, and it is an instrument of our personal response to God.

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Let us pray,

Lord, my Shepherd,

it is with great fondness, we remember our friend, Gianna Gobbi,
and the many gifts she shared with us, so that we may better
listen to You with the children.

May our preparation for and work in the atrium
allow us to better know, love and serve the child.

We ask this in your most holy name. ***Amen.***