

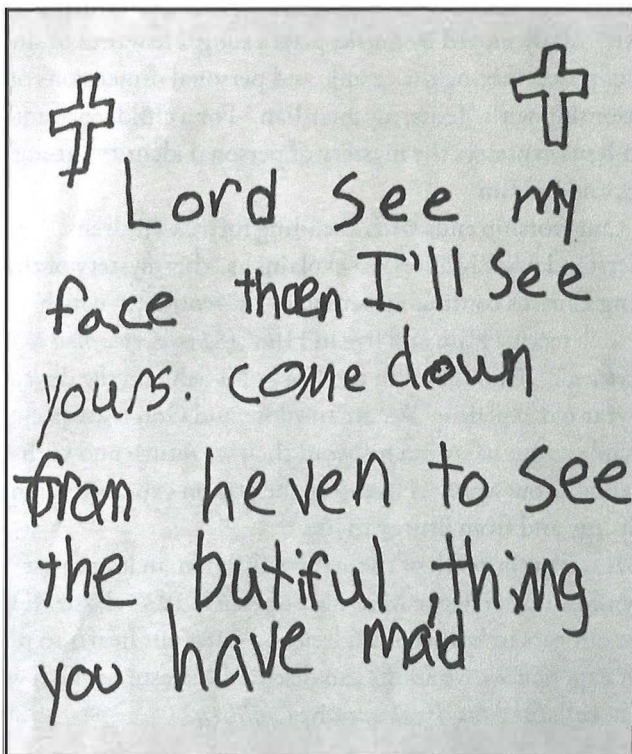
The Mass Explained by Children

Voices from the Atrium Echo in Liturgy

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The Mass Explained to Children was published in 1933. In this slim volume, Maria Montessori offered simple and beautiful descriptions of the true depth of liturgy, hoping that her words would be accessible and inspiring to young people. Today, after decades of Montessori-inspired work in the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, the children themselves could surely offer their own book: *The Mass Explained to Adults*. The work of the children, their insights, and voices can bring adults to a deeper understanding of the mysteries we celebrate when we worship together.

If children were to explain the Mass to grown-ups, they might start by noting that the liturgy begins with a journey, a procession, made in joy and hope. In the atrium, when the seasons change, our little ones delight in their own processions to the prayer table. Like sheep, who follow in answer to the Shepherd's call, we enter into the celebration. What is in our hearts as we sing? In the atrium, nine-year-old Maddy from St. Joseph Montessori in Columbus, OH, wrote this prayer:



Couldn't adults benefit from this kind of confident expectation as the liturgy begins?

Children might then explain to adults that the Mass begins with the sign of the cross. Maria Montessori describes this gesture as the way a believer "was recognized by his brothers" and "a sign of victory" (*Mass Explained to Children*, 54, 55). Children seem to intuit these dimensions of this gesture-prayer. In the atrium, a six-year-old girl wrote the Trinitarian formula. Then she revealed what the words mean to her: "Dear god Thank you for always Being with us."

The penitential rite prepares us for encounter. Our older children in the atrium are keenly aware of their need for mercy. One twelve-year-old's reflection is a poem-prayer, written as if God were speaking and planning to rescue his people. She voices both God's immense love and humanity's free will.

"But first they must let me into there [sic] hearts."

As we beat our breasts in a gesture of contrition, we adults search for words as eloquent as these.

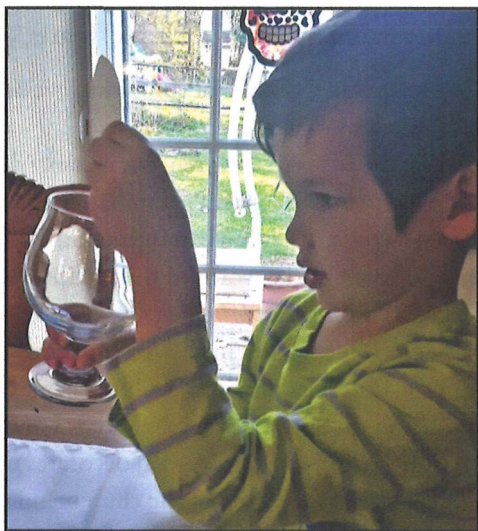
In explaining the Mass to children, Montessori describes the reading of the Scriptures: "There is a great stir when we are about to hear the divine words. . . . You can imagine them saying: 'We have come to listen to the words of the Divine Master! Let us stand up to hear'" (*Mass Explained to Children*, 61, 64). What we hear together in Bible studies in the atrium allows for greater engagement in the liturgical hearing. Children can explain to adults the transformative power of God's Word. For example, a girl in the Level III atrium (for ages 9–12) decorates her page in a style that recalls the stained glass of the church and writes, "We are changed after hearing your story, and wish the world would follow your example." Another Level III child writes, "I love the bible it is full of mysteries." If adults could only display such affection for the Living Word!

After the homily, the gifts are brought forward and preparations are made. In the atrium, we sometimes ask why. Wouldn't it be more efficient to have everything close to the priest? Everything mixed, washed, and ready for the consecration? The children see the folly in this question. Worship is not about

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efficiency! The people's part—our gifts offered and our work in preparing—is a way to linger with the One who loves us so very much. Thus, a five-year-old boy squeezes the word *love* on a page as many times as he can. These words surround a big yellow heart, which perhaps signifies the Light, also colored red, which may signify God's great love. But there are also small hearts, similarly yellow and red, which may signify the people's love. Near his own name, he sets a small heart. Is he telling us that our gifts decorate God's gift in a celebration of love?

We enter into the Eucharistic Prayer, "penetrated with the same joy. He is about to arrive!" (*Mass Explained to Children*, 75). Here, too, the child can guide the adult to a deeper appreciation of the thanks and praise we offer. A six-year-old boy writes: "holy, holy, holy on God / love in the Spirit of God / he takes away the sins / of the world and glory to God / glory to God to God in the heist [sic]." There is a seriousness mixed with joy here, as the child's work is a bridge linking liturgy and Scripture, built with his earnest desire to add his own voice to the song of angels.



*Christopher, age four
St. Joseph Catholic Church, Spring City, PA
Christopher reflects on the gesture of offering.*

As we hear the account of the Last Supper, the work of the child offers the adult a fresh understanding. Jesus gives the chalice of the "new and everlasting covenant" for the apostles "and for many." In a drawing, a twelve-year-old connects herself to the reality of what took place in the Cenacle many years ago.

WE ARE THE MANY she writes at the top of her drawing, as the cross proclaims, YOU'RE NOT ALONE. The bread and wine, along with the lighted candle at the base of the cross set the liturgical context. The back of the sheet of paper is filled with exuberant writing, "I am the many" over and over, as if saying it once is just not enough. For this girl, on the brink of adolescence, time and space have been bridged through the sacramental signs, and she has discovered that Jesus gave his whole self, in the Eucharist and on the cross, for her personally!

Then follows the Eucharistic prayers of intercession. We hear these words week after week, but to the ears of a child, they can be ever new. A twelve-year-old girl uses the material and copies the words: "Be pleased to confirm in faith and charity, your pilgrim church on earth." She notes the humility and sincerity expressed there. She lingers over the line "pilgrim church on earth." Do we adults allow ourselves to be moved by such phrases?

Communion comes next. It is a moment of intense encounter. In the atriums, our children are given the time and space to encounter the same Lord of the liturgy, albeit in other ways. Yet, the call to communion is strong. A seven-year-old writes, "Come be a part of me," and leaves the paper on our prayer table. A six-year-old boy slips a note into the model tabernacle: "I want to see you." Twelve-year-old Matthew, who is particularly moved by music, pens a song. He writes of sin and of peace, mixing the cosmic and personal dimensions of his relationship with "Jesus, my guardian." For a child, encounter with Jesus expresses the mystery of personal identity through, with, and in Him.

Our worship ends with a sending forth. Children understand what Montessori explains as "this mystery of the Living Christ's continuous return to the world, [in which we] . . . receive Him and live in Him" (*Mass Explained to Children*, 8). Familiar with the story of Noah and the dove, a ten-year-old explains: "We are the dove and God is are [sic] owner he sends us out to spread his word then we return and with that he sends us out again." Here, too, the atrium experience connects to liturgy and from liturgy to life.

It seems the work of the atrium children, in its earnest essentiality, can rewrite Maria Montessori's 1933 classic. If we open our ears to hear the children and open our hearts to ponder their experiences, we adults can discover a treasure, which we might call *The Mass Explained by Children*.