

The Meaning, Importance and Limitations of Our Catechetical Materials

Gianna Gobbi
Photo by Elizabeth Piper



Although the most important part of our work is to give the announcement (*kerygma*), the catechetical materials have a pedagogical function and are the instruments and means that distinguish our catechesis. The materials reflect the methodological character of our work, which is based on the educational principles of Maria Montessori.

The subject of materials might seem simple and even unimportant, for it has to do with objects—little things, doll-like figurines and such—that are nothing beside the Mystery or the true “material” that is the Word of God. What is beautiful about our material is that, even though it is lowly in nature, it serves as an instrument of knowledge of the Mystery.

Why do we need to think of a “method” and a “material” when the church has already given us its own methodology and “material” in the liturgy? What purpose is served by an additional material, or one might say a “sub-material,” which could seem to be useless or even a hindrance?

GIANNA GOBBI

We can only find the answer to these questions as we turn our eyes to the children, toward their deep needs in each developmental stage, the particular way they enter into vital contact with reality, and how we place ourselves in relationship to them. Also, in the religious arena, we need to keep in mind the stages of development articulated by Maria Montessori. Here I am referring to Montessori’s four planes of development and specifically to the first two: zero to six years of age (infancy or early childhood), and six to twelve years of age (childhood). These two developmental periods have different characteristics. The first is more sensorial, while the second is more abstract and reflective. The differences in the two phases help clarify what Montessori is referring to when she distinguishes between religious sentiment and religious education.

Religious sentiment is a manifestation of the natural development of the child. The development of religious sentiment is akin to the development of senses, language and movement, and is spurred from within the child. Religious education is the task of the educator, who draws from the heritage of culture and tradition, selecting and presenting what is most appropriate according to the developmental stage of the child. We already know very well how important it is to know who the child is in each developmental stage and how critical our own formation as catechists is. As catechists, we need to be well prepared in the areas of doctrine, pedagogy and methodology.

The Role of the Materials

Everything that is placed in the environment is an instrument of education, whether directly or indirectly: the space itself, the persons who are there and everything in the room, including the furniture and all decorative, utilitarian and didactic objects that are found there. What we are focusing on for now are the materials that are specifically designed for the education of the children: materials in the strict sense of the word—structured didactic material and sensorial materials. We seek here to deepen

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our understanding of the specific nature of the materials we use in the atrium.

In the marketplace we can find an infinite variety of materials in the literal sense of the word: synthetic fibers, glass, metal, and so on, some of which never used to exist. Modern technology has provided us with some of these, like plastics. We use these materials in our everyday lives. They are found in laboratories, in our homes and businesses, in our means of transportation and in every area of life. The variety and number of materials that surround us multiply our opportunities for sensorial experience, and yet, at the same time, their very number tends to numb our perceptions as to their individual characteristics and differences.

At the same time, so many new materials and media have made it possible to expand knowledge of reality through a form of nonverbal communication in which the message is conveyed through graphic design, color, objects, and so on, thus producing a more sensorial form of communication. Today's world of communication engages all the senses. We might think about color-coding, graphic symbols, designs and the like that are used in hospitals and museums, as well as on street signs and tourist maps. Children experience this sensorial form of communication in the world around them. They see it and often touch it, but it is not really intended for them; it does not necessarily help their understanding or educate them.

In the specific world of education and instruction we now have many instruments that are used for communication with children: transparencies, drawings, objects, educational games,

During the session a girl was working with the altar materials. Two wooden figures were facing the altar as if in a congregation. When asked who they were or if they had names, she said, "No, they are anybody. Anyone can come to the table of the Good Shepherd."

—*Carrie, age 5*
Ascension Church
Oak Park, Illinois

and so on, many of which are designed to teach a specific skill or impart specific knowledge. If we want to use these materials in a truly educational way, we must choose from among the many possible materials, and we must be clear about the purpose and proper use of each material.

Teaching Aids

Let us now consider structured teaching aids, many of which were produced from the educational experiences of various pedagogues, including Froebel, Decroly, Sorelle and Agazzi, along with many other, more recent ones. The main objective of these teaching aids has been that of making scholastic achievement easier for children, rather than developing their natural capacities, senses and movement. These aids elicit certain mental and educational processes in children and are intended to make them more secure in the particular discipline under study. Furthermore, these structured material aids function primarily as teachers' aids in giving a lesson to the child.

The Developmental, Sensorial Materials of Maria Montessori

According to the Montessori method, the *Casa dei Bambini* ("Children's House") is

the environment prepared by Maria Montessori for children three to six years of age. All the things that make up the environment—the furniture, decorations, objects designed for practical life activities, as well as structured didactic materials—are instruments of education, whether directly or indirectly, and favor the child's auto-education and independence.

Among the direct aids provided with these aims in mind are the developmental, sensorial materials. Through systematic, sensorial experiences with materials that are freely chosen by the child, the senses are developed and refined, and the capacities of the child are prepared for other areas of learning, including reading, writing and arithmetic. These materials are not designed for random exploration; rather, they have a focused aim and are to be used in a precise way. A well-trained teacher demonstrates their proper use to the child, so that the child might then use them independently to maximum advantage.

The sensorial materials and the materials designed for the acquisition of culture differ substantially from the teaching aids we have spoken of earlier. The sensorial materials are designed to develop the child's abilities rather than

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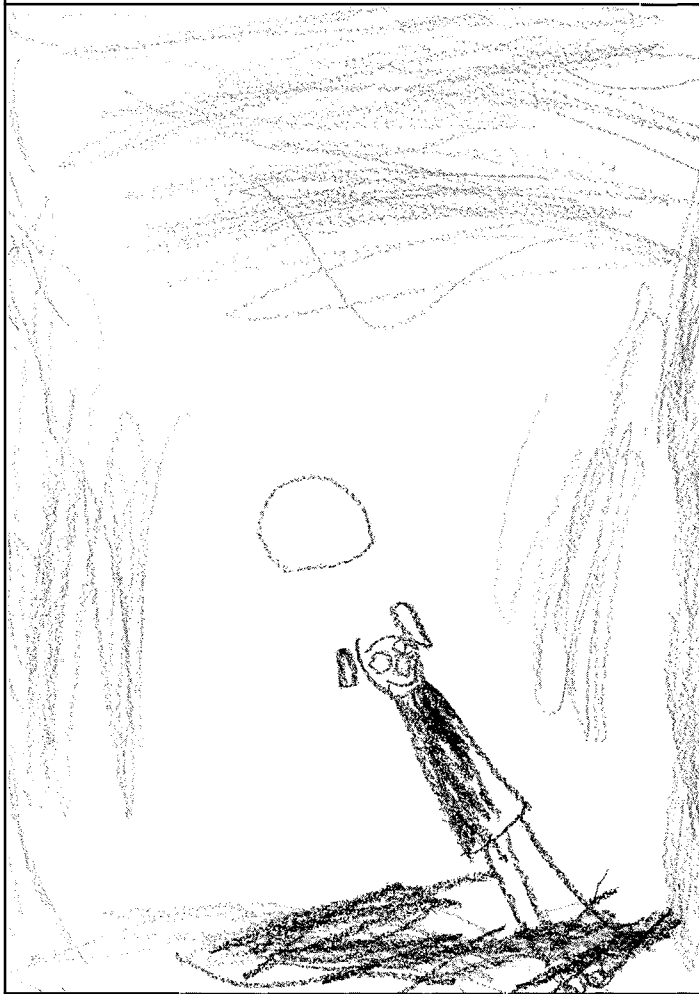
to ensure the acquisition of a particular piece of information. Above all, the sensorial materials are an aid to the child rather than to the teacher.

Montessori defined her sensorial material as being a sort of “alphabet” that gives the child the necessary tools for “reading” the environment. Thus, the sensorial materials serve to guide the child in ordering and clarifying the various sensorial impressions accumulated from everyday experience in the environment. The child’s use of the developmental, sensorial materials creates within him or her a certain mental order that serves as a guide in spontaneous work. These materials incite spontaneous repetition of the exercise and develop the child’s powers of concentration through the manipulation of the material and observation of its physical characteristics, and the materials change according to the child’s handling of them. Thus, we can say that the sensorial material is an instrument of the child’s relationship with the environment and an aid to the child’s development.

Why can it be said that the sensorial material is scientific? The sensorial material is scientific because its development is the result of long, experimental studies involving the observation of the way the child reacts to and relates with reality. Furthermore, these sensorial materials possess certain important characteristics for the child’s development.

First of all, each of these materials has a built-in *control of error* so that the child can work independently, without having to rely on the teacher for the discovery and correction of mistakes.

The second characteristic pertains to *aesthetics*. Although the furnishings and



Anne, age 3
St. Paul's
Episcopal Church
Selma, Alabama
Anne drew this picture
after the presentation of
the Good Shepherd. She
drew a sheep and the sun
first. Then she turned the
paper over and drew this
picture of the Good
Shepherd.

materials of the prepared environment are simple, they need to be carefully proportioned in relation to size and weight for the child’s ease in using them, and they need to be attractive. Their color, luminosity and harmony of form must attract children and inspire them to want to work with the materials.

The third characteristic is that the developmental materials must *engage the child in appropriate work*, that is, they must require the use of motor skills that are appropriate to the child’s stage of development. Montessori said that the possibility the material has for holding the child’s attention does not depend on

its being beautiful or luxurious but on the opportunity it offers for ordered, controlled movement. The materials must engage the child in a definitive, purposeful and intelligent work.

Finally, there is the particularly important characteristic of the *limitations* of the developmental, sensorial materials. Montessori noted that this is a valuable criterion pedagogically, while also being one that is little understood or appreciated. In our times, we can say this is even more true. Think of the vast number of toys on the market today, as well as their diversity and complexity. Yet, the more

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objects we put before the children, the more likely it becomes that they will be confused and disinterested. When we speak of the limitations of the materials, we are referring not only to the number of materials we place in the environment but also to the specific activity that each material calls forth. Each material will have only one purpose and prescribed use. The material is structured to indicate to the child a particular and singular route, a direct and “narrow pathway,” guiding the work according to a predetermined aim.

The criterion of the limitations of the materials is integrated with another pedagogical criterion: the *isolation of difficulty*. This criterion applies not only to the developmental, sensorial materials but also to the teacher’s verbal presentation of a subject, where the possibilities for confusing or complicating the subject for the child are many. Thus, the criterion of isolating the difficulty serves as a guide both in the *Casa dei Bambini* and in the elementary class.

Materials That Aid the Religious Formation of the Child

The catechetical materials have a dimension that is different from the Montessori developmental materials, rising primarily from their differing aims. The catechetical materials are not designed for the acquisition of some specific piece of knowledge concerning an aspect of concrete reality. Rather, it seeks to foster a relationship, a living encounter with a real Person. Therefore, we can say that the primary aim of the catechetical material is to aid meditation and prayer, while also honoring the vital needs and ways of learning

There is a little girl named Hannah who is very sweet but often not attentive, especially during presentations. Earlier in the year, I had presented the Epiclesis and the Offering. This particular week I was doing the Good Shepherd. I was very busy on the opposite side of the room while the children were working. Hannah had taken the Good Shepherd, and I happened to see her working with it. To my amazement she had the sheep and the shepherd in the fold and was doing the epiclesis over the fold. This was not quickly done. When she finished that, she picked up a sheep and the Good Shepherd and held it up in offering. I might add that all the while she was conversing with the shepherd and the sheep.

—Hannah, age 4
Trinity Montessori School
Rochester, New York

that correspond to the child in his or her particular stage of development.

Certainly, then, the catechetical materials foster learning, but, above all, they are an aid to the child’s religious life. To this end, various elements are incorporated in the making of the catechetical materials, including sensorial elements as well as those that are more specifically doctrinal. The catechetical materials are a concrete means of transmitting the Word of God and coming to know that Person who has spoken in the Bible and is present to us in the liturgy.

Several of our catechetical materials have come to us directly from the work of Maria Montessori and from her experience of religious education with children, which she began in Barcelona in 1915. These include the model altar and articles of the Mass, the liturgical colors material and the liturgical calendar, along with the explanation of the Mass for children

and their corresponding work of copying their own missal (which Montessori referred to as “The Open Book”).

Our other catechetical materials have been the fruit of our observation of and experience with children in our Rome center over the years, with the additional confirmation of the responses of many children in various countries and from a wide variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. Some of these materials, such as the Unity Strip and the Plan of God, are religious adaptations of materials Montessori developed for children in the regular, elementary class (not the atrium).

Maria Montessori’s Work in Religious Education

Before proceeding with our discussion of catechetical materials, let us return for a moment to Montessori’s early experience in the religious education of children. Responding to the call of Pope Pius X for

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the reform of religious education and the inclusion of younger children in the liturgical life of the church, in 1915 Montessori created the first "atrium," which was connected to a Montessori school in Barcelona, Spain. The story of her experiences is told in the book *The Child in the Church* and is worthwhile reading.

Montessori describes the interest of a certain missionary priest, Father Casulleras of the Order of Saint Vincent de Paul, in her Children's House, and their ensuing relationship. This relationship was instrumental in prompting her to think about the importance of the child being truly at home in the church, which spurred her to apply her method directly to religious education.

What was most "new" in the arena of religious education was the fact that Montessori began with the youngest children. As Montessori tells it, "Formerly, when teaching was limited to telling the

child the facts of sacred history and making him memorize, in catechism answers, the truths of Christian doctrine, we were, if I may be allowed so to express myself, drawing the child away from the church." As we have said, the notion of renovating religious education for older children and teens was indicated by the reforms of Pius X, but never before had it been considered to include children of three, four and five years of age.

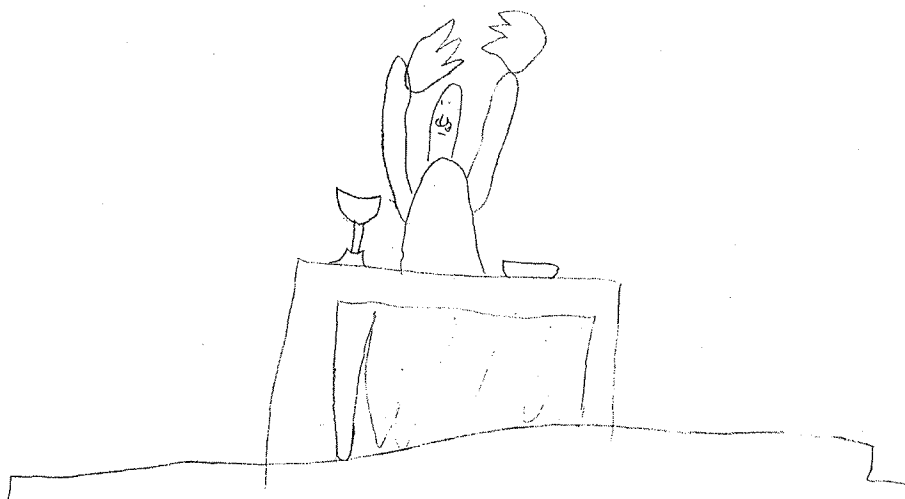
The abbot primate of the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Montserrat welcomed this idea and invited Anna Maccheroni, one of Montessori's collaborators, to speak at the Liturgical Congress taking place at the basilica of Montserrat in 1915. In her presentation on "The Liturgy and the Pedagogical Teaching of the Liturgy" (*Report of the Liturgical Congress of Montserrat*), in the presence of all the clergy of Catalonia, Maccheroni stated that several aspects of the new

catechetical directives proposed by Pius X could be applied to children of three, four and five years of age. The proposal of Maccheroni, a woman of great faith in God and in the child, was accepted, and she was commissioned to proceed with its implementation in the Montessori School of the Barcelona Deputation. The first "Children's House in the Church" opened its doors on March 1, 1915, and, as Montessori noted, "it would remain a historical document of our work in education."

The Materials Themselves

As with any material, our catechetical material makes no sense and does not fulfill its purpose if it is not used properly by catechists who are well prepared. As we have often said before, the verbal meditation we offer in introducing a theme is indispensable, for it prepares for the hearing of God's Word, and the

when the priest breaks the bread I know it
is the body of Jesus Christ, and the wine is his blood
and that it is good to receive communion.



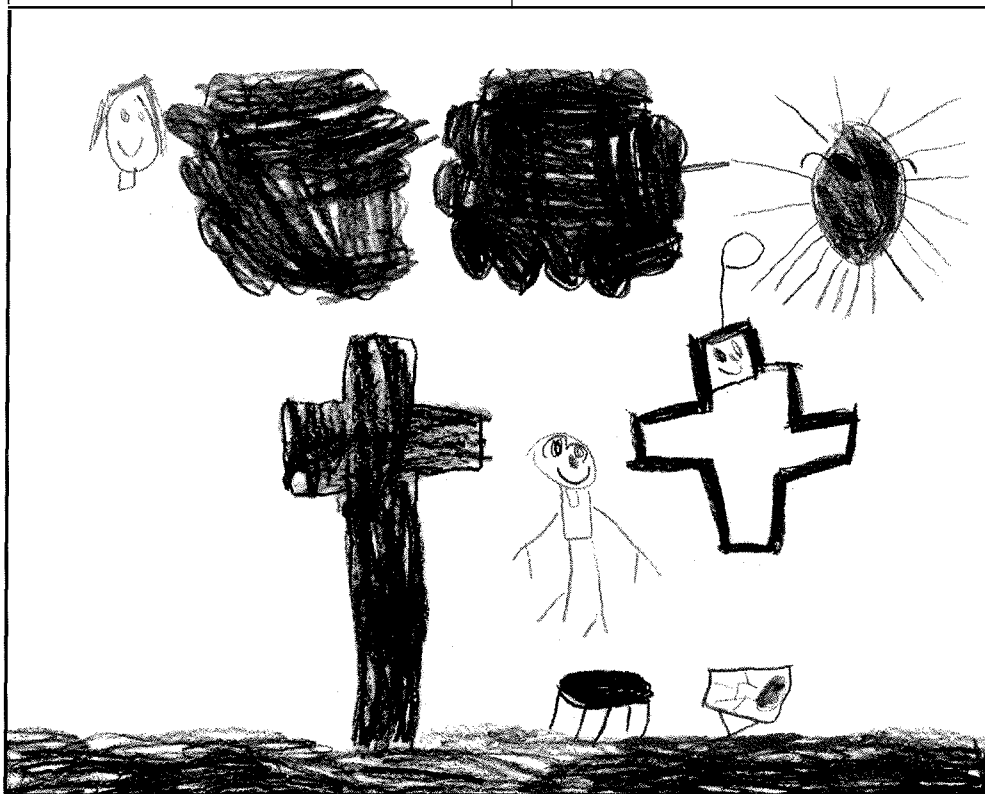
Matthew, age 8
Pax Christi Catholic Community
Eden Prairie, Minnesota

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Caitlyn, age 5

St. James Episcopal Church
Jackson, Mississippi

"The happy sun and a smiling face are in the sky. The angel is happy and smiling over the baby Jesus, and there's someone jumping on the trampoline 'cause they're so happy about the baby. The cross is next to him."



proclamation of God's Word is the primary task of the catechist; it is the moment of the objective presentation of the message. But the material helps the child ponder the Word; through repetition in working with the material, the child listens to that Word again and again for himself or herself, and makes it his or her own.

In her book *Psychogeometry*, which is published only in Spanish, Montessori says, "Our education is an education from the periphery." This splendid definition is valid for general education, but it is all the more valid when applied to religious education. Montessori goes on to say that this education from the periphery replaces the old way of directing educational endeavors toward "the center." The center (the core of the child's being) is left alone so that natural energies might work together freely in the child's development. Furthermore, it is not necessary that we know the child's inner being; neither should we expect nor demand predetermined responses from "the center." Rather, we must respect this innermost being of the child. We must render discreet service, both to the child and to God's Word.

As Sofia Cavalletti states so eloquently in *The Religious Potential of the Child*, "Nothing belongs to the adult, neither what he transmits, nor the soul of the child. They belong to God. They are gifts God gives because of His goodness and for our joy." We would do well to ponder these words of wisdom and to be guided by them in how we conduct ourselves as catechists. Can we see, then, that the materials and the prepared environment offer us the means of educating "from the periphery," and that

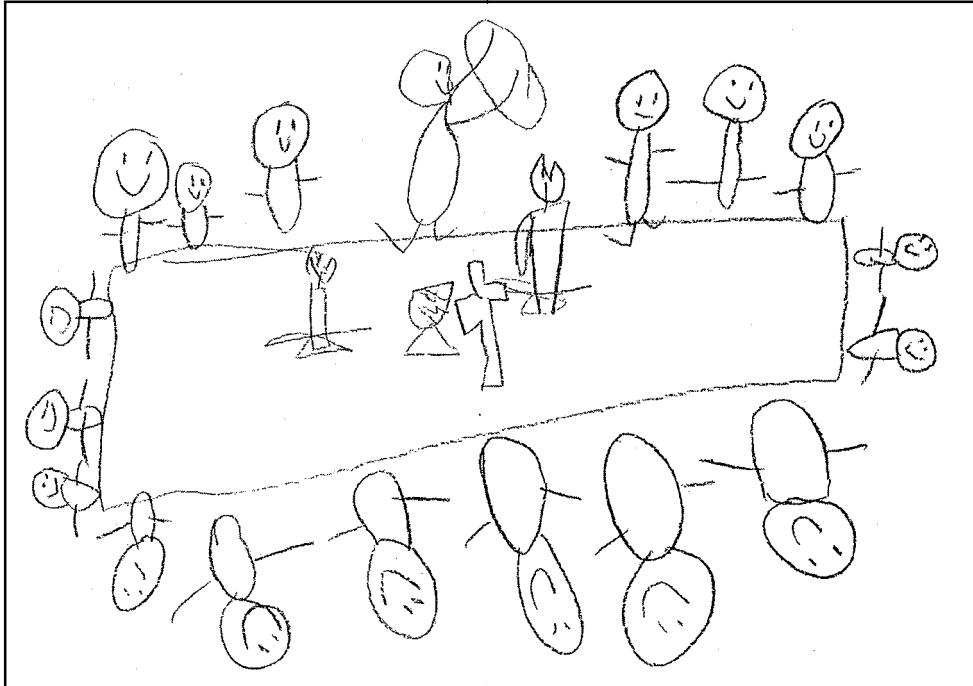
they are a help to the child, a help that reaches the child's "center," which we do not need to know but do need to respect?

We have said that our material must not be considered to be a didactic aid, because it must not function as an aid to the teacher in getting the child to understand the lesson. Rather, if it is used properly, the catechetical material will be an aid to children's personal meditation. It will be the instrument that allows children to reflect on the Word of God for themselves, enabling them to pass from objectivity in considering that

Word to subjectivity in the encounter with the Speaker, the true Teacher.

The material helps the catechist only in allowing him or her to observe the children, to see what they are drawn to, to recognize particular interests, according to their developmental stages. An example would be the younger child's repetitive work with the Parable of the Good Shepherd materials. After proclaiming God's Word, the catechist shows the material, using only minimal movements in simple adherence to the text. The catechist does not impose personal

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Madeleine, age 5
 Grace Episcopal Church
 Oak Park, Illinois
 Madeleine drew this in church immediately after coming downstairs from the church's Seder.

feelings or reflections on the children in how she or he handles the material (such as patting the sheep on their heads, for example). The material is then offered for the child's personal work. The catechist does not intervene, except when the child requests that the catechist reread the text while the child moves the figures, or in those rare cases when the child might need to be stopped from inappropriate use of the material.

The catechetical material helps the child to "see" the mystery of God hidden therein in much the same way that the liturgical signs and the parables communicate this mystery. What is concrete and perceivable through the senses becomes a vehicle that transports us to transcendent reality, a reality that is at the same time both revealed and hidden. Because we are given glimpses of this reality and find ourselves to be part of it, we can say it is "revealed." Yet, because it is incommensurable and thus beyond us, we must also

say it is "hidden." The materials are concrete helps for knowing the language, places and time of the Mystery of God, which children will take in and make their own according to their capacities and the rhythm of learning and development. With due respect for the differences, we can say that the catechetical material does what the liturgy does. Our relationship with God is largely built through concrete, sensory experience. This is a deep, vital need of the human being, and God honors this need by communicating with us through what is perceivable: through creation, through events in salvation history, through the Person of the Son, the Word, and God's continued presence in the sacraments. Thus, a concrete, perceivable "material" is always involved in God's self-communication to us.

Liturgy employs this same method of communication that we refer to as the "method of signs," in which the

"materials" are the water, bread, wine, and so on. Likewise, the parables of Jesus also "hide" the Mystery in elements of everyday life, for example, seeds growing in fields, yeast causing the bread to rise. The Mystery requires a material element in order to be perceived. This is true for both the adult and the child. It is for this reason that we prepare materials for the children, and also for this reason that our making of the material is also a help to our own penetration of the Mystery.

As catechists of the Good Shepherd, we all know how important it is that we present and use the materials well. And we know that this requires of us a thorough preparation and ongoing formation as catechists if we are to grow in our ability to assist the child in his or her relationship with God with ever increasing respect, sensitivity and knowledge.

Translated by Rebekah Rojewicz