

# *When to Start Religious Education*

by Dr. Silvana Montanaro Quattrocchi

Dr. Silvana Montanaro Quattrocchi was born in Rome in 1927. She received her degree in Medicine and Surgery from the University of Rome.

In 1955 Adele Costa Gnocchi called her to join the Staff of the Montessori School for Assistants to Infancy (a Training School for specialists of the newborn and children of the first three years of life) teaching Mental Hygiene, Child Neuropsychiatry, Nutrition and Obstetrics.

Co-founder of the Istituto Medico Italiano per lo Studio dei Fenomeni di Rilassamento e Stati di Coscienza she serves as a Trainer in Respiratory Autogenic Training (R.A.T.). In Clinics and Hospitals she prepares couples to nurture children under 3.

A psychotherapist and a scholar of the problems of the evolutive age, she conducts workshops for parents and teachers (in different countries of Europe, U.S.A. and Mexico) to make them aware of the importance of the first years of life in the building of the human personality.

She currently directs the AMI Assistants to Infancy Training Courses both in Rome, Italy and Houston, Texas.

The mystery of the human being is really great - a body made a "living spirit" (Genesis 2,7). This puts us in a very special position towards our Creator and the rest of creation. The necessity of a relationship with God will always be present in the human being in every moment of his life.

Studies of the fetal psyche have clearly demonstrated the participation of the embryo and of the fetus to the life going on around him/her which arrives through the mother. The Bible illustrates this phenomenon very well when it talks of John the Baptist, a fetus of six months, who answers the salutation of Mary to Elisabeth (Luke 1,41).

In the last decade the interest and the studies of the human sciences has helped us to discover a little bit more who we are. The time of infancy is now known to be the fundamental time of development of our personality. To reach the complete development of the human person it is necessary to fulfill all his/her needs which include the wish to meet God because this person has, since the very beginning, biological, psychological and spiritual necessities. All of them have the same importance for a harmonious development of the person. The integration of the various components is the result of the experiences the new being will have in his/her environment so it is essential that all the potentialities receive the right "education" as a help to come out. The talents, the personal richness of the child, must find the possibility of being used to produce their fruits. The favorable soil for this development is the human community where each of us must be accepted and through its mediation the personality components can grow and form into a whole.

These components are at least six:

religious activity  
cognitive development  
work with hands

play activity  
freedom to choose what to do  
unity with all human beings

The development of each human being is therefore strictly connected with the development which remains necessary all through life to be able to continue to progress towards perfection. But we are here interested only in the beginning of life - to underline the importance of a religious education in this period.

The pregnancy is a long time of 280 days during which the child is in a very special relationship with the mother but this relationship can be complete and reach the three levels (biological, psychological and spiritual) only if there is an immediate "answer" to the presence of the child. This answer must be not only the acceptance of his/her presence but must be united with the wonder for the miracle of the life: from the very small to the bigger, from one cell to the complexity of the human being who is the most extraordinary creature because in him/her it is reflected the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1, 26-27).

As we have a memory since the moment of conception it is good to offer to the child the sounds of simple prayers said with slow and clear voice or sung. These moments of "prayer with the child" can become repeated encounters with him/her during the day. In the morning and the evening the two parents can pray and sing together (the child is able to recognize the two voices very well) and we can have even during the pregnancy the praise and thanks to the Lord from the new family. We pray with the child because he/she is able to participate and these moments of religious life can become "points of reference" during the intrauterine life and can continue after the birth and contribute in reassuring the new born that not everything has changed in the new life. Why could not the parents sing one of their hymns of praise when the newborn is laying on the mother's chest before cutting the umbilical cord? The well known voices and music are really appropriate to receive the child into the new environment and to convey the continuity of the relationship. This experience of continuity is fundamental in avoiding the birth trauma: the child must feel still attached even if in a different way. It is to be understood that all the developmental phases should be only new ways of the same relationship with life.

A short but joyful hymn of thanksgiving can be introduced every time before the meal and another hymn can close it; we can use part of the prayers of the community in which we live or we can take phrases from the Psalms. The hymn must be a short one but can be repeated while we are going to the easy chair on which the milk is given and when the child is still in our arms before putting him/her back to bed.

Every time the child must be changed and we are in front of him/her, face to face, we can say: "I thank the Lord (or the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit) for the gift of a child like you" and, of course, we will add all the loving and sweet things that are usually said on this occasion. The continuous acknowledgment of God's gift, represented by the presence of the child in our house, can have very important consequences for the baby and for the adults. The words of thanksgiving will bring to the child the meaning of having value which is so important in building self-esteem. The consciousness of our importance as human beings can be received only from our image reflected in the mirrors (the significant adults) that surround the child: for this reason the parents are the most significant ones. The same words can remind the adults that, in reality, the life comes from God and it belongs to Him and all this can make easier the "service to the life" which is the correct attitude of educators. The tendency to consider the child our possession with the subsequent block of his/her development can be avoided.

During the pre and post-natal life we can use Gregorian chant and symphonic religious music in accordance with the liturgical times. This special concert can be for all the family a very useful moment of relaxation and meditation.

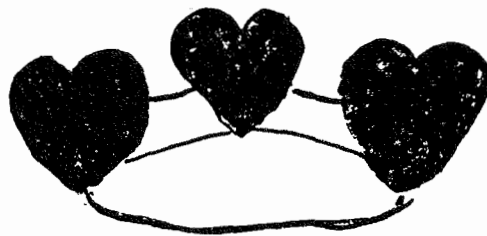
The gesture language too is very important and can be understood early by the child; a Cross sign can be done slowly on ourselves or on the baby at the beginning and at the end of the day or entering and going out of the Church. The head can be bent in a gesture of salutation and we can smile to an icon of Christ or the Virgin every time we pass in front of them. The hands and arms can be elevated in a gesture of invocation when praying the "Our Father" or other special prayers. All these experiences, repeated in the everyday life, can start a religious education which will continue for ever, in different ways, according to the age.

A last suggestion in order to start well our relationship with the child: the newborn must be called, from the first day, with his/her real name. The name with which the child has been christened; the name used by the Good Shepherd to call him/her. For no reason must the name become shorter, or be preceeded by "little" or transformed into a nickname. In doing so we will demonstrate a religious respect for the greatness of the child. The fact that this greatness is hidden in a small body will transform the child into a living parable in front of our eyes and will help us to discontinue the mistake of giving importance in proportion to the size.

Dr. Montanaro writes: "I met Sofia and her work a long time ago when my first daughter (now 31) was 3 and started the Good Shepherd Catechesis. The way she and my other children were talking about God and the kind of works they were bringing back pushed me to do the entire Course with Sofia and Gianna until I got the Diploma in 1964. During the Course I developed a great interest for the Bible and its original texts so I decided to study at the Biblical Institute of Rome where, in five years, I then graduated.

"My collaboration with Sofia is in lecturing at her course on Child Psychology and Montessori Pedagogy. In the last years I took responsibility for the group of children preparing themselves for Confirmation. The presence of the Good Shepherd changed my life and I feel that it has even enhanced my understanding of psychology with a better insight into the relationship between the different parts of our personality." (October 9th, 1984)

by Elizabeth Mullin



Jesus is hearts.



Elizabeth Mullin, age 8.