

The Richness of Early Religious Experience

by Sofia Cavalletti

translated from the Italian
by Claudia Riordan

We have already had occasion on these pages to speak about the religious experience of the child and about how it seems to figure into early childhood. Today we would like to stop briefly on what an early religious experience can give to the child.

As we have said at other times, the religious experience is essentially an experience of love, of love received and returned.

It is well known that the person keeps on forming him/herself in a relationship, i. e., in the creative interchange, in a dynamic that involves in depth the gratifying experience of receiving, and the no-less-gratifying experience of giving. Both moments of such an interchange are at the level of being, i.e., they involve the person globally down to his/her deepest roots.

Such an assertion is perhaps clear for what concerns the first moment of the relationship (receiving), while more often than not the second moment is considered to be placed above all at the level of behavior, i.e., at the level of doing things, characterized by multiplicity. If the latter were true, it would be extremely serious in regard to early childhood (i.e., that period which precedes what used to be called the "logical/moral crisis" (which manifests itself at about six years of age). The child before the age of six, who is not so interested in things to be done or not to be done, would appear to us as lacking the capacity to truly live the relationship and therefore to form him/herself as a person. But such an interpretation of the aspect of response in the relationship is extremely limited and incomplete. Both the moments which constitute the relationship are based on the deep level of being that precedes and nurtures every realization on the level of behavior. If in the second moment the behavior assumes value, it assumes it only inasmuch as it is a manifestation of a state of being. Fundamentally, the second moment of the relationship is constituted by a movement that can be compared to the heliotropic movement of the plant that turns itself toward the sun; it is with a movement that involves it totally and orients it in a certain way. It is clear that it cannot be but one orientation that the multiplicity of behavior gets its value and meaning. Deprived of vital sap that comes from the roots, all human works can be an ephemeral blooming if the deep level of the person is not helped to form itself and to set its roots in being.*

The formation of the person is characterized by the need (exigency) of globality. It is from such a globality that the level of behavior, characterized by multiplicity, gets its value.

With such a vision, early childhood presents itself as the golden age for the formation of the person, because early childhood is the time when the child does not as yet open him/herself up to the multiplicity of the real; rather, in each of his/her experiences, all of the person is involved down to the very depth of his/her being. Free and clear from the preoccupation and worry of practical utility and the anxiety of doing things, the child goes to the relationship with all of his/her person. The child opens up to it with all of him/herself, both in that moment of receiving and in that of giving.

*translator's comment: see John 15.

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With this vision, early childhood appears as the age when the very structure of the child responds to the most essential rules of the formation of the person.

Dr. Montessori says something very similar when she speaks of early childhood as the "first place (level; stage) of education," and the harmonious establishment of it is indispensable to the construction of the planes that will follow.

We haven't yet answered the question we asked ourselves at the beginning: What does an early religious experience give to the child? In order to answer this, we observe that the child, who is in the ideally existential situation to establish the relationship, must find in it the adequate partner: a partner that corresponds to and is in harmony with the child's capacities of globality; a partner that satisfies the child's exigency (vital need) of a rapport where he/she is involved down to the depth of his/her being; a partner that, because of its own capability of giving of itself and loving without limits, could not delude (deceive).

At this point, to assert that such a partner cannot be but God - God is Love (1John 4:8) - might be asserting a principle that not everybody's willing to accept. But to look for those qualifications we spoke of in anyone who was not God would cause anybody embarrassment.

Anyhow, we are not going to answer the question we asked ourselves on the level of principles, but rather at the experiential level.

It is evident that it's not granted to the adult to enter the mystery of the first moment of the relationship, that moment when the child receives the gift from the Other. Such a moment cannot be in any way the object of experimentation from the outside.

Yet the value of such a moment can be evaluated by the intensity with which the child lives the moment of response. In fact he/she lives it with a feeling of joy so deep that any observer can notice that it involves the child down to the most intimate part of his/her being; the child answers with a joy that manifests itself in attitudes of serene and recollected peace which in words can be expressed with such a sentence as: "It makes me feel so good!" The child's reactions are those of a person who has found all that corresponds to his/her most vital, most essential needs (exigencies) and all the child's being rejoices in the satisfaction of such exigencies. Let us recall that "very great feeling of joy" that Dr. Montessori had noticed in the children during her first experience of religious formation in Barcelona.

We have spoken about this at other times and we don't want to wander from the subject. What we would like to stress here is that the feeling, the sense of complete satisfaction that the child shows in the religious experience, in our opinion, finds its reason in the fact that in such an experience two "globalities" meet. One is that of God who is Infinite and the other is that of the creature who, even within the creature's limitation, reflects the image and likeness of God. In the child who seeks God and rejoices in finding Him, we see "the likeness who seeks his/her Likeness." It is natural that, upon finding Him, the child feels satisfied down to his/her depths. In reference

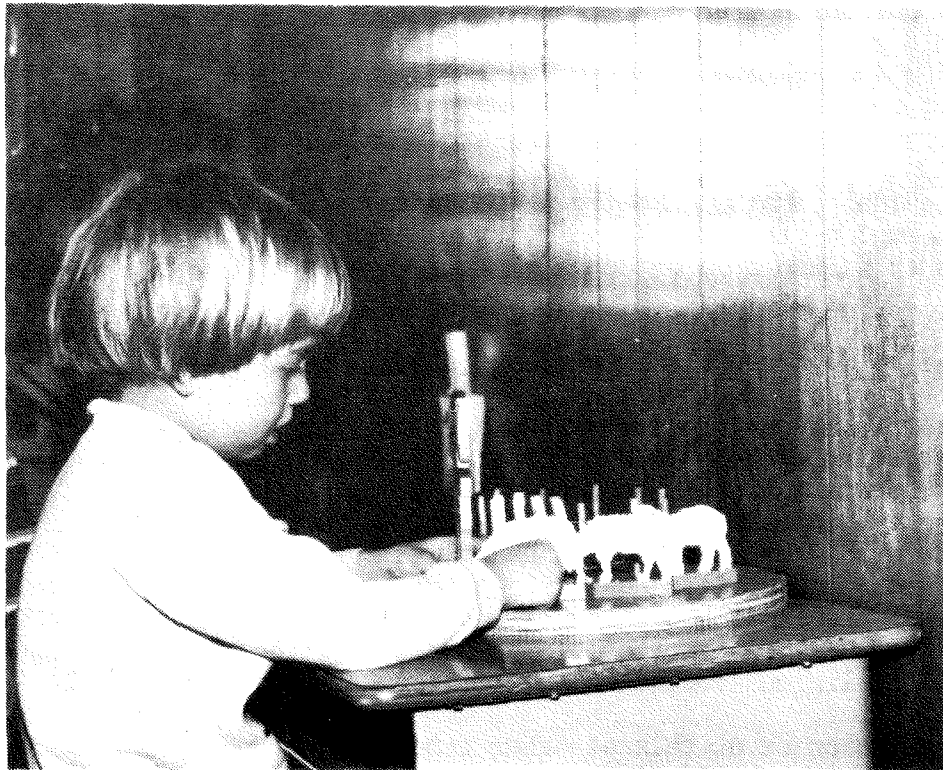
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to the previous statement "God who is Infinite" a child from a school in Tuscany, raised in a totally areligious environment, said of Him after a long meditation: "Perhaps He is an infinite perfection."

Helping children to experience the presence of God in their life is helping children to form their person according to the exigencies of their deepest structure; failing to do this means to expose the children to delusion, which it cannot fail to derive from relationships which do not fully correspond to the child's make-up. We believe that we can say that an early religious experience is what can best help the formation of the person.

vocabulary clarification by Rose Paul

globally - totally or completely -encompassing all
multiplicity - manifold or multiferous - many
ephemeral - transient - short lived
reductive - limited
exigencies - vital needs



Gabriel Burns, age 5, with the Good Shepherd.
Oak Park, Illinois.

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