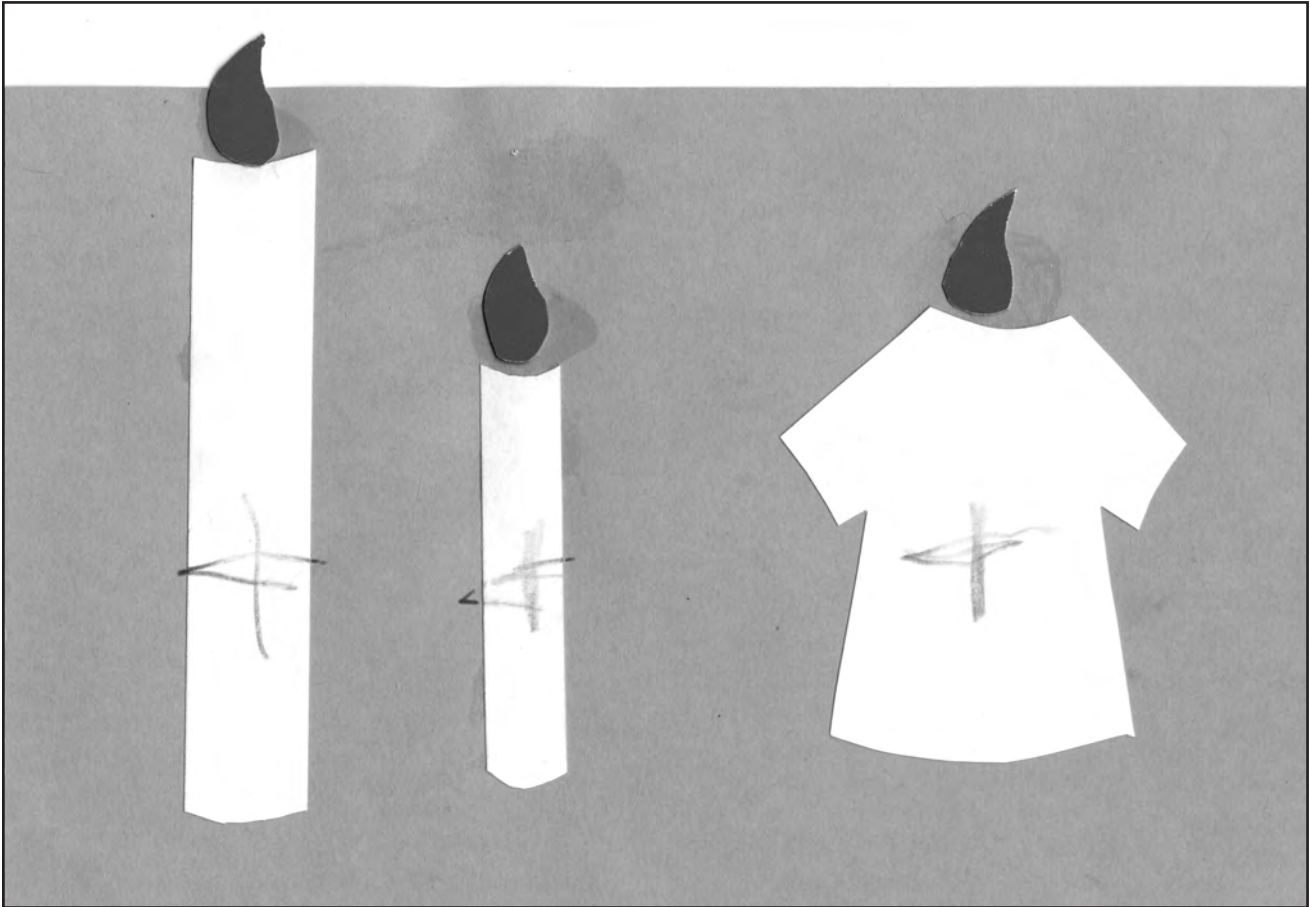


Assisting the Religious Experience of the Child



*Child, Level I
All Saints Episcopal Church
Chicago, Illinois
(The candles and robe are white, the flames
are orange, and the crosses are red.)*

GIANNA GOBBI

Editor's note: this article is based on a transcript of a talk given by Gianna Gobbi in 1995 to catechists visiting the atrium in Sofia Cavalletti's home on the Via degli Orsini in Rome. The talk, originally in Italian, was simultaneously translated by Silvana Montanaro, and transcribed by Suzanne Haraburd.

I cannot directly express my feelings of admiration and love for all of you working in the catechesis, so I am indebted

to Silvana. Sofia and I thought that you would be interested in the topic of prayer related to silence, like we do in the Montessori school. I would like to begin with some Montessori principles. We will talk about the child aged 3 to 6 years old because they are very delicate and because our work with them forms the basis of what will come later. I don't address theological points but reflect on the children who have come to our care and the delicate task of their religious education.

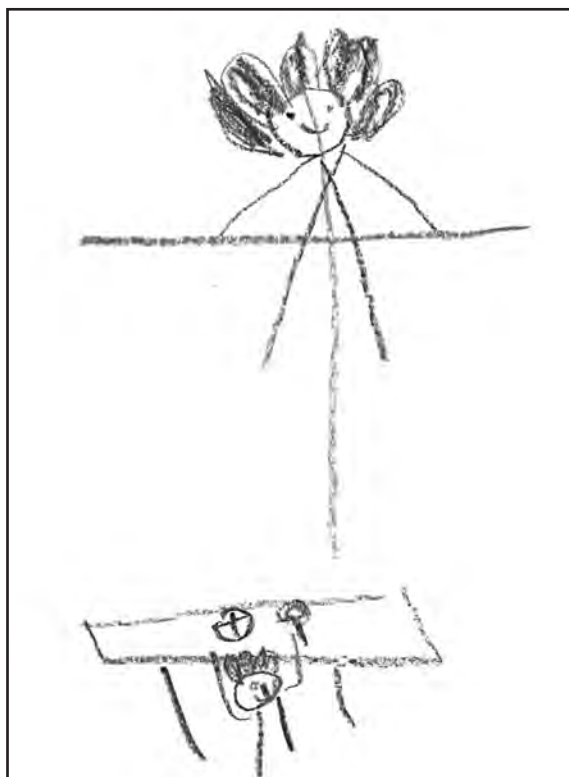
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The Revelatory Environment

I would like to focus your attention on the word *help* because this can enable us to understand what we have to do with the children, not only as educators in the sense of teachers at a school, but even more as catechists. In order to do this we need to perfect ourselves in this work. In thinking about the word *help* there are two attitudes that we must have as educators: first, to be able to observe, and second, to be able to mediate between the child and the environment. Certainly, you know the phrase that the child—I have been told that he was Mario, Jr.—said to Montessori, “Help me to do it by myself.” This phrase characterizes the essence of the Montessori educational program. When the child says, “help me,” it is to an adult in whom the child has trust. The child believes that this person can help him or her, can respond. It’s as if the child is telling us, “Stay nearby when I need you.” The task of the prepared adult is that of introducing the child into the prepared environment and seeing that the child doesn’t get lost there, can work well there, feel at ease, and so express him— or herself. In this way, the prepared environment becomes the *ambiente rivelatore*, or revelatory environment, one in which each child can be revealed.

In order to help the child, and so that we can understand the true nature of children, it is necessary that the adult must become an attentive and patient observer of the phenomenon of Life that we can see in the children. Thus, both the environment and the child educate the adult. Of course, even if the child reveals him— or herself, you can lose the opportunity if you are not a patient and attentive observer. This is a quality, an attitude necessary for any educator, but even more for a Montessori educator. It is not enough to have the intellectual

knowledge of things if you are not able to see them revealed in the child. Knowledge is the first step; then, with patient observation, you will see this knowledge appear in front of you.



Riley, age 5
St. Michael's Episcopal Church
Barrington, Illinois

(Drawn in response to the presentation of the *Gesture of Offering*. The cross is orange. All the rest is drawn in purple.)

The capacity to be a good observer brings with it other qualities: patience and humility, the qualities of the scientist. This is the model that Montessori gave us in chapter four of *The Advanced Montessori Method*¹ in which she talks about the preparation of the teacher. The teacher must know methodology for educating, but this must come after the scientific attitude of observation: patience and humility. Montessori states that the new teacher, instead of learning to talk, must learn to be silent. Instead of teaching, he or she must observe. Instead of taking pride in knowing a lot, he or she must assume the attitude of humility necessary for persons who relate to children in any phase of their development. There is a religious aspect to this, and it is basic to the respect that we must have for the human person. Montessori talks about the *internal teacher*. It is the duty of the adult educator to help the child listen to this internal voice, this internal teacher. In order

to reach this goal, the adult educator must first take away any prejudices about children, come out of his or her omnipotence, and become a servant of Life.

The adult must be clear about the two aspects basic to the educational relationship: one's own work and the work of the child. The art of educating lies in understanding when it is necessary to do something and when it is necessary not to do something. We call this the *level of intervention*, and it is always responsive to the child's intellectual requirements and behavior. It is not possible to give a rule because you have to know the child, the environment, and the child's history. Sometimes we

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must not be afraid of strong intervention, if it is necessary. This comes from understanding the situation.

In Montessori's thinking, the child and the adult are two different people in need of each other. In 1950 Montessori wrote that the child and the adult are two different parts of humanity that must come together and harmoniously interact in order to help each other. The child has different laws of Life than those of adults. We can see this in the natural world, where there is a diversity of instinct among small ones and grown-ups. The behavior of grown-ups changes when they have small ones to take care of. Montessori observed that when some ferocious animals have small ones, they become not so aggressive, but protective of the little ones. Some who don't have fixed houses collect material in order to make a nest and go to look for food, and so forth. We can think that God himself gives protection to the small ones in the universe and that he has hidden in secret the important task of saving them in order to make us remember that he is always present in the midst of his small creatures.

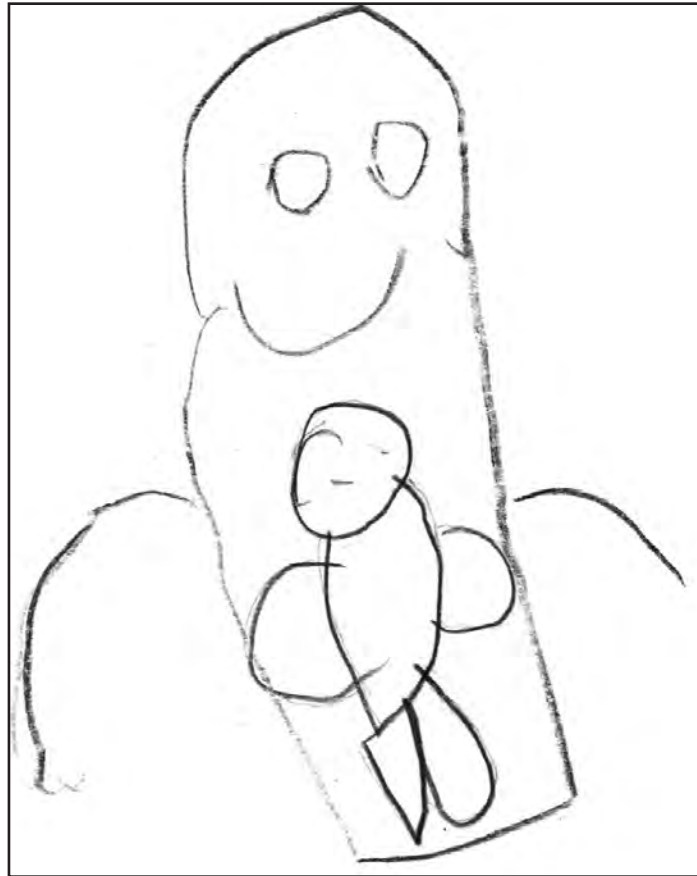
To Montessori, it seemed that civilization developed as if there were only adults and no children. We look for progress based exclusively on the qualities of adults, so that, to us, civilization means the triumph of strength, violent conquest, fighting, and the selection of the winners. Until recently, children have been taken out of the picture, although, in Montessori's opinion, children are the best and most powerful part of humanity.

Montessori's ideas were prophetic because we can see a big contradiction in our time. Although in Italy the twentieth century was declared the Century of the Child, and Montessori was supported in Rome by the royal family, nevertheless we

can see that we still have not brought forward the different point of view of the child. Montessori points to the necessity of preparing adults for this task.

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We need prepared adults who are educators, and especially prepared adults who are catechists, if we can hope to have a better humanity and society. We must ask ourselves if it is true, as Montessori says, that with the children there is strength capable of opening the doors to a better world. The complementarity of adults and children should also be found in the religious field. Even there we see that it is a world of adults; we don't notice the special way children have of living their relationship with God, and so we don't learn from this precious observation. As Sofia Cavalletti wrote in *The Religious Potential*



*Nicholas, age 5
Holy Trinity Catholic Church
Lenexa, Kansas
("Mary, mother of Jesus." Mary is drawn
in blue; Jesus in yellow.)*

*of the Child,*² this attitude is necessary in every educational field but even more for our work as catechists where nothing belongs to the adult: not the soul of the child nor what we transmit; these belong to God, and God Himself gives them because He is very good and for our joy.

If we are capable of serving the children, we can see that they have within, and can reveal, the existence of a deep religious nature that wants to live and receive a response.

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Geraint, age 5

Incarnate Word Academy

Corpus Christi, Texas

(Jesus and his disciple sheep on a boat in the Dead Sea. The sea is purple, the boat is brown, Jesus's robe is white with a red sash, the sheep is white with blue eyes. Two suns in upper right are yellow with orange rays. Figure to left of boat is white.)

The difficulty in understanding the religiosity of children lies in the differing manner in which children express their religiosity: differing from adults, and according to the child's differing developmental periods of life. The attentive observation of children will put us in the right position in front of both the mysteries of God and the mysteries of the children so that we reach an attitude of deep respect and humility.

Prayer and the Young Child

If we wish to help children in their religious experience, prayer is very important. At the end of October, we had the sacrament of Confirmation here [in the atrium in Sofia Cavalletti's home]. A Cardinal from the United States who lives in Rome came to give the sacrament. He was very good. He said to the children, "I don't want to give you a long speech. I only want you to remember one thing. When I meet you, no matter where, I will ask you only one question: did you pray a little bit every day? This is the only thing you have to remember."

Prayer is listening to the Word of God and it is the special key that opens the mystery of the relationship between God and his creatures. It is a key that God gives to every one of his creatures, without distinction of church, race, or anything else, in every moment, in every place and in all conditions.

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All human beings pray, even if in different forms according to their culture and religious confession. We Christians pray with the mediation of Jesus Christ because in our prayers we always say, "In the name of Jesus Christ." Prayer prepares us and brings us to the great prayer of thanksgiving that is Eucharist. Prayer is initiation into the Mystery and is itself a mystery because it is knowledge of God. Through prayer, God makes himself known, and prayer is the instrument of our personal answer. The Good Shepherd calls us by name.

We catechists cannot pretend to teach to pray, but we have the duty of creating the conditions of silence and meditation that can facilitate concentration and listening. Certainly you have experienced prayer with the children and have observed how naturally the child is capable of spontaneous prayer. You have observed how this prayer is different, in shape and mode, from the prayer of adults. The prayer of children has a special quality: it is silent and contemplative. The long silence of a small child, even younger than one year, in front of a sunset or a bird flying in the sky can already be a prayer. The prayer of the child is usually very short, perhaps only one word followed by a long silence: "Jesus," "light," "amen." Usually, small children make exclusively prayers of praise and thanksgiving, never asking for anything: "Jesus is wonderful." "My body is content." I read long ago about an old person sitting in the back of an empty church, as if waiting for someone. When he was asked, "What are you waiting for?" he said, pointing to the tabernacle, "I look at him and he looks at me." This kind of prayer has the same qualities as those we so often see in the small child's prayer. I do not insist here on the spontaneity of the small child's prayer, which is the basis of any introduction to prayer; I just want to clarify the necessity of taking care of the external form of the prayer as well, so that the child can reach an equilibrium between spontaneity and formulated prayer that will help the child all through life. It helps to have some vocabulary as a basis on which the children later will compose their own prayers.

After experiencing the Solemn Communion meditations and retreat at an Episcopal church where there is no atrium, Olivia and Ellie, when it was finished, looked at the catechist and said, "What? That's it? We want more!"

*Olivia and Ellie
Tucson, Arizona*

It follows the development of their language. When a child learns to speak he or she says, "Dog barking." The child doesn't use a lot of words but speaks the essentials of the situation.

In a corner of the atrium we have a table with the sacred image and maybe a carpet or other place where the children can go and kneel. When we want to pray, we call the children there and invite them to be silent. We turn down the light and light the candles. The prayer can be a short phrase from a song that can be repeated with intervals of silence. The catechist usually stays in back of the children, especially if she is playing a musical instrument; the duration of the prayer time is in the hands of the children. We say something very short like, "The Lord is my Shepherd," and then we make silence. Then we say it again, "The Lord is my Shepherd," and again have silence, to absorb what we are saying. In the beginning we don't invite the children to give a verbal response. We wait until they understand and then they will do it spontaneously. We want only to give them some vocabulary of religious language, to give an external form to the moment of prayer, and create the atmosphere of prayer.

We have been discussing whether this ritual is necessary. It of course does not exclude other moments of spontaneous prayer or listening to the Word, including singing and working. The children like the ritual because it is something that touches them deeply, and the repetition makes it something they know so they are put at ease and feel secure. All catechists and mothers have experienced the joy and peace of children of every age after praying. Of course, such a ritual would also be good in the family.

The formal aspects of the prayer ritual must be prepared in advance. There are three essential elements: silence, position of the body, and words. These three elements must be considered one at a time before putting them together for the moment of prayer. The first element, silence, is more necessary than before because today it is very difficult to have the right

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conditions for silence. Even in small towns there are many noises that sometimes reach beyond the limits of human tolerance and can be very disturbing. Places that once were very silent, like the country, now have a lot of noise: airplanes, cars, big machines, and radios and other listening devices that can be used everywhere, even in the fields. It seems that we can never stay alone with ourselves. Our environment is not helpful anymore and the riches that lie within silence escape us. Only by practicing yoga or meditation techniques can we recover the values of silence.

In the past, in religious places where monks and nuns lived, they were accustomed to create this special atmosphere of silence and prayer because all the teachings of the Bible call for these conditions of concentration. In silence God revealed himself and will continue to reveal himself to human beings. Even Jesus went away from people sometimes in order to communicate better with the Father and take strength from being in silence. Jesus gave us practical advice for prayer, “Whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret . . .” (Matthew 6:6). He asks us to close the door of our selves in order to keep out all that can disturb—movement, words, noise—so that we can make silence inside and pray. Quietude allows us to reflect and listen to the Other so that we can take him inside. According to God’s Word we are supposed to make an interior void so that he can reveal the gift of himself.

We wish to help children to become conscious of the value of silence as a condition for responding to God. In order to help the children, we prepare by giving Montessori’s lesson of silence, which can be found in *The Discovery of the Child* (chapter 8).³ It is a collective lesson that is part of other lessons, like walking on the line and practical life. All these lessons are very important to reach a personal consciousness of what we do. The best one is the lesson of silence. The silence we are talking about here is not the one we have when the teacher imposes silence because there is too much noise in the classroom. The silence of which we speak is that which Montessori calls the *silence of immobility*. It serves the child, not the teacher, and produces interior order in the child. The children show that they love this exercise very much. Montessori tells us that the children loved it so much that as soon as the teacher went to the blackboard and began to write the first letter, S, for silence, they would stop their work and put themselves in the

attitude of silence. It is a kind of silence that can come after the children have reached a comfortable position.

We can reach this level of silence with exercises that stop activity and movement until we can be so still we can feel the silence and enjoy it. This silence puts the child in relationship with him— or herself through the observation of the breath. The child comes into relationship with the external world as well, listening to noise from the environment such as water running outside, the sound of a watch, or a distant voice. This shows that the silence is full of many things. In the first *Casa de Bambini* (Children’s House) in Rome there is still the clock that makes the tick-tock sound which Montessori and the children listened to in silence. This type of silence brings interior peace and a new and better disposition towards ourselves and others. It brings the child to a superior level of listening. All Montessori pedagogy, when well-applied, prepares the children for prayer. There is no prayer without silence; therefore, we must create the habit of silence. The exercises are starting points to predispose us to prayer as a dialogue in which we listen to God who talks to us and we respond.

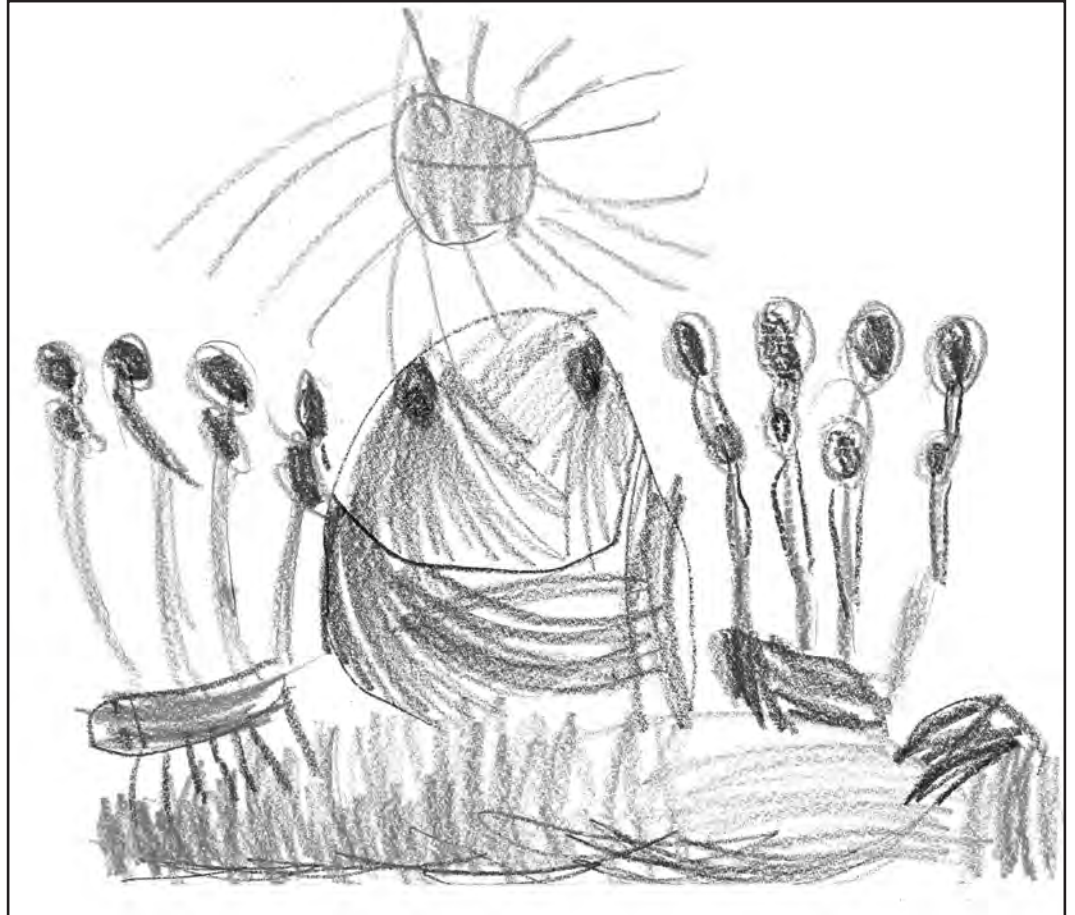
The second element is education of the body and control of movement. This helps the child very much to become capable of silence. These exercises are done especially at the beginning of catechesis. They are collective lessons, the aim of which is good use of the environment, such as moving a chair, sitting down, and bringing something from one place to another. These lessons also are useful to make the children know themselves and become a group. Of course, we must be able to make this lesson interesting and pleasurable. All these exercises will help the child to assume certain positions of the body, like kneeling and folding the hands, which create the interior attitude for prayer. Prayer needs a position, and the child is capable of understanding the meaning of the different positions of the body in order to achieve the habit of being conscious of what he or she is doing. An old Montessorian was reading solemnly something from the Bible to a 3-year-old child, and, maybe because of the solemnity, the child said, “Don’t sit, stand up.”

Of course, gestures are transmitted in the environment and by imitation. Still, we have to teach some gestures, like folding the hands, kneeling, the sign of the cross, for example. Also, the hands have their own language when we fold them for prayer; we can see that the gesture has a religious meaning.

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So, too, the gesture of the praying person in the catacombs who stands with her arms lifted, and people in Japan who greet each other putting their hands together in front of them, as if one wants to put the whole body together to greet you. The sign of the cross is a special lesson. We first do this gesture in front of the children without any words. Later we add words, so that the gesture and words do not become confused.

All these conditions can help us to receive the Word of God and make it ours, enriching the language of prayer. Words that have reached us through the centuries, which have been said by human beings who spoke with God, can help to express our feelings when we don't have adequate words. We can choose a small verse of the psalms, which are very vast. We can choose the verse most attuned to different moments or feelings, or that is related to the two most important festivals of our liturgical year, Christmas and Easter, or the times of preparation, Advent and Lent. The language of Holy Scripture hits the religious sensitivity of the children. You have noticed that the children love to repeat what we say in certain moments, for example, the names of the Messiah: Prince of Peace, Wonder Counselor. They like the names that the angels say in announcing Jesus: the Son of God, and Son of the Most High. Montessori says in *Advanced Method*,⁴ that the children love words passionately, and at approximately 3 to 5 years of age, they are still in the sensitive period of extreme interest in words. I remember a 5-year-old child who loved so much the prayer of the three young men in the furnace, in which they praise God for all the things of creation (Daniel 3:52-90). Every night he wanted this prayer to be repeated in Latin; evidently, even if he was unable to understand the language, he was able to catch the religiosity



Nina, age 4
St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church
New Kensington, Pennsylvania

(The sun is yellow. Center: the smiling figure, colored red, is Jesus. To his left and right are yellow, blue and green candles, with yellow and red flames. The sheep at left bottom is yellow. The sheep at right bottom are red. The grass is green, and the water is blue.)

of it. Works such as these will enable the children to acquire a quantity of vocabulary that they will then put into their own prayers, so they can have the possibility of expressing what they want to say, and reach the content and external form of prayer.

¹ Maria Montessori, *The Advanced Montessori Method*, Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1917.

² Sofia Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child*, Chicago, IL: Liturgy Training Publications, 1992, see pp. 52-53.

³ Maria Montessori, *The Discovery of the Child*, Fides Publishers, 1967.

⁴ Maria Montessori, *The Advanced Montessori Method*, *ibid.*