

# My Darling Abbey

*We are not human beings on a spiritual journey, but spiritual beings on a human journey.*

Surely this statement of Teilhard de Chardin is in agreement with the work of Sofia Cavalletti, building upon that of Maria Montessori, acknowledging the rich innate potential of the spiritual life of the child. Each child comes into the world as an incarnate expression of our Creator God, who becomes flesh for us most fully in the person of Jesus, the Incarnate Word.

I see this lived out by our young children in so many ways in our Catechesis of the Good Shepherd Atrium - as they express themselves through words, art, prayer and action. But I'm also becoming aware of the silent witness of God's presence that a young child can bring - long before the formal time of Atrium begins about age three.

This challenges me to see the Atrium walls extended to include all of parish life - as indeed the Church itself is that sacred "atrium" space between heaven and earth. I'm finding too, that my little Atrium room in the basement of the church is actually the heart and focal point of Christian Formation for the entire parish. Most particularly it informs baptismal preparation for parents whose little ones will one day come to know consciously that they are one of the beloved sheep of the Good Shepherd. Perhaps they begin to know this as they are cherished by their own parents, who reflect this divine love. (Even in the absence of parental love, the desire and unconscious quest for this spiritual connection is there). Perhaps its the child who provokes this love in the parent - when there is a willingness for it.

A story was shared by a young couple in our parish recently as they were being prepared for the child's Baptism. In a discussion of faith matters the mother shared her profound feelings for her long hoped for child. The baby was now a healthy three months old, after having experienced life threatening complications during the first few weeks of life. In one of those beautiful mother and nursing child moments, she found herself looking down at her infant daughter and saying in her lovely Irish lilt. "Oh, my darling Abbey - I love you so much, I'd give my life for you."

"In that instant", the mother relates, " I thought, 'Oh - now I know! Now I understand for the first time (after years of being raised in the Christian faith) what it means that God could give us God's own Beloved Son to be among us on earth and that Jesus could give his life on the cross for us.' " It was not a matter of doctrine, but lived faith in what she called a "moment of conversion."

That day she made a decision to find a new church home after ten years of separation from the one of her childhood where she had felt condemned because of social and life style circumstances. Following a phone call of inquiry she walked in the back door of our neighborhood church with her infant in arms, saying, "I'm looking for a loving, non-judgmental Christian community where I can raise my child so that she can know the eternal loving embrace of Jesus." Abbey has "brought" her parents to church faithfully every Sunday since as well as to her own Baptism a few months later.

Surely this child was some small expression of God's Word made flesh while silently, but openly, witnessing to this mother's own spiritual hunger. What better image, also, of the face of God - than the warm embrace of a nursing mother as she looks down at each one of us and says, "Oh, my darling, I love you so much, I'd give my life for you".

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