



# Parent Pages

## Preparing the environment of the Domestic Church\*

\* The term "Domestic Church" refers to the family, the smallest body of gathered believers in Christ. Though recovered only recently, the term dates back to the first century AD. The Greek word *ecclesiola* referred to "little church." The early Church understood that the home was fertile ground for discipleship, sanctification, and holiness.

## The Materials

Dr. Montessori recognized that there were three main "players" in education: the adult, the child, and the environment itself. Forming an equilateral triangle of sorts, she saw that these three elements each had a profound impact on an individual's education. In the atrium we recognize, as did Montessori, that there is an "inner teacher" within each child who guides development. The environment of the Atrium is set up in such a way that the three principal actors are God, the child, and the prepared environment of the atrium. The adult, who prepares this space and facilitates its use, is simply a part of the environment which has been prepared to allow for the growth of an ever deepening relationship between God and the child.

## The Sensorial Materials

Sensorial, manipulative materials are a part of every Montessori environment. The younger the child, the more they learn through their physical senses. Think of children at the age of putting everything into their mouths or touching everything they see! This is their natural way of exploring their environment and "incarnating" truths about the real world within themselves. When it comes to our faith, something that is even more real than anything our physical senses can hold, we have often struggled to provide appropriate "hands on" materials. How do we convey the great dignity of God to such small children? In the atrium, materials which concretize the truths of our faith, as designed by Maria Montessori, Gianna Gobbi, and Sofia Cavalletti, abound. These materials are not meant to convey abstract concepts in the way some of the Montessori math materials do, but, rather, as Gianna Gobbi said, they are meant to lead "to a vital encounter with a real Person....They are not only an aid to learning: they are an aid to religious life, itself" (*Listening to*



*God with Children*, 20). In this way the environment, itself, is allowed to become the instrument through which God and the child interact, enjoy each other, and grow in relationship.

## Preparing the Environment and Making the Materials

The atrium materials which incarnate truths as great as God and his Kingdom in a way that that meet the religious needs of a child at particular ages, have taken years to develop. Even today, after consulting diagrams



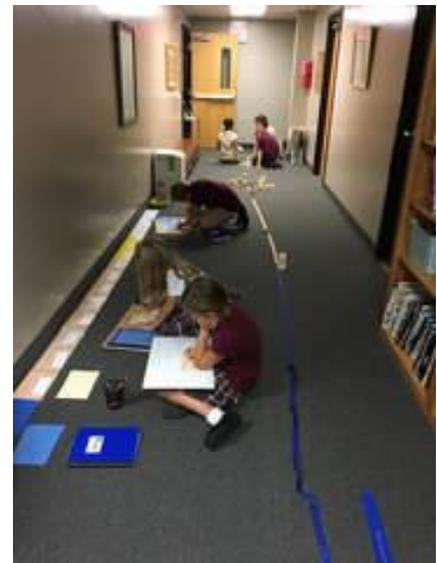
and photos, the catechists of each atrium community work to make the materials that their children will use in their atrium. The making of materials provides an opportunity for the adult to meditate more deeply on the realities concretized in that particular material just as the work with the material will provide such an opportunity for the child. In “The Characteristics of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd,” #25, we read of many reasons why the catechist makes materials by hand including:

- “To absorb the content more deeply.”
- “To combat hurry, consumerism, and even excessive ‘efficiency.’”
- “To pace oneself more to the rhythm of the child and thus also – or so we believe – to the working of the Holy Spirit.”
- “To try to reach the integration of hand, mind, and heart.”

## The Child’s Prayer with the Materials

The direct aim of the atrium is to lead to prayer, and the prayer of the youngest child is primarily spontaneous, material-based, and individual. While an adult can return to the Bible and reread a Scripture passage over and over, the young child who is not yet reading is unable to independently repeat in such a way.

However, repetition is essential for us all, especially for the youngest child. The sensorial materials of the atrium provide for this great need and allow the child to independently return to the truths he desires to ponder more deeply. Perhaps he will set up the model altar again, recalling the placement of the items and even their names before taking a moment for silent prayer. Maybe he will sit with the raised surface map of Israel, feeling the high, rough mountains and the low, smooth waterways before placing the flags for Nazareth, Bethlehem, and Jerusalem in their places. It is possible he will stand at the baptism area



and, having set out the baptismal candle and the model white garment, he will ask to have the Paschal Candle lit and then pause, taking a moment to remember the gift of receiving the risen light of Jesus on the day of his baptism. Each material, once it has been presented, allows for individual, independent, freely chosen, repeated engagement with a particular truth of our faith. This engagement, so we believe, leads the child to deepen his personal relationship with the one who has given him life and holds him in existence, the one who is Truth himself. What a great gift!