

# We Have Already Been Together

TINA LILLIG

First of all, I would like to acknowledge how good it is to be here. And also how good it is to be speaking with you on the subject of ecumenism. We are here together in Assisi at the very site where all the major religions met in October of 1986 to pray for peace. We are also in the presence of competent experts who have worked with great care in the ecumenical and interfaith dialogues: in particular Bishop Griswold, Maria Vingiani and, of course, Sofia Cavalletti. I feel very privileged and grateful to be in this company.

Usually before I begin to speak, I find myself saying the same prayer that I say silently before I give a presentation to the children. The prayer is very simple, a verse from Psalm 51: "Lord, open my lips. And my mouth will proclaim your praise."

This prayer is very fitting for me today because I'd like to tell you a story, a story about the Good Shepherd's work in Chicago which, since 1984, has had a very beautiful ecumenical quality, a story that allows me to proclaim God's praise.

In 1983 when Sofia's book, *The Religious Potential of the Child*, was first published in English, I had been a catechist in an atrium for about six years. At that time, our Roman Catholic

community had the only atrium in the Chicago area. I didn't yet know Judy Schmidt, an Episcopalian in the Chicago area. But Judy was also reading *The Religious Potential of the Child*. When I met her at the national course in 1984, she asked me if I would consider going to St. Barnabas Episcopal Church to speak to some of the parishioners there about our children's experience in the atrium.

So on a Saturday in November, I put the Good Shepherd material and the Eucharistic Presence of the Good Shepherd material in my car and set out to look for this church in the Chicago suburbs. I had never been in an Episcopal church. When I arrived, the woman who greeted me invited me to step into the sanctuary for a minute. How beautiful and simple it was—with the altar in the center and pews circling around it, just like the material for the Eucharistic Presence of the Good Shepherd! I remember very clearly my feeling, which I have had many times since, when I enter an Episcopal church or when I attend an Episcopal service. The feeling is twofold: We have already been together.



Rachel, age 6

Our Guardian Angels' Atrium  
Midland, Ontario, Canada

("The two hearts at the top are for the love of  
Mary and Elizabeth and the two smaller hearts  
at the bottom for Jesus and John.")

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But something has happened. I look around and I know that we have already been together. And yet it is just different enough that I know something has happened. In the long moment when I stood in St. Barnabas Episcopal Church that day, about to go downstairs and meet this church family, I said silently, "Lord, open my lips."

Three hours went by quickly. We were a very small group—only 5 or 6 people. And one in particular was a young mother with a 6-month-old baby in her arms. Her name was Carol Nyberg, who later came to the national course in 1985 and began an atrium at St. Barnabas that same year. After the course, she and I talked on the telephone every week—so happy to share the same joys and the same practical questions, and to share our many stories about the children. We received the gift of friendship that so many of us know in this work. That course, in 1985, took place in St. Paul, Minnesota, and Sofia was there, as well as Maria Christlieb; also, Carol Dittberner, Catherine Maresca, Betty Hissong and Sister Sheila Sentiff. Some, but not all of the first Episcopalians in the work were there: Judy Schmidt and Carol Nyberg, Red and Martha Fisher and Ruth Scheef. Presbyterians, one Methodist and a member of a Reform Church also attended that training. Two participants were drawn to the course because of their acquaintance with Jerome Berryman.

Three years later, because of many inquiries from Chicago Episcopal churches, Carol Nyberg and I gave our first Level I course. A year later, 15 Episcopal churches and one Roman Catholic church opened atriums. Two

A catechist was asked during Advent to present something about the Christian belief to a group of secular school children. She chose to present an Advent prophecy. She brought out the Bible and explained that it is a very important book. Then she began to read from the prophecy of Isaiah, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light."

One little boy whose family religion is Judaism joyfully exclaimed, "We have that book. I've read that book!"

—*Catechist*  
*Chicago, Illinois*

more courses followed and we have over 30 atriums in the Chicago area today—only five are Roman Catholic, though that fact is changing. We are in the midst of three more courses now in Chicago, with five more scheduled to begin in the future, and all of them are ecumenical.

How do the children and catechists in Chicago experience this journey? How have we experienced our unity and division? What I know best is what has happened in my own church, St. Giles Community. For eight years our Roman Catholic community has rented atrium space in an Episcopal church. Grace Episcopal Church uses the atriums on Sunday mornings and St. Giles uses them Monday through Saturday. Our children have shared atriums, materials, retreats and celebrations, all of which brings us very close together. Our catechists have had ecumenical formation both in the courses and in the regular monthly catechist meetings. The congregations from our two churches have celebrated a joint Ash Wednesday service for the past three years.

Many years ago, when I first began to invite catechists from other churches to the St. Giles catechist meetings, a few of our catechists expressed some longing for the time "when it was just us." But over the years we have come to love and delight in each other, to know each other's ministers, to pray together, matching our "aamens" and "ahmens," to rejoice when a favorite hymn from the Episcopal hymnal is also in a Roman Catholic missalette. Someone is always there to help us find our way in the Book of Common Prayer.

I used to wonder why we enjoy so much the church of the other. I think it is because we can sense that we have already been together. And as we grow in the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd we see this shared history very clearly in the materials of the atrium. They tell us the stories of our origins: the Fettuccia, the Unity Strip, the History of the Gifts, the Plan of God. We have a shared vision of salvation history and a shared theology of worship. The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd gives us a place to meet that is

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a very deep place. A place where we have already been together.

We also know that something has happened, though. In Chicago we experience the pain of knowing there will not be a eucharist at the close of our courses, and there will not be a eucharist when

the St. Giles and Grace churches celebrate together. We feel an urgency and an enthusiasm for sacramental unity. It is not a dull question for us. Usually, when Christians speak about ecumenism, sacramental unity is the last thing they

want to talk about. But this fact is not true for the catechists.

Our experience in Chicago is only a small part of a larger movement of the Holy Spirit in the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. Other amazing ecumenical stories exist in our work in Minnesota; Atlanta, Georgia; Kerrville, Texas; Australia; Feldafing, Germany; Toronto, Ontario; and many other places. All of us, in all these places, have questions about the historical roots of the division, about the disciplines of the several churches, like the discipline regarding intercommunion; even theological questions—scriptural, liturgical, ecclesial, doctrinal.

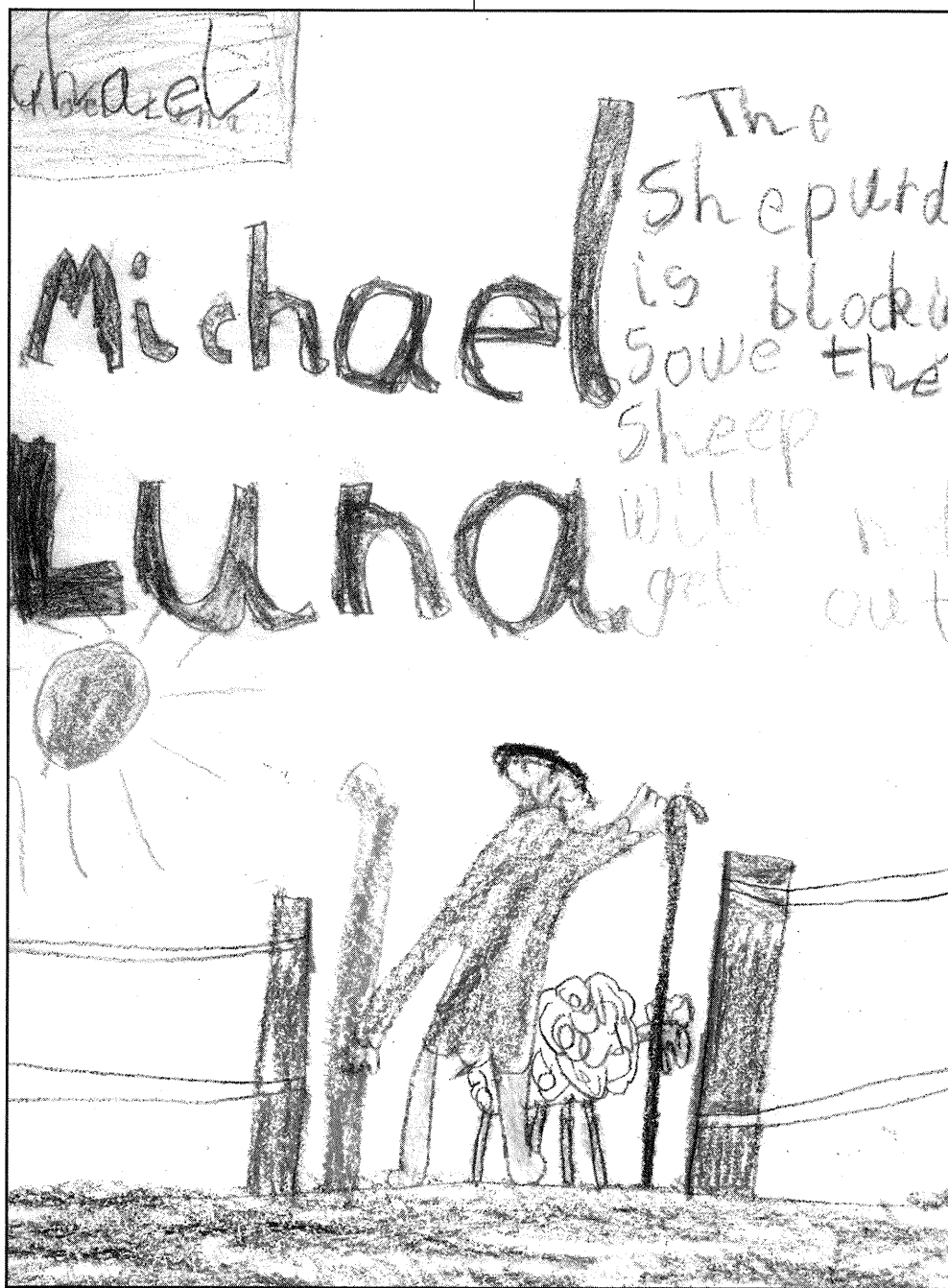
At a Level III formation course for catechists working with 9 to 12-year-olds, I heard questions like this:

- Why can't we receive communion?
- How can we help the bishops see that we are one in the Vine?
- What do we say to the children?

The questions continue. But as we ask them, and as we continue to study and learn from each other, we also proclaim God's praise for so many gifts:

- The gift of the knowledge that our unity is in what is essential.
- The gift that the children guide us all as we work.

Michael, age 7  
Immaculate Conception Atrium  
St. Charles, Michigan  
(This picture was drawn after the Found Sheep presentation.)



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- The gift of ecumenical perspective that informs our formation courses.
- The gift of growing in esteem and respect for our diverse traditions.
- The gift of our continued attempts, despite sometimes failing in the past, to eliminate any words, judgments, or actions that could make our mutual relations difficult.
- The gift of morning prayer and evening prayer.

- And finally, the gift of our different traditions, which, rather than being an obstacle, have made the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd even more comely, more attractive.

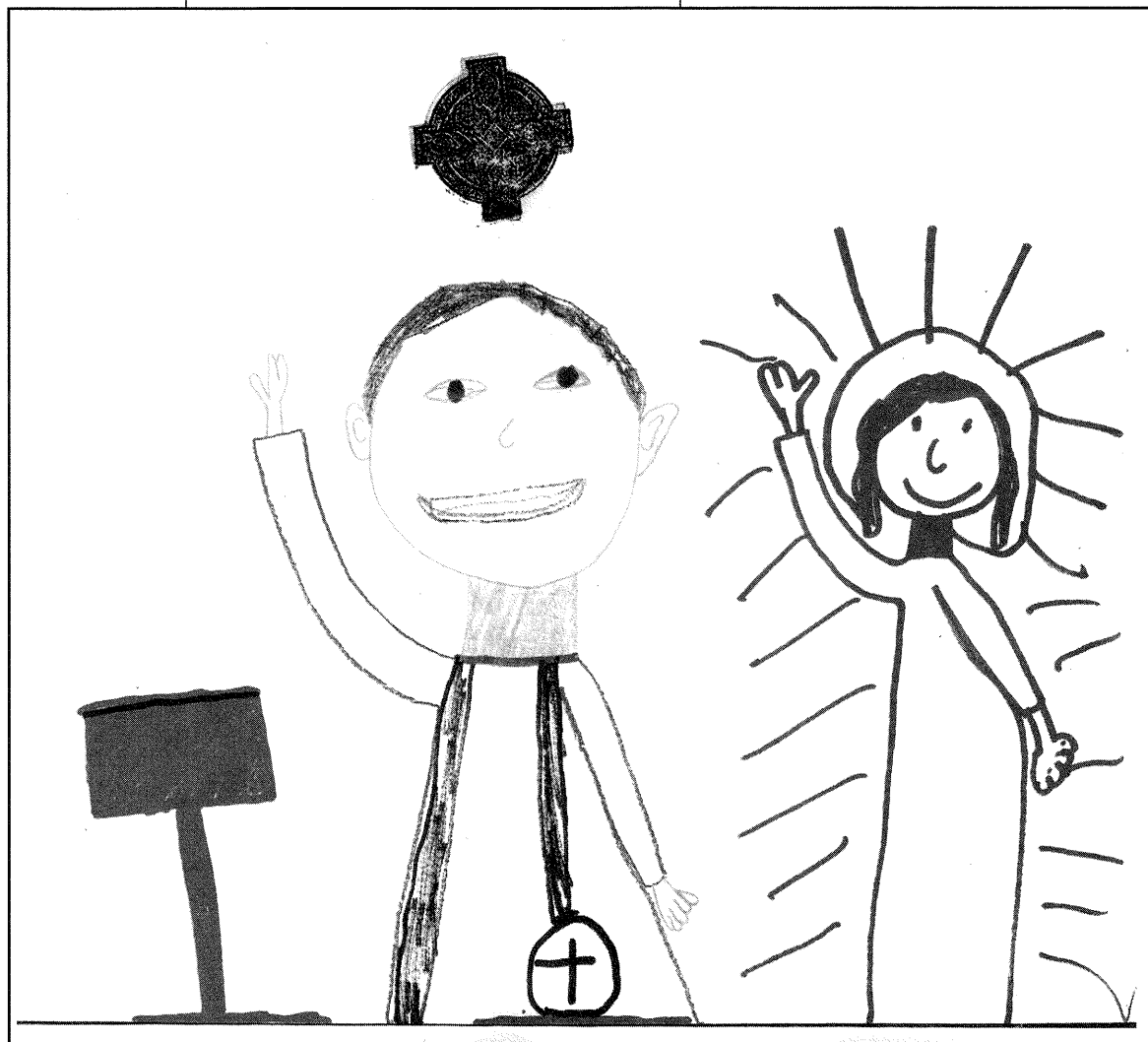
Ours is a simple work and a somewhat hidden work with children. But it could be a greater work than we realize.

In the nineteenth century, the very hidden work of missionaries gave birth to the modern ecumenical movement. Missionaries realized that the division of the Christian churches undermined the credibility of the gospel.

In the twentieth century, the hidden work at the desks of scripture scholars led to the historical-critical methods of scripture study and much collaboration across denominational lines.

In the twenty-first century, our hidden work with children, begun by Sofia and Gianna, may prove to be another of God's instruments designed to bring new life and new energy to the ecumenical movement.

We will wait and see and continue to work all together.



Mae, age 8  
St. Frances Cabrini  
Minneapolis, Minnesota  
(This was drawn at her  
first communion retreat.  
Jesus is truly present.)