



John XXIII Montessori Children's Center

CGS Atrium Newsletter ~ Ordinary Time ~ October 2005

It has been an exciting month and a half as we have welcomed new and returning children to the Atrium. The new Catechists and Assistants have enjoyed meeting and getting to know your children as we all become acclimated to the new year.

The 6-12 year children have responded favorably to their new Atrium space. "It is so cool – everything is my size!" was one comment we heard. Just what the 3 year olds would say if they could put to words what is read by the expressions on their faces! This is one of the subtle, unspoken affirmations of the Atrium environment for the children.

The 6-12 children recently shared in the experiences of their Catechists, Mrs. Delmare and Mrs. Accettullo, who both had the blessing of making a trip to Fatima, Portugal, over the fall break. The children were eager to hear about the pilgrimage, and were pleased to receive a little gift – a rosary, prayer card or triptych blessed at Fatima. We all pondered how the children of Fatima were just their age when our Lady chose to appear to them. Why did she choose these children when she might have chosen anyone else much older than they? What is heaven saying by this choice about the dignity and abilities of this aged child – an age bracket which now has the honor of having two saints proclaimed from their numbers?

The children in the 6-12 Atrium will have the opportunity to read more about the little shepherds in a new book placed on the shelf dedicated to work about the Saints and Our Lady. You may choose to use this opportunity to recall the heart of the Fatima message with your child of this age.

Atrium Calendar at-a-glance:

November 23-24: Thanksgiving Break
– NO ATRIUM

November 30: Parent's Gathering
"The 9-12 CGS Program" – in the 9-12
Atrium, 7:30-8:30 p.m.

A Note from the 3-6 Catechists

Dearest Parents:

Greetings from the 3-6 Atrium! Let us begin by thanking you for the honor and joy of working side-by-side with your children in our prepared environment. We have formed communities in the Atrium which enable us to experience joy and wonder together. We now begin a beautiful spiritual journey that is closely following the Church's own liturgical journey.

As we begin that journey, we learn to work and focus ourselves purposefully and, subsequently, are becoming fertile ground for the planting of God's mysteries. Our work includes growing familiar and comfortable with God's house – our Mother Church. We are learning the cycles and seasons of the Church, the colors used in the seasons of the Church, the vestments of the priest, and the articles used on the altar during the Mass. As parents, you can continue to deepen this familiarity by pointing out the colors the priest is wearing and the cloth and articles the altar is adorned with. If possible, sitting up close to the altar will offer the miracle of the Mass to His youngest disciples. This topic will be further explored as we

enter the season of Advent and experience the change of the season's color to purple.

We are also working in the Geography center of the 3-6 Atrium. We begin this work with a globe of the earth, proceed to a map of the continents, and are using this knowledge to focus on the regions of the Holy Land. Our 3-D map of the Holy Land facilitates the child's "hands on" exploration as they "feel" the land and water and place flags on the three important cities of Nazareth, Bethlehem and Jerusalem. There is also discussion of the role each of these cities played in Our Lord's life. This work appeals to the sensorial needs/desires of the 3-6 child and cements in their understanding the knowledge that Jesus was indeed, a real person who existed in a place and time.

Everything we are experiencing in our "spiritual journey" is advancing us closer to the coming of Advent. The community as a whole has been preparing and soon will experience this time together. Many rich prophecies and narratives of Christ's birth will be offered to the children. We will wait in great anticipation for the celebration of the birth of the Son of God. More news of this will follow in the next newsletter.

In closing, we humbly ask for your prayers that the Good Shepherd will guide us on our journey. This is indeed a very essential and fruitful work!

Yours in Christ,

Mrs. Michelle Castellan
Mrs. Karen Primeau

The Child in the Church by Maria

Montessori. For those of you whose children are new to the Atrium this year, or for those of you who didn't get a copy last year, we have a few copies of this beautiful book available. They will be available at the next Parent's Gathering for \$17.00. Please make checks out to John XXIII Montessori Children's Center.

Listening to God with Children

Attached to this newsletter you will find an excerpt from Listening to God with Children by Gianna Gobbi. Gianna, together with Sofia Cavaletti, worked with Dr. Montessori to develop the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd.

The selection is about children and prayer entitled "Helping the Child to Pray." While the excerpt focuses mainly on what our goal is in the Atrium with regard to prayer, it has many nuggets of wisdom which may be applied in the home as well. As you feel inspired, you may wish to set aside a special, quiet corner in your own home as a "Prayer Corner." Even a simple "prayer candle" and statue next to your child's bed may be used every evening as part of your goodnight prayer ritual.

Listening to God with Children, a very readable and accessible little gem, may be purchased for \$12.00 through the CGS website, cgsusa.org, or from The Catholic Shoppe in Chantilly, VA.

HELPING THE CHILD TO PRAY

by Gianna Gobbi

If we want to assist the child in his or her religious experience, an important area to which we must attend is that of prayer. Prayer is, first of all, listening to God. It is the particular key which opens up the mystery of God's relationship with His creature; it is a key which belongs to God but which God gives to all His creatures regardless of denomination, class, or race; it is a key which is offered in every moment, place, and circumstance. Indeed, all people pray in differing forms, according to the culture and religious expressions of their own countries. As Christians we pray through the mediation of Jesus Christ. Our prayer is both a preparation and a vehicle for arriving at the greatest prayer of thanksgiving; the Eucharist.

Prayer is initiation to the mystery of God and is, itself, mystery. It is a means of knowing God; it is a means of God's self-revelation to us, and it is an instrument of our personal response to God. The Good Shepherd "calls his own sheep by name." This means, as catechists, we cannot presume to teach prayer. Rather, our task is that of creating the conditions for silence and reverence which will help the child to focus on and listen to God. We do this, first of all, by preparing an environment with a prayerful atmosphere.

THE NATURE OF THE CHILD'S PRAYER

Each of us who has experienced the child's praying knows how capable the child is of spontaneous prayer and how different the child's prayer is from that of the adult, both in form and content. The child's prayer has a special quality of silence and contemplation. For example, even a one-year-old might enter into a long, contemplative silence when experiencing a sunset or the flight of a bird, and this can be considered prayer.

The child's prayer can be very brief, such as "Jesus," "Goodness," "Light," or "Amen" and is often followed by a long silence. Furthermore, the spontaneous prayer of the younger child is exclusively a prayer of praise and thanksgiving, rather than a prayer of petition. Thus we hear: "Thank you for the light!" "Thank you for everything!" "Thank you because I am one of your sheep!" "Jesus is wonderful!" "My body is happy!"

A story is told of an old, humble man, who was sitting in the last pew of an empty church and seemed to be waiting for someone. When he was asked, "What are you waiting for?", the old man just gazed at the Tabernacle and answered, "I look at Him, and He looks at me." The prayer of the child is of this same quality of spontaneity and authenticity, and it is these very qualities which form the base and the motivation of every initiation to prayer.

Certainly, then, we must respect and encourage the spontaneous prayer of the child; however, we must also help them with more formal or structured prayer. We do this in order to enrich their personal prayer language, as well as to aid their participation in the liturgy of the church. We want to help them find a balance between spontaneous and formal prayer which can support and nourish them throughout their lives.

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THE PRAYER CORNER

Within the Atrium we designate a space set apart from the rest of the work environment to be the "prayer corner." In this space there will be a low table on a lovely rug which helps define the space as special. The prayer table will be prepared by the children with particular articles: a cloth which corresponds in color to the current liturgical season, a beautifully-bound Bible, candles, and a sacred image (such as a statue of the Good Shepherd, or the Madonna and Child, an icon, etc.) Often there will be a vase of flowers, prepared by the children and placed on the table. Also, there is a kneeler or cushions to invite the individual use of the prayer corner at times other than communal prayer sessions.

The catechist gathers the children in the prayer corner and invites them into silence. The catechist then darkens the room and lights the candles. There follows the recitation or singing of a psalm phrase and intervals of silence. The catechist should be positioned beside or behind the children (never in front of them,) so as not to distract their attention and concentration. The length of the prayer time will be determined by the children and will often consist in long periods of silence, which are, in themselves, authentic prayer. We may conclude the prayer session by inviting the children's verbal responses. Great respect and patience are required on the part of the catechist in soliciting the spontaneous responses of the children.

All of this need not seem too formal, because, particularly in the beginning, it is necessary to provide an exterior, structured form for prayer or, we might say, to create a kind of ritual for prayer. Obviously, this does not preclude the importance of other times of spontaneous prayer in the atrium, such as: when the children listen to the Word being proclaimed, or are working, or singing, or "listening" to the silence. However, the children love ritual; it seems to touch a deep need within them. The repetition of something they know and love gives them a sense of security. All who work with children, as catechists or as parents, have experienced the joy and peace of children of all ages after a time of prayer. A ritual of prayer, similar to what we have in the atrium, can also be done in the home.