

Centenary of the Birth of Maria Montessori

Pope St. Paul VI

On Thursday, September 17, 1970, Pope Paul VI received participants in the International Congress held in Rome to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the birth of Maria Montessori. The President of the Italian section of the International Montessori Association, Dr. Maria Jervolino, and the international Secretary, Dr. Mario Montessori, Maria Montessori's son, were present. The Pope spoke as follows:

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are really very happy to welcome you here this morning and so respond to the desire so kindly expressed by your devoted President, Signora Maria Jervolino. You have done an excellent thing in arranging an international congress dedicated to "Maria Montessori and the Problem of Education in the Modern World". The centenary of her birth falls in the same year as the International Education Year, being held under the auspices of UNESCO. Is not this coincidence a stimulus to profitable reflection about the work of that great educator and to renewing methods of educating children and adolescents at home and at school? We rejoice at this with all our heart.

The personality of Maria Montessori is a very attractive one. She was a true pioneer in the fundamental field which education is; she accomplished lasting work in it. Is not your presence at this Congress in itself an eloquent evidence of the topicality of her work and its exceptional fruitfulness? It radiated through Italy first of all, then through Europe and is now spreading throughout the world, wherever her works have been translated and distributed, but above all where her example has given rise to many fervent followers, who in their turn have become eminent masters in this field.

There is no doubt that the source and secret of her influence are to be found in Maria Montessori's soul, in her vital discovery of the child and her infective enthusiasm for this great work of education. In this time when so many questions are being asked in various domains about the need for reforming teaching, her doctrine is of singular topicality; we ought to go back to it with feeling and draw inspiration and energy from it.

The Discovery of the Child

[T]he discovery of the child – these words recall Maria Montessori's first experience: she made a discovery. She had obtained a medical degree in 1896, and that was an extraordinary achievement in those days for a woman. She herself tells us in her lively and spontaneous way, which continues to enchant us today, of her experience in a kindergarten for workers' children in the San Lorenzo working-class quarter of Rome. The children in the kindergarten were undernourished and had nothing to do. It was then that she made her so fruitful discovery of the vital basic laws which govern the child's psychic and intellectual development. That was also the starting point for a movement of pedagogical reform, the chief characteristics of which was use of active methods. Such methods are accepted by all today, but at that period her innovation had revolutionary effect, and did not fail to arouse fierce opposition. Such is the ordinary fate of those who make new discoveries.

School needs transformation

Maria Montessori had the genius to treat the child, even the very small child, as a person - a living being with his or her own laws of development. From then on, she did not begin by imposing laws which are conceived by adults and are unsuitable for children, but she never ceased insisting that in order to fulfill his part the educator must agree to stand aside, not try to impose himself, to be there, yet with complete discretion, watching the child's early reactions, which are all the more meaningful if they are expressed in an atmosphere of collective liberty and personal autonomy. As she herself so happily wrote: "This spiritual embryo which the child is, develops according to a plan. In it is a concealed adult, an unknown child, an imprisoned living being who must be liberated. This is the most urgent duty of upbringing. In this sense, to liberate is to know. It is therefore a question of getting to know the unknown" (Maria Montessori).

In order to play its part in this awakening, the school needs to be profoundly transformed. It ought to become a true home, where the child can feel at home, and not under repression, even though subject to study and supervision. The school lay-out and agreeable furnishings become elements which help the teachers to guide the child's development while respecting it. The teacher can be attentive to children's "sensitive periods" and help them to make a progressive discovery of their own possibilities and bring their best potentialities to flower. It is a question of educating for life, and such education naturally cannot be given in any but a lively way, not neglecting physical education and sense education, drawing and the art of music.

Child learns self-control

In a word, the child learns in many ways how to be himself and how to live, in work and in play, which offers him many possibilities for expression, particularly through handling objects. He masters his body, he controls himself, he develops his thought and he expresses his artistic gifts, he communicates with others, and together with the happiness of being alive he discovers the joy of loving. He does all these things in a single flow of energy.

The teacher's role is far from being diminished by this active method; on the contrary, it is increased; her influence may be said to be multiplied ten times. Teaching is no longer a matter of purely and simply transmitting conceptual data; rather is it initiation to life, through the means of living example. This shows the prime importance of the teacher being properly formed, for spiritual and mental training is clearly as important as the acquisition of knowledge. Maria Montessori rightly dwelt upon the child's power to absorb things from a very early age.

Since this is so, who can fail to see the capital influence upon the child's formation which is exerted by the images presented to it, the examples given to it, the ideals which are instilled into it by teachers to whom it spontaneously gives all its trust? Who is unaware of the child's tendency to imitate, to mimic, to identify with those it admires and loves?

Maria Montessori therefore rightly insisted upon religious upbringing. We think the prodigious fecundity of her method is far from having been exhausted in this domain. She was convinced that the pedagogy inherent in the liturgy contained the same principles as her own theory of secular education, and she resolutely took the ways towards liturgical renewal which were opened by Saint Pius X. Just as the school had to be the children's home, so the church had to be the home of God's

children. Maria Montessori's method of religious pedagogy is an extension of her secular pedagogy; it is naturally founded on the latter and forms its crown, by enabling the child to develop its highest potentialities to the full and to bring its whole development to fulfillment in an harmonious way.

Just as children's school life prepares them for their later lives, so their sacramental and liturgical initiation is the porch through which they are brought into the community of the children of God. Religious instruction certainly continues to be always necessary, for the facts of revelation are not foreknown in the child's consciousness, and the child has to be prepared for receiving them as a personal gift from God, his most loving Father. So, each child is ready to feel wonder at his meeting with God, according to his age. He learns how to pray to God, and subsequently rejoices to receive him in the mystery of the Holy Eucharist. In any case, is not the Holy Spirit at work from the child's earliest days, in the heart of each of the baptized? Is he not the first craftsman of this progressive discovery?

“Do not despise these little ones”

Such, dear gentleman, are some of the reflections which your presence arouses in us on this occasion of the first centenary of the birth of Maria Montessori. May her example awaken many teaching vocations in this World Education Year; may it help them to overcome the temptations to discouragement which are inevitable in face of the vastness and difficulty of the task to be performed. It is a matter of vocations devoted to early childhood, and these are above all vocations for women, for it is woman that is privileged with the sensitivity, tenderness, gentleness, patience and dedication which are needed for this pedagogical “childbearing”, this spiritual motherhood. We hope that such a delicate task shall preferably be entrusted to women, to women with high human and moral qualities, for the task is so connatural to them. This is a time when educators are unsure about what methods to use and have even come to wonder about the use of what they are doing. But Maria Montessori reminds us that there is nothing more exalting than to give aid to a human person and to go along with him in all the richness of his being, which has been created in God's image, was redeemed in the blood of Christ, and together with all God's children is called to enter into the depths of his trinitarian life, for eternity.

Instead of breaking up into empiricism, education which is worthy of the name rests upon sure principles and is deployed through development of the best potentialities in the child and the adolescent, who will gradually discover for themselves those human and religious values persuasive examples of which are given to them by their educators. “Do not despise even one of these little ones”, Jesus tells us, “for in heaven their angels always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 18:10).

Dear Gentlemen, we thank you for making this visit to us, and at the same time we encourage you with all our heart to go on with the educational work which you are doing all over the world. We give our Apostolic Blessing to you and to all your dear ones.

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An Excerpt from the Preface of *The Good Shepherd and the Child: A Joyful Journey*

The youngest children lead us to the deepest mysteries of our faith. As they fall in love with the mustard seed (Matthew 13:31-32) they help us discover that the Kingdom of God is a mystery of growth and transformation. Like the mustard tree, which hosts birds in its branches, the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd was born from a tiny “seed,” an unexpected encounter with children and God’s Word. Dr. Sofia Cavalletti was a privileged witness to that encounter and to the children’s total engagement with the mystery being revealed, and it changed her life. Beginning in 1954, she and Gianna Gobbi began a “long work” together of tirelessly observing children and seeking to put in their hands the particular announcements from the Bible and the liturgy that seemed to most deeply satisfy their spiritual hungers. Their indicator that the “food” being offered truly matched the need and capacity of the children was the children’s joy, a peaceful kind of joy that led to further contemplation, especially through their personal work with the corresponding material, and to prayer.

Along with their efforts to create an “atrium” for the children (a sacred, prepared space where they might be “helped to draw closer to God by themselves” by being given direct access to the portions of the Bible and the liturgy most suited to their developmental stage), Sofia, Gianna, and their collaborators sought to share their discoveries with adults: those adults who seek to serve the children as catechists, but also parents who are their child’s “original and irreplaceable” teachers of faith, and with all adults as fellow members of Christ’s Body, the Church.

The most important tool they offered for adults to aid their journey with children toward God is that of the formation courses for catechists. These courses provide an in-depth look at the mystery of the child—basic child development along with the child’s spiritual development—and how the mystery of the child intersects with the mystery of God. In addition to the richness in the arenas of child development, pedagogy, and theology, the formation courses offer an even greater treasure: the invaluable experience of receiving the “Good News” for oneself in the essential, wonder-filled way the children receive it in the atrium. In other words, the first gift of the formation course is our own faith formation, our own discovery or rediscovery of the “precious pearl.”

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Back to the mystery of the mustard seed: All living things grow and change, and the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is no exception. The children are always teaching us a better, more essential way of approaching the mystery.

The tiny “mustard seed” of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd has now grown into a “mustard tree,” with branches reaching into six continents! There are atria in parishes, schools, homes, even on a van that serves “street children,” in thirty countries and counting! In 2009, Mother Teresa’s order, the Missionaries of Charity, adopted this catechesis worldwide. There is perhaps no greater testimony to the “hidden treasure” of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd than the Missionaries’ desire to be formed in it, not just for their work with children, but with the poorest of the poor of all ages. Even more remarkable is their wanting the catechesis training for their own spiritual formation. In her utter amazement, Sofia asked them, “Why? Why this catechesis?” and they answered: “Because here we find the true spirit of poverty; here we learn true contemplation.”

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Rebekah Rojcewicz