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Box 07, Folder 12 - "The Atrium or Anti-Chamber to the Church" (The Child in the Church)-Chap2 (E.M.S.)

Edwin Mortimer Standing

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CH:2
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THE ATRIUM

OR

ANTI-CHAMBER TO THE CHURCH

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THE ATRIUM OR CHILDREN'S CHAPEL

QUESTION: "In your method you have prepared the environment of the child in such a way as to stimulate the development of the natural faculties: What sort of an environment would you prepare to correspond with, and draw out the development of the SUPER-natural faculties?"

DR. MONTESSORI: "Such an environment already exists. It is the Church. What is the Church if it is not a specially prepared environment for drawing out and sustaining the supernatural life of man?"

QUESTION: "But speaking practically, as a teacher, how would you set about giving what is called 'religious instruction'?"

DR. MONTESSORI: "People are constantly asking me about this question of religious instruction--whether it should be long or short, determined by the teacher, or left to the choice of the children, and so on. They nearly always speak of it as if it were a special school 'subject.' My answer to all this is that I should not regard it as a 'subject' at all. The preparation of the child for his full participation in the life of the Catholic Church is a much wider thing than the learning by heart of certain intellectual truths. It is a life in itself.

"The child, for instance, must learn how to make the Sign of the Cross, how and when to genuflect, how to carry decorously objects such as candles and flowers without making a noise. He must be taught how to prepare for the sacraments of penance and of Holy Communion, and how to participate in these sacraments. He must be taught how to follow the actions of the Mass, how to take part in processions, and, in general, how to participate in the liturgical ceremonies of the Church, as far as it is possible for the layman to do so. All these are things to be done rather than things to be read.

"In all such matters it is important that the small child should be most carefully instructed, so that he shall feel 'at home' in God's House."

of things in Protestantism. Led by Luther,

LEARNING BY HEART.

QUESTION: "But how about the Catechism? Would you not have any learning by heart?"

DR. MONTESSORI: "Yes, of course I would have certain things learned by heart; but I would have the memorizing come at the end, as a summing up after the experience."

QUESTION: "What do you mean by 'after the experience at the end'?"

DR. MONTESSORI: "I mean something similar to the manner in which our children become acquainted with the definitions of geometric forms. You know how the children occupy themselves with the geometric insets in our schools. They take them out of their sockets and run their finger-tips around the edges, thus getting a tactile as well as a visible impression of the various forms. They also take different kinds of geometric forms out of their drawers at the same time and mix them together. Then by comparison and contrast they sort these out again, putting each back in its right socket. All this is genuine experimental work, often involving trial and error; and by this means the children become more and more familiar with the various geometric shapes. So that when they come to learn the exact definitions, one can truly say that the learning by heart comes 'at the end, after they have experienced them.'"

QUESTION: "What parts of the Catechism do children learn by heart?"

DR. MONTESSORI: "What I could not, naturally, decide myself. They would have to be selected by someone in authority who would also be responsible for the wording. The important thing would be to have these statements very exact."

"It would not be necessary, in my opinion, to learn all the catechism by heart; only certain necessary and accurate definitions, such as it is essential for every Catholic to know. Nowadays there are so many people who talk such a deal of sentimental rubbish about religion that it is imperative

that every child should have something clear and logical to fall back on. One cannot, unfortunately, enjoin silence on all these 'loose thinkers'--more's the pity!--so one must learn to distinguish between their vague ideas and exact definitions.

"In Italy some of the Cardinals have made up catechisms for the use of children--different ones for different ages. I am quite confident that, by teaching children religious truths according to the method I have indicated, we should be able to show that our little ones had grasped the truths as well as, if not better than, older children taught by the usual methods."

QUESTION: "To go back for a moment to what you said about the children learning things by heart--after they had experienced them. I can see how this can be managed in a subject like geometry, but I do not quite see how you are to make it work in the sphere of religious knowledge?"

DR. MONTESSORI: "For this it would be necessary to have a special material, appealing to the senses, working on the same lines as our 'didactic material.' The children would learn by means of objects and actions."

QUESTION: "Would you have this 'religious apparatus' mixed up with the ordinary didactic apparatus of the Montessori school, or would you keep it separate?"

DR. MONTESSORI: "I would keep it separate. I would have a separate room specially dedicated to the 'supernatural life.' Everything in this room would have a bearing on the spiritual life, and the general effect would be that here the soul of the child and all his activities would be centered in the life and personality of our Lord. The work in this room would of course include: Bible History, the study of Doctrine, Church History and the Lives of the Saints, and of course the Holy Mass."

QUESTION: "Do you not think it might create an artificial sense of separation in the child's mind to have all the religious material kept separate from the rest--as though the supernatural life could not go on just as well in an ordinary schoolroom?"

DR. MONTESSORI: "No, I do not think it would have this effect at all.

In our adult life the church or chapel is a place especially devoted to the supernatural, which, with its prepared environment, helps on our spiritual life; but this does not prevent us from having supernatural inspirations at other times, and in places which are not so specially set apart.

"It would be better to have a room specially devoted to the religious life, because such broad distinctions are a help to the immature intellect, and form the basis of more detailed subdivisions (cf. pp. 123-4). It would, of course, be possible to have the natural and the 'super-natural' apparatus all in the same room, just as it is possible to eat, sleep, work and play all in one room, though it is better to have separate rooms."

QUESTION: "Would not this idea of having a separate room for the teaching of religion be looked upon as rather unnecessary and newfangled?"

DR. MONTESSORI: "People might think it was a new idea, but, as a matter of fact, it is a very old idea--almost as old as the Church itself. In the early Church there was, indeed, a special room called the atrium, generally adjoining the church, which was used for the training and instruction of catechumens. It was--as you might say--a sort of ante-room to the Catholic Church, both in a literal and a metaphorical sense. Here, as in so many cases, we can, with great profit, take a 'leaf out of the book' of the Early Church.

"This room then--which one might call the Atrium--would be set apart for the preparation of little children for their full participation in the life of the Church. It would not simply be a question of teaching them their catechism, but something much broader and deeper. This room would be a place where the religious sentiment would be born, and nurtured--where the children would be quite free in the expression of their religious instincts.

"Just as my first schools in Rome were called 'Children's Houses' (Case dei Bambini) so one might call these 'Children's Churches.' Not of course in the sense that they should form a substitute for the real Church--which

would be absurd--but because everything in them would be directed towards initiating the children into the true life of the Church."

QUESTION: "Supposing that money were no object, how would you build your Atrium or Children's Church? How would it be furnished? And how would the children occupy themselves in it?"

DR. MONTESSORI: "That is rather a big question. Well, first, I would try and find some architects and artists who understood the child spirit; and I would get them to give of their best. I have no patience with the idea that because children are very young they can be put off with the second best. I would have the room built in an ecclesiastical style, with pointed windows, which would be adorned with sacred pictures. The windows, of course, would be very low, down to the children's level--like everything else in the room. There would be statues, here and there, of our Lord, our Lady and the saints; and the children would bring flowers to put in front of these images, and also light candles before them. On the walls would be sacred pictures illustrating Old and New Testament stories. The whole room would be fitted up as a sensorial environment calling out to the souls of the little children. As in an ordinary Montessori school, around the walls would be cupboards and shelves with various exercises and occupations for the children to work at."

QUESTION: "What sort of occupations would there be in this Atrium?"

DR. MONTESSORI: "My principle would be that in this room everything that the children learn and do in the ordinary Montessori school would be repeated on a higher plane, super-naturalized, as you might say."

QUESTION: "Could you give some examples of what you mean by this 'super-naturalizing' of the activities of the ordinary school?"

DR. MONTESSORI: "Well, you know what we mean in our schools by the 'exercises in practical life'--how the children are taught to take great care of their environment--how they dust the apparatus and so on. Now they would do the same here. With an even more loving care, they would busy them-

selves dusting the sacred statues and pictures, the little altar and its furniture, and all the other objects in the Atrium.

"Then again, as we have already mentioned, the little ones would feel that the skill they had acquired in carrying a glass of water without spilling it would have gained a new value and significance when they carried vases of flowers to place in front of the Holy Images, or carried a stoup full of holy water. As you know, too, when they walk around the line they have to carry a little bell, and carry it so carefully that it does not ring; so now in preparing their little altar as for Holy Mass or Benediction they will feel a new significance in their power to do this, as they carry the little 'Sanctus' bell and place it without a sound in its position at the foot of the altar.

"I would arrange, too, that the children should often have little religious processions, carrying flowers to the place at Our Lady's feet, or at the foot of the Altar; and here again the marching while carrying things, which is a regular part of the ordinary Montessori school routine, would acquire a new meaning.

"In a similar way the 'Silence Game'--in itself so full of mystery and awe--would now become the prelude to the still more wonderful silence of prayer and meditation.

"Even the decimal system, with which the little ones have just become acquainted, can be made use of here, in the counting and arranging of beads to make rosaries. There is a stage (when the little ones are just acquiring the notion of number) when they are interested in anything that has number and can be counted. At this stage they will begin quite spontaneously to count all sorts of things, such as the number of persons in the room, or the number of books on a shelf. It would be a simple matter to devise different exercises, of varying degrees of difficulty, in which they would be able to make use of their newly-won knowledge of numbers. They could begin with simple numbers as the five loaves and two fishes, the

twelve apostles, the seven churches, the number of years in Our Lord's life and in His Ministry, the number of candles used at Low and at High Mass and at Benediction. Coming to more difficult numbers, they could express numerically, with the aid of the number apparatus, such facts as the number of Sundays in the year, the different subdivisions of the liturgical year, e.g., the number of Sundays in Lent, or after Pentecost, etc.

"They could use the 'thousand chain' as a chain of years, and by counting off the thirty-three years of Our Lord's life at one end, they would be able--by marking in the centuries with number cards--to gain a clear idea as to the length of the Church's history (comparing it too with the ephemeral life of heretical sects). These are only suggestions, but one could find many facts in connection with the Church and its history which have a numerical significance, which would be specially interesting to the children at this stage.

"In the Montessori School the children are busied at a certain stage with the color tablets. These exercises give them an intense interest in colors; and everything that they see in their environment which has color attracts their attention. It would be a great joy to the children, at this particular 'sensitive period,' to be given the little models of the liturgical vestments, in order to recognize their different colors and learn the significance of each.

"Music, of course, would play an important part in the life of the Atrium. I would have the children taught how to sing the old Gregorian chants, and also the old hymns which have been handed down as folk-songs.

"You know that our children have a special musical apparatus, made of bells, for learning the notes of the scale and their names. In the Atrium, too, I would have a set of bells, but here I would have them arranged as a little belfry, like a miniature church tower. The children who had already learned to play little tunes on the other bells would be allowed to use these at certain times. They would be used for calling the others to prayer--as at the Angelus, and on other occasions. These bells would be useful, too, in

other ways. I would ask a priest to come and explain to the little ones the ceremony of "Blessing the Bells." He need not necessarily actually bless the bells, but it would be easier for the children to understand the ceremony with these objects before them. They could also copy out some of the passages from the prayers used at the Blessing of Bells, which are very beautiful (e.g., "May the sound of the bells drive away dangers, prevent storms and tempests from harming us; may their voice increase the devotion of the faithful and rouse them to eagerness in hastening to their church, there to share in divine worship").

READING AND COMPOSITION.

"Many of the children in the Atrium will be at an age when they are just learning to read. For these I would devise the same kind of exercises as I have done in the ordinary school. As at Barcelona, I would have little cards made out with names written on them. These would correspond to various small objects which would be kept in sets in boxes, each set being accompanied by a small packet of cards with the names describing them. The child would take the objects out of a box, place them out on the table, and then read the little cards, placing each under the object it denotes. One set--for the smaller children--might contain such objects as: a cross, a lamb, a rosary, or little figures representing Our Lord, His Mother, St. Peter and so on.

"Another set would comprise the various objects used on the altar, e.g., a Chalice, a Monstrance, a Corporal, an altar cloth, a candlestick, a crucifix, a burse, and so forth. The different vestments worn by the priest at Holy Mass would form another series; whilst still another could be made of the various things found in a church, such as a baptismal font, confession box, lectern, altar, pulpit, etc. Pictures mounted on cards could be used where it was not possible to obtain suitable models."

READING SLIPS.

"It would be a good thing also to make use of 'Reading Slips' such as the children have in our schools. These reading slips, as I expect you remember, are in the form of little commands which the child on reading has to execute himself. The little one struggles eagerly and voluntarily with the difficulties of reading because it knows that--when it has wrested the meaning from the sentence--it will be amply rewarded. The reward lies in the joy of carrying out the action suggested by the card. To these little children, just beginning to read, it seems a great mystery that these small cards can, as it were, come to life and give commands to a living person."

QUESTION: "What kind of actions would these reading slips command the children to do?"

DR. MONTESSORI: "In such an environment as there would be in the Atrium, it would not be hard to find many things for them to do."

1. Go to the Holy Water stoup, and very devoutly make the sign of the cross.
2. Go to a statue of an angel, think of it as your guardian angel, and thank him for looking after you. Ask him to pray for you.
3. Go to a prie-dieu and say an "Our Father" for the Pope's intention.

"As the children get older I would encourage them to write little compositions on Biblical subjects. Not indeed that they will need much encouragement; for it has often been proved that little children prefer writing on these subjects as their little hearts are so full of love and faith.

"Everything to be super-naturalized! that would be my aim. To take another example. It is part of the recognized equipment of a Montessori school that there should be a little washstand with soap, water and towels. The children are given the most minute instruction how the ceremony of washing and drying one's hands is best carried out. Now in the Atrium I would have this same action (of washing of hands) done over again, but with an entirely new significance. I would ask the Priest to come and very carefully go through the action of the Lavabo, as it is done in the Mass, explaining to the little

ones the significance of the ritual, and teaching them to say the prayers. After that I would have the bambini go through the action themselves, repeating at the same time, the words that accompany it."

MANUAL WORK.

"Manual work would form an important feature of the Atrium. There would be a little carpenter's bench for the older children, where they would make little wooden models. At different times of the year they could make models appropriate to the particular liturgical season. Thus at Easter they could make a little cross, at Christmas a crib. It would be a good thing if a number of them joined together in making a more complicated model--as the Temple at Jerusalem, or the Stable at Bethlehem. There would also be plenty of scope for weaving, clay-modeling and embroidery. All these things would help to make the children understand the kind of life Our Lord Himself lived as a child; for I would have the little ones realize that the religious life is not a thing apart from ordinary every-day life; but is one complete life which includes and takes up into itself the common things of life. This is one of the reasons why I should like the children--as far as circumstances and climate permit--to do as we did at Barcelona, where they grew their own wheat and grapes, to obtain the bread and wine to be offered up in the Mass of their First Communion (see p. 12). It is a good thing anyhow for children to take care of plants and watch for themselves the mystery of growth, but this activity takes on a still higher purpose when the materials they have helped to produce are to be offered up in the highest act of worship--to be changed into the very Body and Blood of Our Lord.

"I would also have the children become acquainted with the other elements which are used in the sacramental life of the Church--e.g., salt, oil, water, olives, incense, etc. As we did at Barcelona I would have the Priest go through the ceremony of Blessing the water, and the children could afterwards copy out parts of the prayers, e.g., "Fill this element of water, O God, with Thy

power and blessing that it may be endowed with divine grace to drive away devils."

"Water indeed is such an important element in the life of the Church--being used in Baptism, at the Lavabo, in Holy Water and in the holy rite of the Mass itself, as well as at other times--that I would have it much in evidence. I would have a little fountain in the garden with a pond containing fishes. The children themselves would look after the fishes, and I would have a little tablet near the pond--a replica of one of the ancient inscriptions from the Catacombs--showing the fish as the symbol of Christianity."

QUESTION: "Where would you have your pond?"

DR. MONTESSORI: "In the cloister garden. You told me that expense was to be no object! So, adjoining the Atrium, I would have a special garden for the children. The ideal thing would be to have the school arranged like a monastery round a little cloister. The Church could be on one side, the Atrium on another, and on the other two the ordinary schoolrooms. I would have statues at the end of the cloister-walks where the children could place flowers. The children could play in the cloister garden, and I would like a tree in it with a little house up in the branches into which the children could climb, as they had in one school I visited in California.

"In this garden I would like the children to keep as many as possible of the 'Evangelical Animals and Plants.'"

QUESTION: "What do you mean by the 'evangelical animals and plants'?"

DR. MONTESSORI: "I mean the various animals and plants that play a conspicuous part in Bible history and symbolism. For instance I would like the children to have a pet lamb to remind them of the 'Lamb slain from the foundations of the world.' They could have a dovecote and keep doves, because of the two turtle doves Our Lady offered up at the Temple, and the dove that was sent out of the Ark, and also because the dove is the symbol of the Holy Spirit. They could keep bees, too, and have some candles made with the wax their own bees had made. These could be blessed and placed on their school altar.

"Nature study would form an essential element in the work of the Atrium. In my description of the work at Barcelona I have indicated the reason for this, viz., that from the observation of created things the child's mind should be raised to their Creator. As the Psalmist says: 'The Heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament showeth His handiwork.'"

THE WALLS OF THE ATRIUM.

"On the walls of an ordinary Montessori school you see numbers of cards hanging up, some containing little poems, some lists of spelling examples, others the "Parts of Speech," and so on. The children are constantly reading these and spontaneously copy them down. Similarly in the Atrium, besides the sacred pictures which I have mentioned, I would hang up a variety of cards. These would be tastefully prepared, written in beautiful script, and embellished with ornamental designs after the manner of the old monastic manuscripts.

They would include such writings as:

- a. Sacred mottoes, such as one sees written on the walls of churches or on the altar, e.g.:

"Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus."

"Tota pulchra es Maria," etc.

- b. Definitions of the Sacraments.
- c. The Works of Charity.
- d. Acts of Faith, Hope, Charity, etc.
- e. The Fruits of the Holy Spirit.
- f. The Confiteor.
- g. The Lord's Prayer.
- h. The Hail Mary.
- i. The Gloria.
- j. The Apostles' Creed.

"To some of these sacred inscriptions I would assign a more conspicuous place than on the wall. The 'Ten Commandments,' for instance, I would have actually engraved on a slab of stone, which I would place on a little stand or lectern, specially made, so as to be just the right height for the children.

"On a similar stand, beside a statue of St. Peter, I would place the 'Commandments of the Church'; and, on a third, beside a statue of Our Lord, the 'Commandments of Our Lord.'

"The children would have these writings on the wall and on the lecterns constantly before them, and at a certain stage--when they are learning to write--they would spontaneously and with great enjoyment copy them out. They would keep their copies in a special folio, as they do the multiplication tables which they have themselves worked out, and would use them, like the latter, for learning by heart."

USE OF MODELS IN THE ATRIUM.

QUESTION: "Would you approve of the use of little model altars for the children to learn about the Mass?"

DR. MONTESSORI: "Yes, we had them at Barcelona. I think these models may be very helpful so long as they are used in a proper way."

QUESTION: "What do you mean by a proper way?"

DR. MONTESSORI: "Well to begin with, the model altar must never be confused in the child's mind with the real thing. The models should only be used for learning the names of things and their uses. They must never forget, for instance, that a real altar contains an altar-stone with some relics of the Saints, and that a priest could not say Mass without such a stone.

"Care should also be taken that the child's preoccupation with the model altar does not degenerate into a mere game.

"In this connection, too, I would recommend the use of the cardboard models, published by the Liturgical Apostolate (Abbaye de St. André, Belgium). These have been made to illustrate the different actions of the Mass, showing the positions of priest and acolytes at the important moments of the Mass.

"In the Notre Dame Montessori School at Downhill, Glasgow, the Sisters have a series of beautiful models, representing the various 'mysteries,' such as the Annunciation, the Nativity, the Crucifixion and so on. The children take these models from the cupboards where they are kept, and place them on the floor. Then with the Montessori movable script alphabet they make up in their own words on a rug on the floor a little description of the incident portrayed. Such models would form desirable parts of the 'environment' in the Atrium.

"It would also be a good thing to have models of the ancient Tabernacle, the Temple of Solomon, a Church, or a monastery, with a little description written out for the children, and cards with the names on them, which the children could place, from memory, on the various parts of the models.

"I think it is very important that children should be made interested in the history of the Church. I would have little stories and pictures specially composed revealing the characteristics of the Early Church--its simplicity; its fervor and its heroism. I have a great admiration for the work of one of the Benedictine Fathers in Rome. This Priest takes the boys, under his charge, to the Catacombs, explains to them how they were used by the Early Christians. He goes further than this for he actually celebrates Mass there, as was done in the Early Church, and his boys assist at it. We should do everything we can to revive the spirit of those early times.

"As in those times, I would have the children follow as far as possible the actual words and ceremonies of the Mass, and not content themselves with reading special books of devotions. The latter may be very good in themselves but they can never take the place of the actual words of the Mass."

A SPECIAL DRESS FOR THE ATRIUM.

"In an ordinary Montessori school the children--when they come into the school--very often put on little smocks or pinafores to work in. I would have the same in the Atrium, but specially designed. I would make the children wear little colored smocks like the one the child Jesus wore. Some would be red, to commemorate the martyrs; others white for purity; and others green, which is the commonest liturgical color. The little girls would wear a small veil like a Spanish mantilla; and the little boys would have a cowl attached to the top of their smocks at the back. On the shoulders of each of these garments would be worked a cross to symbolize that the Christian must carry his cross--big or little as the case may be--in his daily life. For even the children have their crosses to bear, sometimes much heavier than we are inclined to imagine."

THE LIFE OF THE ATRIUM.

"Thus it will be seen that the work of the Atrium would be a much broader thing than merely 'teaching the child his catechism'--often with the avowed aim of making a good impression on the Diocesan Inspector, or the Bishop! It will rather be a life complete in itself, something which will affect the children at all points. It will be like a surrounding and pervading atmosphere in which they will live and move and have their being."

The whole trend of modern psychological research is to emphasize the permanent effect, for good or ill, of impressions in early childhood. How could these little ones, therefore, better prepare themselves for the struggle against the paganism of today and tomorrow than by being--in these formative years--"Bambini viventi nella Chiesa"--Little children living in the Church?