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RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN RELATION TO THE SENSITIVE PERIODS.

by Rev. Malin Isabel Eugene

General Characteristics of the Montessori Method.

(a) Dr. Montessori considered the individual child and catered for him. Each child has his own rhythm, character, gifts, powers of developing. She studied the laws that govern the development of the child, physically, psychologically, spiritually, and applied them to the individual in the classroom.

(b) She caters all the time for the whole man, as Pope Pius XI lays down in the Encyclical on Christian Education. Dr. Montessori recognised that the child had within himself, God-given powers enabling him to develop. He has senses which give him experience of the world he lives in, and a mind that gains knowledge through these experiences.

Dr. Montessori provides the child with many and varied occupations, which she describes as the Materials for Development. Some of these - the Sensorial Materials - aim largely at assisting towards the more perfect development of the senses, whilst others assist the child's intellectual development as he progresses along the various "Prepared Paths to Culture" which he finds waiting for him in the Prepared Environment of the Montessori School.

(c) But the child has not only senses and a mind, but also free-will. If he is to develop harmoniously, he must be given freedom to choose. This choice must not be an arbitrary one, nor one of caprice or curiosity. It is an ordered choice,

for the child may only use the apparatus to which he has been introduced. No other method caters for the free-will of the child in this way. So often children are either commanded to develop along the lines the adult has chosen for him or they are left 'abandoned', that is, they are given a liberty to behave as they like, which is not liberty, but licence.

(d) The child is not only body and senses, mind and will, but he is also a creature of God. If he is baptised, he has a supernatural life - a 'participation in the Divine Nature,' St. Peter calls it in his epistle. Apparatus for the development of the senses, for the gaining of knowledge of the material world is not enough. Montessori provides the child with aids to his spiritual development which are dealt with in other chapters of this book.

(1) Based on a lecture given to the Catholic Montessori Guild by Rev. Mother Isabel Eugene.

Dr. Montessori being a true scientist, studied the children with an open mind, quite unbiased by preconceived theories about how, ~~and~~ what and when they were to learn. When people want to know something about the nature of a living being they study it in its natural environment, to know how it reacts, and to what stimuli. From her observations and research with children at home and in school, Dr. Montessori became convinced that children of whatever nation, like many other organisms, show special aptitudes for certain things at certain epochs in their life (1). Dr. Montessori calls these 'sensitive periods'. Froebel described something similar, and he called these periods of special sensitivity "budding points", though he never went into the matter so profoundly as Montessori. Thus at a certain age touch means more to children than at any other epoch.

Then there is the Sensitive Period for Order; the sensitive ~~for~~ ^{for language - i.e.} period for learning to absorb the sounds of spoken languages; there is even, says Montessori a sensitive period for learning Grammar! And many more besides. (For a fuller account see Maria Montessori - Life and Work. Chapter VII).

The question now is - how can this principle be applied to the teaching of religion? Experience proves that there is great advantage in taking into account the physical and psychological development of the child at these various ^{periods,} ~~stages,~~ and that there certainly exist truths and aspects of religion that the child assimilates better at one moment than at another.

There are three marked stages in the life of the child: ^① ~~infancy~~ ^{infancy & childhood} ~~babyness~~, up to six or seven years old; ^② the junior stage from seven to eleven; and ^③ ~~then~~ adolescence. At each stage, the development of the child presents special characteristics. For the little child up to seven, this mental development - especially the first part of it - is largely affected through what Montessori calls the Absorbent Mind. The child does not learn and acquire knowledge by reason or with deliberate effort: but rather absorbs it. Everyone knows, for instance, how a young child will absorb its native tongue just by living in an environment where it is spoken. It is not done consciously - the child absorbs it as blotting paper absorbs ink.

(not can)
IV.P.

FIRST STAGE 0-7

Furthermore during this period of absorption the senses are particularly active; and this absorption is nearly always accompanied by some sort of bodily activity. So it is sometimes called the period of sensorial - motor activity.

At this stage of development the child tends to be individualistic, and he likes to work on his own. He is not a social being in the full sense of the word. His main work is the construction of himself, the development and perfection of his senses and of muscular co-ordination.

(The time par excellence for the Exercises of Practical Life.)

Second Stage 8-12

12

Between seven and eleven, reason begins to work.

The child asks the 'why' and the 'how' of things. His conscience begins to form. He is full of energy and of enthusiasm. He is curious; ^{he constantly asks} he asks questions; He wants to know.

At the age of adolescence, the child begins to come out of himself. He begins to interest himself in other countries, in other people, in all sorts of things around him, in the other sex. He is very drawn to social questions. It is the age of high ideals, of the need to devote himself, to give himself, of vocation.

A few years ago, not long before her death, Dr. Montessori gave a wonderful lecture in London on the subject of religion. In it she expressed surprise at the controversy about religious education that had been going on in England around the time of the Education Act of 1944. 'Religion', she said, 'is not simply a subject like another on the time-table. It is not a subject that one can take or leave at choice. Religion is a life-one learns it by living it, not as a subject of the school curriculum.'

(1)

Education based upon psychology has drawn the child into the field of objective study. And so the conception of childhood, which at first was a general one, came to distinguish different forms of psychology in the different periods of development.

At the same time also anthropology and physiology point out marked differences between the different periods of growth. Four periods are thus distinguished, each covering six years, although in anthropology periods of three years are put forward:

They are:

- 1° from birth to 6 years of age;
- 2° from 6 to 12 years of age;
- 3° from 12 to 18 years of age;
- 4° from 18 to 24 years of age and then the rest of life.

The first three periods are distinguished anatomically:

at 6 years of age the cranium is completely ossified and at the same time the second dentition takes place;

from 6 to 12 years of age runs the period between the second dentition and puberty;

from 12 to 18 years of age runs the period of puberty and at 18 years of age the wisdom teeth appear.

The first period - that of infancy - is characterised by great transformations and in relation to them we see the infant diseases and the manifestations of so-called naughtiness.

The second period is that of the greatest health, mortality is very low and psychologically it is a period of great

calm as if proceeding towards maturity.

The third period is again full of transformations, almost to the same extent as the first period. These numerous transformations of the body are accompanied by diseases (the diseases of puberty, especially tuberculosis of the lungs and nervous diseases) and juvenile delinquency.

The fourth period is characterised by the ossification of the basis of the cranium. Normal health is regained. Psychologically we witness forms of adaption and mature sexual life. This period is followed by permanent adulthood.

These four periods - and especially the first three - were intuitively recognised in practical life.

The period of infancy (when man is formed) remained mysterious, its characteristics are negative in relation to adaption.

At 6 years of age everybody gives recognition to the child with whom the adult can enter into relationship, he, therefore, is considered accessible to education (the period of the primary school).

At 12 years of age more or less secondary education begins and

at 18 years of age approximately the University (until 24 years of age more or less.)

The Catholic Church has almost exactly, almost scientifically, taken into consideration these same four periods, it has distributed the Sacraments in relation to them.

The first period : Baptism - the foundation itself of religious life.

The child is solemnly received in the Church and his being a Christian depends upon Baptism. This marvellous period, marvellous on account of its development when man is formed, worthy of the greatest respect and in need of much help, because it has a great task, is distinguished from birth itself.

Its need of help is recognised - the need of Grace.

The feasts and solemnity with which the new-born is received and the recognition given to him demonstrate the fundamental importance of this age.

The naughtiness - the characteristics ^{badness} "~~business~~" of the child until 6 years of age - which does not depend on the will and conscience because conscience and intelligence are not yet developed, ~~is~~ is not considered as a sin.

The child, even the suckling, is admitted in the Church, the mothers may take their children with them. He is a citizen of the Church.

The religious education that is given by the mother is intended to make the child feel the protection given to him by other powers, not only by the mother, but ^{for example} ~~the~~ by his Guardian Angel.

The second period has special psychological characteristics. The child seems less inclined to receive the manifestations of his mother's tenderness. It seems that he feels the

need of knowing the reasons of things, and he has a natural tendency to know what is right and what is wrong.

Often he seems a rebel. He tries to gain independence to form associations of an almost secret character, inventing new languages, as if he himself wanted to recognise good and evil. He looks for the absolute.

He does not depend any longer upon his parents who protect him and lavish their care upon him. The family becomes more remote, but a keener sense of respect is born and the father and the mother are considered to be certainly the most honest people in the world.

It seems, however, that at the same time they are not the absolute example that should be followed. The child's progress moves towards independence and the constitution of his own personality (independence and gregarious spirit).

The Church gives special consideration to the child of 7 years of age (the first year of this period between 6 and 7 is recognised as a period of adaptation by psychologists).

The Church considers the child of this age in relation to a general instruction where the command "Honour thy father and thy mother" is proclaimed as a divine law. However, the absolute example that should be followed is Jesus Christ Himself, not the father nor the mother. A plane of absolute morality is built up and any deviation from this plane is a sin. The spontaneous need to know good and evil is therefore answered. The preparation for confession on the other hand corresponds to the instinct of independence, because it is the individual himself who

recognises his sins. He is, therefore, given an education of an active character which reinforces the individual.

This is very different indeed from the current practice of the adult's reproaching the child for every mistake he may make and of punishing him for it. Here it is the child himself who in confession accuses himself, because he has recognised by himself the evil he has done; he recognises it by means of a guide which places good before him as an absolute value.

First H. Communion is placed at this stage. The preparation preceding it and the solemnity of the function deeply touch the soul in a period in which the conscience is formed.

This education, therefore, does not merely give knowledge, it helps life. New, not religious, education, recognises now that knowledge must not be merely taken in by the memory, it should be assimilated by means of activity and interest coming from the subconscious, from the very sources of creative power.

Religion continuously addresses itself to activity, it does not merely give a knowledge of what is good, it gives the opportunity of living what is good.

The third period is one in which the man who proceeds towards permanent adulthood is formed, this is the period of puberty.

Psychologically speaking first a period of agitation and confusion is observed. The calm maturity reached at 12 years of age is upset. The youth does not any longer love his

studies as he did before. He is rather intravert. His inclinations go towards greatness (his parents are of noble birth, they possess many cars - these are the things he puts forward. He goes back, therefore, to the forms of exaggeration which are the lies typical of infancy). At the same time, however, there is a tendency to accomplish great things - a spirit of heroism - the consciousness of a mission in the world. This epoch finished in close proximity of the decision of one's state of life and searches for ideals. Here vocations are born for a superior social status. But here also juvenile delinquency is developed. From an educational point of view this is the most important period of life and it is in great need of guidance, just as the first period needed protection.

The Sacrament which is best suited to receive this period of the life of formation is Confirmation - which makes a man, a "soldier of Christ" and indicates no longer one's own perfectionment, but a social mission. It gives the investiture with mystical arms : the helmet of salvation, the cuirass of justice, the shield of faith, the girdle of truth, the boots of peace. It awards the consecration with holy oil. All this is done with great solemnity, because only a bishop may do so. If this sacrament were prepared and given with the same emotion as the first H. Communion, it would have the significance of a responsibility and of social duties which would be incarnated in this solemn and decisive period of life. This vision of Christians fighting for peace in the ^{whole} world, in the

whole of living society, is exactly the preparation for the social future which enters as a vague ideal in the ordinary education of our times. To prepare men to love each other, to prepare a unity of a peaceful humanity, but a strong humanity ; Confirmation gives it most clearly. It also gives the sublimation of the fighting spirit and the spirit of adventure which are characteristic of that peace is an active struggle and not a passive negation of society, this corresponds precisely and in a special way to the needs and ideals of our times.

Furthermore to reach this point through a Sacrament and not through teaching or a theory, means to assert that man must live principles and not merely learn them.

All the modern psychologists recognise that the third period, that of puberty, may be compared to the first, that of the new-born, on account of its transformations and because in the first period there is a final formation (man in himself, in his characters) and in the third there is the formation of the adult. The third period is therefore considered as a new birth which has a new finality. the reproduction of the species and life in society.

We should equally recognise that the second period on the other hand is calm and almost mature, like adult life. Whilst ⁱⁿ the second period the children feel the need of organising themselves in societies (there is a marked gregarious spirit and we see the development of scouting), here we have the entering into the definite society, of adult men.

The third period is like infancy in relation to childhood; here we observe the first form of definite maturity as an adult.

In the fourth period the Church offers the Sacrament of Matrimony.

In the periods of preparation (infancy and puberty) there are two Sacraments which remain unique for the whole span of life, they cannot be repeated in any case : Baptism and Confirmation. They mark the entering into individual and social life. The other two Sacraments (Confession and H. Communion) accompany instead the whole of life, until death. And also the entrance to death is accompanied by a Sacrament, which, however, can be repeated if who thought he would die is cured. Likewise Matrimony can be repeated, if death breaks the link between the two partners.

Of all these that accompany the whole of the life of man, the Sacraments that have an educative meaning are the two, Confession and H. Communion, which support man on the path of his perfectionment and man needs them always. Man cannot be abandoned at any stage of his life. The adult needs them just as much as the child, even more so. Education, therefore, should last all one's life and not only as long as the period of formation as official, ordinary, education does which educates and then abandons.

Also scientific education, nowadays begins to consider the education of the adult. Indeed the education of the adult

has arisen spontaneously as a consequence of the development of newspapers, wireless, etc., also the expansion of public lectures, conferences, etc. necessarily follow the life of the adult, but without logical sequence and rule.

Now, instead, the idea of the necessity of regulating the education of the adult comes forward, especially in order to overcome analphabetism and to give an orientation for social life. This part of education has great interest for me and I am working on it.

All these who have a leading part in the field of science study all of life and it is really the study of the adult, not that of the child on which progress is based. It is a grave mistake to abandon educationally those who leave school, be it even the University.

The Church, instead, has considered a real education for the adults, besides the educative support of the two perpetual Sacraments.

The Sunday sermon for all people is a continuous school. During Lent a real course of lectures is held and they are not only historical or philosophical, but they aim at illuminating the practical life of men. The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius are preparations for adults and can be repeated every year. Also the Roman Lenten practice of visiting forty churches, churches which commemorate a Martyr, is a school of history and example for life. Another educative factor for the people is the Church itself, open to all, where the people

may receive a superior education of an artistic character too, on account of the beauty of the environment, the magnificence of the larger churches, and the elevating music accessible to all without distinction.

There is no other sumptuous and artistic place which is always open to the public, and without them the poor would not have any lofty enjoyment. All the others, the palaces of princes, the musea, etc. are closed and a poor or ignorant man would remain repressed in the squalor of his life, were it not for the Church.

The only religion and the only institution which has provided for the education of man from birth till death, in a regular and universal way, is the Catholic Church.

The only religion which does not make any distinction of caste and considers the whole of mankind, is our religion.

It has already answered the tendency towards democracy, towards equality among men, towards the union of all men in one life. Furthermore it has already given the vision of a Mystical Body to which all men must belong.

That is why the splendour of this really divine institution which already and beyond all human conceptions realises what stretches out towards the future, which has realised the most distant ideals of social perfection, should be illustrated to the many who are outside it.

Absorbent Mind

Montessori's last great work was a book called The Absorbent mind .

In this ~~xxx~~ drawing on her long experience with small children in the first seven years of life , she pointed out that the child's mind , in this epoch works in an entirely different way from what it does later when reason has developed . Who teaches the small child its mother tongue ? Who teaches it how to pronounce perfectly the language it hears in its environment ? Who instructs it in the science of how to construct a sentence , with preidicate , object , adverbial clauses and all the ? No one . The child's mind is so constructed - or rather it's whole psyche is so constructed that at this early period , say from 0 - 5yrs , it learns a language perfectly simply by living , and does this unconsciously and without effort and the use of ~~w~~ reason . That is why it is so important to have the child brought up in a correct environment , from the point of view of speech and pronunciation and grammar , for the child will absorb whatever it finds around it .

↳ human environment in pure Shuddhi - Natural 21st (?)

*Sanskrit
at
to read*

In the same way Montessori pointed out that in this very early period , before it can reason , and even before it can walk or talk , it has an innate sensitivity , which enables it to absorb the religious customs and atmosphere in which it is brought up This is true of every human group , for , as she herself points out , every human society , even the most primitive , has some form of religion , and certain definite religious notions and rites . And this is why she says the child begins to absorb religion and the religious atmosphere of its group right from its birth. On the very day before Dr Montessori died she wrote a