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Box 09, Folder 21 - "Notes on the Atrium" / "Notes on the Method with the Materials Used in the Atrium" (draft sections from "The Child in the Church") (E.M.S.)

Edwin Mortimer Standing

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VI

NOTES ON THE ATRIUM

2
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Though this room is not a Church it should be one of special beauty, made in a semi-ecclesiastical style, with beautiful lights, objects, statues, and so forth; everything of the best. It could have pointed windows, which would of course 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, His Mother, the Saints and the Angels, especially the Guardian Angel. The children would bring flowers to put in front of these statues, and lights could be kept burning before them. Great use would be made of the walls of the Atrium which should be adorned with pictures illustrating Old and New Testament stories, and the liturgical colors and so forth. Round the walls should be cupboards and shelves with the various occupations at which the children will choose and with which they will work.

There could also be a belfry tower with a bell that the children could use at certain times, as for instance when they are going to say the Angelus.

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NOTE ON PLAN ONE

This a ground plan of the Atrium which is divided partially into two separate parts (A and B). The Division (C; C,C) is composed of three cupboards which are taller than the cupboards at the side; and are mounted on castors so that they can be easily moved to the side to make one big room joining A and B together. This could be done when a story is being told, or the children are making a procession, or rehearsing for a play, etc.

The division, C, C, C, does not go right across so as to leave a long stretch of space for putting out Time Lines.

Room A is for the smaller children and the cupboards in it, marked yellow, contain the more elementary materials, - those of a more sensorial nature, as for instance the liturgical colors, the early exercises in reading - putting names against objects, and also the activity which have to do with L.T., the Liturgical Table of which more anon. Or also those exercises of a sensorial-motor nature, such as polishing the miniature Sacred Vessels and pouring water into the cruets, and vases for putting flowers into, and so on. In the corner of room A where there is a quarter circle could be placed a statue of the Madonna with her Child; and in the corresponding corner in room B could be a statue of Our Lord perhaps as the Good Shepherd.

OTHER ITEMS IN THE ATRIUM

The blue rectangle in the corner marked Or.ⁿ is a little Oratory like the one shown in the folio page 4. It has a little altar at one end and perhaps four or half a dozen little kneelers. It is fitted up very much like a chapel with the stations of the Cross on the walls. The details of this could be found in the pictures or photo of the similar chapel at St. Anthony's School, Mill Hill, London.

At the same end of the room on the opposite side marked red is S.ⁿ This would be a little Sacristy with the suitable cupboards and drawers for keeping the models of the Sacred Vestments and Sacred Vessels. See folio of photos numbers 14 and 15.

The porch

The Atrium is entered through the porch, which is the ground floor of the belfry. It has two Holy Water Fonts one on each side.

PEGS FOR CLOTHES

Just inside on the right are rows of pegs for the children's clothes.

MORE ABOUT THE ATRIUM

3

THE ABSORBENT MIND

You must know that in our schools the life in the Casa dei Bambini is based in the small child's characteristics. And the most interesting and significant things that the small child has the power to absorb what is in his environment. This Absorbent Mind is characteristic of little children. They just take without judging. And what he takes becomes a part of himself, something which enriches his psychic life. It makes one realize that the child should be in a position to take from the environment that which makes him grow.

This fact is very important and very impressive and should be taken into consideration because at this stage in which the child takes from his environment to construct himself he has a power which later becomes lost.

This is our Doctrine of Sensitive Periods the result of 30 years' observation and experience with children. The child has special sensitivities which lead him to take certain elements from the environment, and - taking - to transform himself. It is a creative work, the work of Self Creation.

AN EXAMPLE: LANGUAGE

The child takes in language from environment without a teacher. But not only is he able to take in thousands ^{of words} but he transforms his vocal organs so as to reproduce them exactly. No adult can do it as well. There we come to possess our language which is our 'Mother Tongue'.

The adult can learn a language with rules and efforts - but it is always with an effort. (Sforza)

THE WORD BECOMES FLESH

The other day I saw a work of art and underneath was written 'The Word Became Flesh.' I took these words in a material way. That

is what happens in every child - 'The word becomes Flesh.' 4

So the child masters this language in a way peculiar to childhood. -

He takes,
constructs,
makes himself grow to a man,
without effort or fatigue,
merely by living.

The child it is who produces this creation.

So what the child takes does "become Flesh," because language becomes incarnated in him. This a matter of Supreme Importance: It is the Period of the Absorbent Mind.

WE MUST BEGIN EARLY

Hence we see how essential it is that Religious Education should begin very early, in this period of the Absorbent Mind, and this Religion should be offered to this child who takes, who absorbs.

So it would be possible at this stage in the Atrium to put the little child in contact with: -

- (a) The Liturgical Year
- (b) The Mass

But in such a way that the child lives and acts; for his way of living at his time is to act to do. (agisce) So we must give something which permits or leads to action, as in the ordinary Montessori school.

LITURGICAL STUFFS, COLOURS

In the ordinary Montessori school the child learns to distinguish by touch various stuffs of different textures. Similarly, in the Atrium there would be two collections of stuffs; these would be the stuffs out of which the Liturgical vestments are made. There are two different grades or qualities, one grade for each set.

Thus for Christmas and Easter there are stuffs of a special lustre. These two sets could be compared and sorted with that exactness which is so important at this stage.

LITURGICAL COLOURS ON THE WALLS

We could have large strips of stuffs of the liturgical colours hanging on the wall, one set longer for Easter and another shorter for Christmas.

LITURGICAL FLOWERS

If there is a garden, flowers which have the liturgical colours, white, red, green, and little vases similarly coloured. There could be also a Liturgical Table and every day the teacher first, and later the children, spread out on the table a cloth which has the Liturgical colour of the day, and period of the year.

Children, living in this environment, would grow up accustomed to this fact of the liturgical colours. Not a great deal would be said about it, but rather it is a thing done and seen. Thus the children would see most days general ferial as Liturgical colour, and against this as a background other colours for the special feasts.

SOME PRINCIPLES FOR RELIGIOUS TEACHING

- (a) It is necessary to have a special environment in which the religious life can develop and unfold in itself (sic evolve), remembering that the child is a human being with the dignity of a human being.
- (b) And that this religious life develops by means of activity.
- (c) We must remember that the inner creative force in the child is much stronger than what we usually think.
- (d) The teacher must endeavour to arrange things so that the child passes all his time in a religious activity.
- (e) Going from difficulty to difficulty overcoming them.

6

THE LITURGICAL COLOURS AND WHEN THEY ARE USED

In the Atrium there should be many and various materials for teaching the details of the liturgy. Thus to teach the child the liturgical colours different which are used for the different occasions we could have a material specially made along the following lines .

On the walls there would be a large diagram of the Liturgical colours and what particular occasions they are used for (see the enclosed diagram). This would act as a sort of key or reminder and could be consulted in doubt .

The material would be as follows . Five cards would be set apart and on each would be one of the liturgical colours . it would be best to have a bit of the actual stuff mounted on it. The a large number of little tickets or labels would be made with the names of the various sundays in the year and the chief Feast days - like Christmas , Easter , The Assumption of Our Lady, Pentecost , Feast of the Sacred Heart - Masses for the Dead and so on . The exercise to be done by the child would be as follows . The cards are placed all in a line , with a space below them . Then the child takes the labels or slips with the names of the various occasions - the Feast and so on , and places them under the appropriate card .

VIOLET WHITE GREEN RED BLACK

For further details see the accompanying diagram .

USED IN THE ATRIUM

Whatever the subject—whether it be the Liturgical Year, the Mass, or Biblical history, or ^{det} Geography, with which we are dealing in the Atrium, by means of a material, there are certain rules or principles which we must follow: -

(1) The Principle of Activity. Visual aids, so commonly praised, are not enough for us; we must have Sensory-motor aids; i.e., we must use a material which brings about an activity on the part of the child. "We are dealing with a child who has with in him a principle of activity."

(2) It must be an individual activity, ^{which is} directed by the will, ~~bringing~~ Mind and Body together in a functional ~~harmony or~~ unity.

(3) This material must bring with it the Possibility of ^{Spontaneous} ~~Repetition~~, which leads to self perfection.

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AN EXAMPLE THE STATIONS OF THE CROSS

Suppose we are going to teach the Stations of the Cross: - It would not be enough to give the child a book with the Stations in them. We must prepare a material, which leads to an activity, on the following lines.

Something

- (1) We separate the pictures and mount each on a card.
- (2) We separate the reading matter, titles and captions.
- (3) We ^{also} separate the Roman Numerals, ^{mounting} ~~putting~~ each on a card like the others, with the ordinary numbers on the back as a Control of Error. Then all these ^{groups of pictures, numbers & captions} ~~things~~ kept separate by elastic bands, are placed in a box, on the lid of which is written the Stations of the Cross, ^{with}, preferably an illustration as well. And thus the material is ready for use.

So now we are ready for the individual activity by which the child will teach itself - true auto education - by working with the materials in this way: -

(a) He puts out the Roman Numerals in a horizontal line.

[I] [II] [III] [IV] [V] [VI] [VII] [VIII] [IX] [X] [XI] [XII] ~~⊗~~
on a long table or on a rug on the floor. ~~⊗~~ XIII XIV ⊗

(b) Then he takes the pictures and places the corresponding Station under each Roman Numeral. ^{Again there is} (Control of Error on the back.)

(c) Then he puts out the reading matter - headings and description, to each Station.

^{alter} Thus, ~~there is~~ a prolonged individual activity. ^{the work is finished} At first the child will probably refer to the Control of Error on the back of the card many times; but, as he repeats the exercise, either on the same day or other days later, he will come to do it more and more without reference to the control of error, thus perfecting himself through repetition use.

using if necessary Control of Error to Arabic numbers - which the know on the back of cards

⊕ Or he could put them out in two separate lines, as they are in a church

