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SOME THOUGHTS ON THE RELIGIOUS EDUCATION OF

YOUNG CHILDREN

by

~~M. W. Miller Standing~~

Some good
anecdotes

ON THE RELIGIOUS EDUCATION OF SMALL CHILDREN

When I am asked - as not infrequently happens - whether small children should be given religious instruction I feel disposed to reply : This is not a question for me or for anyone else to decide in an a priori manner . It is a matter which depends on the nature of the child . Our business as educators is first and foremost to observe the child and then adapt ourselves to to the needs of his unfolding nature .

To educate successfully means to aid all the creative manifestations of the child's soul ; to give him that freedom which will enable him to reveal his needs to us and at the same time to provide him the means for self- development in correspondence to those needs . In short our aim is to bring about the flowering of the child's inner creative energies as these reveal themselves on ever higher planes , thereby forming a complete and harmonious system of his interior life in a well-ordered and well balanced personality . .

We can only give to the child what he has the capacity to take . No one would ever seriously consider whether it was our duty to give religious instruction to a dog . Why not ? Because this creature has no potentiality within its nature to make any response in that direction . In general we need only place in the environment of any developing organism those things which correspond to its nature - to its inner potentialities - no more and no less . It would be foolish for instance to

to present the sand paper alphabet or the number frames to a monkey for it has not that in its nature which would repond to these instruments of culture , as could be easily verified by observation .

If we wish to know then whether wem ought to give religious instruction to small children the answer is quite simple . Have they that in their nature which would respond to it ? Or to put it in another form : if we were to place children in a religious environment would it reveal some potentiality in their nature which would otherwise not come to fruition ?

We have not yet come to recognise sufficiently the revealing power of environment in the sphere of education . In the realm of Biology this principle has become more and more important . The researches of the great French Naturalist , J. Henri Fabre , were crowned with such remarkable success simply because he based all his work on this conception of the Environment as a Revealer . At the risk of too much repetition let us take a simple example to illustrate this point . Let us suppose somebody gave you two objects identical in appearance and resembling an acorn : and let us suppose , futher , that one was a genuine acorn and the other a so cunningly devised imitation that you could not distinguish the real from the artificial by means of the senses . How could you surely tell the difference ? By planting both in suitable soil and giving them fresh air and moisture and sunshine . In time one would

develop and grow and the other would not ; because the suitable environment revealed the hidden potentialities which were present in the one case as they were missing in the other .

The success of my method of education - which has been acknowledged in every civilised country - has been built up on this same conception as the Environment as a Revealer . What I did, in effect , in my first school at Rome , was to place the tiny children confided to my care in a specially prepared environment , establish their right relation to it , and then leave them free to develop themselves in contact with it . The consequence was that these same children quite unexpectedly revealed traits of character and mental capacities hitherto unthought of in connexion with children of such a tender age . I was just as astonished as anyone else when these tiny creatures - ages from $3\frac{1}{2}$ to 6 years - began to display an immense spontaneous love of work - real intellectual work , freely chosen and carried on for hours with great concentration of mind . And this without the slightest coercion , without even the stimulus of marks or rewards of any kind . They displayed too a love of order in their environment so intense that it brooked no interference . Their very characters seemed to change and from being capricious ~~they~~ and disorderly they became quiet , serene , joyous , obedient , mutually helpful and extraordinarily disciplined , - with a discipline which came from within and not from the presence of adult control .

These characteristics would never have been revealed if I had not placed the children in a specially prepared environment and given them freedom to live in it as their nature required .

In doing this I had acted on a more elevated view of the nature of the small child than that commonly accepted with the result that the children spontaneously learned to read and write and make arithmetical and other abstractions . In this way the prepared environment combined with the freedom to use it revealed powers of rapid spontaneous intellectual development hitherto unsuspected . It would not have been sufficient if I had permitted the children liberty of movement in an ordinary room . That might have been enough for a cat or a dog but not for a developing being endowed with the noble faculty of reason . In a similar way liberty to eat and breathe but without freedom and opportunity of movement would be enough for a plant but not for an animal . For in general the more complicated the organism the greater must be the number and variety of factors essential to the full development of the potentialities within it .

In my first school in Rome I placed in the child's environment not only those things necessary for the vegetative and animal functions of its life but also what was required to nourish its intellectual nature (I refer of course to the Didactic Material and the Exercises of Pract

(5)

- ical Life) Good as this was - as seen by the results - I felt it was not enough , though it was a step in the right direction . I was anxious to go further and introduce into the children's environment that which corresponded to their religious instincts ~~and~~ also , still of course permitting them the same liberty of development freed from unnecessary adult intervention which they had already enjoyed on the purely intellectual plane . For I was convinced that children have within them a profound and sure intuition in divine things . That this religious instinct begins to reveal itself at a very early age was made clear to me by many observations of which the following are typical .

Helen - a small child of only eighteen months - used often to be taken to her aunt's bed in the early morning . The latter used to give her little playthings and entertain her . One day the child's attention was caught by a crucifix which hung on the wall . Her aunt hastened to take it down and the child held out her arms to welcome it . Then she looked sadly at it ; and , taking it in her arms, tried to comfort it as though to make its sufferings cease . Then she lay the crucifix against her little cheek and kissed the nails several times .

From that time onwards she went regularly to her Aunt's bed for the crucifix . Each morning one might see the child take the cross and kiss the nails gently and sadly . She was told that it was Jesus . Her interest in

all that concerned Jesus grew constantly . When she was 2½ years old a little room was prepared for her individual life , with small furniture and playthings proportionate to her size and age . Soon afterwards a truly extraordinary thing happened . She wanted a little crucifix hung up on her wall .

Some time after - Helen was barely three - I spent a day with her in the country . I was lying in a sort of couch chair and I invited her to lie near me . "Teach me some Italian words ", she said . I taught her the words one after another : nose , eyes , chin , fingers.... Then remembering her love of Jesus, I said , "Now I should like to teach you a prayer in Italian ". She became suddenly serious . "No , I do not want you to " . "What !" , I replied , " I thought you loved prayer) " " I do not want you to ", she repeated sharply . I was very astonished : "Come , tell me why ". She answered firmly and with conviction : "One cannot pray lying down : one has to be kneeling on the floor ". She had given me a lesson in respect . I bowed before it .

Realising then that even very small children " do not live by bread alone " I was anxious to extend my researches still further than I had done in my first school in Rome . I desired to place a group of free children in a still richer environment - one in which they would find nourishment not only for their intellectual faculties but

also for their religious instincts . The wished-for opportunity came to me some years later in Barcelona , where with the assistance of several devoted and cultured I carried out the new experiment of applying my Method to the religious life of the child , thus penetrating still deeper into its soul .

The first step was " to prepare the place " for the little ones , that is the chapel , which had to be the most beautiful room in the house . Little seats , holy water fonts within easy reach , pictures and little statues placed at the height of a yard from the ground indicated that the new Lilliputian race aspired to be received as " active members " of the Church and no longer in virtue only of the rights accorded to them by the grace of Baptism .

The scope of this article does not permit of a full account of this experiment and of the revelations accorded to us by these little children living in the Church . (We have already done so elsewhere (see "The Child in the Church" by Dr Montessori , published by Sands and Co , London) It must suffice us here to record in broad outlines some of the outstanding results of our experience .

In the first place we found that these little children , because of their innocence , can feel in a more intense manner - even if less definitely than the adult - the need of God's presence . Their souls seem to be more open

to divine intuitions than that of the adult despite of the latter's more perfectly developed intelligence and skill in reasoning .

Secondly , we discovered that there already existed , unknown to us - a sort of unconscious relationship between our Method, as applied in the everyday activities of the children in the ordinary Montessori School, and the special activities undertaken by them as living members of Christ's Church .

Indeed it seemed to us that the Life of the children in the Church almost seemed to be the end or consummation of the education our Method proposed to give . In order to understand this thoroughly the reader ought to be fully acquainted with such activities as "The Exercises in Practical Life " , "The Silence Game " , "the Exercises in Rhythm and Balance " and many others , which form a regular part of the daily activities of the children in every well run Montessori class . Our point is that these everyday actions took on a higher significance and a deeper meaning when they were applied to the life in the Church . For instance : the Silence Game observed in the class to accustom the child to be recollected , here found its application ; it became the intense recollection observed in the House of God , amid the gentle flickering of the candle light in the House of God .

Again the following actions were practically repetitions of what the child had already learnt to do in the

class-room : walking silently avoiding all noise , placing chairs quietly , standing up and sitting down composedly , passing between benches and by-standers without knocking against them , carrying objects - even fragile ones - with care so as to let no harm come to them , - for example carrying lighted candles without covering hands and clothes with wax , or baskets of flowers , or vases of water to be filled with flowers . Or again when the little server at the Holy Mass had to carry a bell before the altar without letting it ring - just as he had already done in the exercises of balance round the ring on the floor .

Such things , therefore , must appear to their tender minds as the end of effort patiently sustained , whence issues for them a pleasing sense of joy and of new dignity . Before such an apprenticeship these tiny members of the Church feel that they are servants executing material tasks without understanding what they do ; after it , and after what they have learnt has been applied in the Church, they begin to comprehend and to distinguish between the different circumstances . The child of four is not ignorant of the difference between the holy water stoup into which he dips his tiny fingers before blessing himself with the Sign of the Cross , and the basins in the next room where he washes his hands .

When this preparation has been made in the ordinary Montessori Class , and the child finds in the Church opport-

unities for its application which are varied and deeply significant, he receives as a result a sense of dignity and satisfaction. He begins to realise that he is a child of God, lovingly received in the house of the great Heavenly Father, - although hitherto he has been considered as almost incapable of rising to any such conception.

In fact many persons were incredulous of the reality of such impressions. "Do you know why my little nephew wants to go to school in time for Mass?" "Because you let him put out the candles. That is all. Would it not be better to apply this pleasing exercise to Arithmetic? - for example, to have ten lighted candles and then put them out counting one, two, three, etc?"

The critic who spoke thus to me had but a poor spiritual understanding and little knowledge of children. The arithmetical exercise with the candles would have lasted at most a week, the time necessary, more or less, to learn to count from one to ten. But those children as they grew older, and continued their instruction - either in general or religious knowledge, would observe in Church the putting out of the candles that consume themselves, burning in the presence of Jesus descended amongst them; and they would know that the act was not a mere childish pastime but a religious function to be reverently fulfilled, because done in a sacred place, and bearing on the worship paid to God.