



Parent Pages

Preparing the environment of the Domestic Church*

* The term "Domestic Church" refers to the family, the smallest body of gathered believers in Christ. Though recovered only recently, the term dates back to the first century AD. The Greek word *ecclesiola* referred to "little church." The early Church understood that the home was fertile ground for discipleship, sanctification, and holiness.

Order and the Prepared Environment

"Before I formed you in your mother's womb, I knew you" Jeremiah 1:5

At the beginning of the year, we spend time orienting the children to the prepared atrium environment and focus on the prayer table and the items found there. As we gather with the youngest children, we wish to introduce the child to the environment in such a way that the child will be comfortable in the space so they can work to know God. Prayer is the living relationship of the children of God with their Father who is good beyond all measure, with His Son, Jesus and with the Holy Spirit. The life of prayer is the habit of being in the presence of the Trinity and in communion with Him.

We hope that from these very early sessions the children will develop reverence for God and a respect and enjoyment for the atrium environment. This will help them have fuller, active, conscience participation in the Liturgy and prepare them for prayer. Our aim is to help children enjoy their relationship with God and so we have pondered, "What kind of environment can we create that will respect and cultivate the child's needs and capacities at this level of their development, especially in terms of their spiritual development?"

There are two characteristics of the child's development which assist the adult as we prepare the atrium environment, which are (1) an absorbent mind; and (2) sensitive periods. The child's environment can assist or hinder these two characteristics, so it is important for the environment to correspond to the child's developmental needs.

Sensitive Periods

Sensitive Periods are periods when the child feels him or herself irresistibly attracted toward specific objects or acquisitions, such as language. Maria Montessori wrote that "the sensitive periods push the child to do, with extraordinary joy, an infinite number of things that are constructive for him." There are certain characteristics of sensitive periods; they are transitory, so they do not last; they are not permanent. They are periodic, and each period overlaps, they are never found in the adult, and they are mostly seen in the early stages of life.

One of the most important sensitive periods for the younger child is that of order. The sense of order is different for an adult than for a young child. The adult may want order to help in establishing greater comfort and efficiency. For the young child, order gives the child the necessary fixed points of reference

among persons and things in their environment. Having those people and things in their same places offers the child security, and it is in this security that the child will construct him or herself.

Since the very young child knows so few things at this stage it is necessary for him to have order and stability in his environment. Since his knowledge is limited now, if something is out of place, it can leave a rather large void in his life. It is near the age of two that the child loves, even delights in this sense of order, i.e., putting items back in their certain place and to sitting at their usual place at the table. When this need for order is not met, at times, the child's response is can be an intense, emotional one, which adults interpret as a tantrum. (*The child's response to order not being met isn't always intense, emotion or a tantrum.*) When the child's need for order is satisfied, the child's response is contentment. The children at this age, and even as infants have a need for a constant routine; children are very aware of this.

In the atrium, we honor the child's sensitive period for order in

- How the furniture is arranged in a specific order. The materials, too, are arranged on the shelf in a particular order. The child finds great comfort and security in returning those items to its proper place on the shelf.
- Time also has a particular order in the atrium. The children know that when they come into this space, there is a rhythm to our time together.
- Order in the environment helps the child to classify and clarify the environment and activities around him or her.
- Specific material, for example, the Raised Surface Map of the Land of Israel offers the child a sense of order. The child learns that Jesus is a historical person who was born in the town of Bethlehem and died and rose outside the city of Jerusalem. His birth was first announced in the village of Nazareth. The child learns that Jesus is a real person who lived in the land of Israel. They come to understand that since there is a physical place for Jesus, there is a place for the child as well.



Karen Maxwell, Director of Formation for CGSUSA, tells us, "The order and the rhythm of the atrium time flows in a manner that sets it apart from a child's other experiences of daily life. It is often slow, quiet, and careful, especially for the youngest. They are shown how to walk carefully in the atrium when carrying materials from the shelf to a workspace, how not to disturb another person's work, how to speak quietly. In that kind of pace, a prayerful atmosphere is established. Children are given the time to experience silence as a form of prayer, but they also experience prayer as a celebration with others as well."