



# 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.

## Orientation to the Atrium

The first time I walked into an atrium was for what I anticipated would be a brief visit, and I was accompanied by my three-year-old daughter. I paused at the doorway, wanting to caution her before we entered not to touch or break anything. Before I could offer that warning, she quickly and quietly walked inside and moved to a nearby shelf. It was as if the materials, attractively displayed there, seemed to beckon to her. She opened the doors to a small wooden sacristy cabinet and took the glass cruets in her hands. I later came to understand that Dr. Maria Montessori referred to the materials in the prepared environment as "the voices of things." It is as if they call to the child, "Take me! Work with me. Choose me."

It was from this first glance of the atrium, and seeing my own child's response, that I knew I wanted her to have this experience of coming to a place where she found the joy of everything being her size. Where she could work with beautiful materials that were prepared for and especially made for her to touch, to hold, to use, without any fear of breaking them. And the ability to discover her environment without being interrupted by my constant and cautious pleas to treat these items with care.

Many atria offer parents and families the opportunity to visit the environment and meet the catechist before the year begins. Whether or not that is a part of your community's tradition; as the children return to (or begin their time in) the atrium, they will be invited on that first day to an orientation to the environment. The catechist will offer a tour of the space so that the child feels comfortable and safe.

### **Human Tendencies**

All humans (men, women, and children) have certain tendencies or behavior patterns that drive the fulfillment of the fundamental needs of life. These fundamental needs are divided into two areas: material and spiritual. Nutrition, clothing, shelter, protection, and other factors contribute to a secure and comfortable existence on earth. The second area of fundamental need is spiritual in nature, the quest for understanding what cannot be seen; the sense of wonder that needs to be nurtured; the urge to express our deepest longing through our creative efforts.

When the basic human tendencies of human behavior are understood and respected, children become what Dr. Montessori called "normalized." They have a sense of internal peace, joy, tranquility, and happiness. They can concentrate. They can choose and complete the work. They can handle frustration and make rational choices. They can adapt. They have self-discipline/self-control, are independent, and are secure within themselves. They have a

positive, balanced self-image, have healthy self-esteem, and are aware and considerate of others. The easiest way for us to nurture the human tendencies in our children is to create an environment that lets the child use their tendencies. How do we honor the human tendencies in the Atrium? What we do on that first night to help the child: we take ample time to allow the child to explore, to orient, to order, and to communicate.

- **Exploration** – the child’s curiosity leads him or her to explore and the desire to understand, it renders living better materially and spiritually.
- **Orientation** – the child’s ability to orient him or herself to new situations, for a child: to know where and how she or he fits into an environment, we must give the child freedom, without too much guidance.
- **Order** – for the child to understand his or her environment. One way we do that is for the child to know that there is a place for everything.
- **Communication** – this tendency is the ability to understand each other, through speaking, writing, and reading. For the catechist in the atrium, we listen. Prayer and song are important forms of communication.

*Note: There are other human tendencies, i.e., for activity, work, repetition, exactness, abstraction, self-perfection, etc. that we will focus on, but for the first gathering with the children, the four listed may be enough.*

While the young child, from the age of 3 to 6 has a strong need and desire to explore by active, hands-on experience, that does not mean that the older child (or the adult for that matter) does not have the same need to explore. For the oldest child, we want to offer them the same opportunity of respect and for them to be able to inspect the atrium. It could even be inviting them to look around and to explore their environment and to “Bring to the rug something you are eager to hear about...”

Montessorian Gianna Gobbi, co-founder of this work, reminds us that the atrium environment and the materials on the shelves speak to the children about God without using any words. The materials allow the adult to limit their own interaction with the children, as not to interrupt the child. When the child is allowed to work and is not interrupted, the materials offer the child the time and space to think deeply about what has been proclaimed in the atrium, without the constant interference of the adult. How wonderful for the child, that he or she can enter this experience with God without needing the adult to have to say or to speak words every time.

### **Practical Life**

In the coming weeks the catechist and the children will spend time on lessons of practical life. The younger child is drawn to the practical life materials. Because the materials are representative of the children’s culture, they help the children to orient themselves to that culture. They also help orient children to the atrium environment by showing them how to manage and maintain its order. Practical life exercises give the children the opportunity to do purposeful, meaningful activity. The young child is irresistibly drawn to the Practical Life exercises because they are truly constructive for the child. The child can become completely engaged in them.

We need to understand that the practical life exercises fulfill a deep need in the child, this is especially true for the younger child, and practical life is also directly connected to the religious life of the child. Exercises of practical life allows the child to slow down and to listen. This will serve the child well when they come to the prayer table to listen to the Voice of God.

- *Mary Heinrich, CGS parent, catechist, and formation leader*