



Introducing Susan & Caroline

Susan Carne & Caroline Allen have been working together to develop children's work in our small rural parish church. Susan is a wise and reflective parent, grandparent and experienced foster carer. Her love for God and children is inspiring, and... yet she remains teachable.

I wish I'd know this years ago!

Susan's eagerness to learn has piqued her interest in Maria Montessori and her approach to childcare. This curiosity has drawn her to inquire further into Montessori's faith-fuelled legacy.

Introducing Maria Montessori

Qualifying as the first female doctor in Italy, Maria Montessori was highly intelligent and determined. But fundamental to everything was her strong faith, which gave her a heart for the vulnerable and inspired her method and teaching.

The first Montessori Children's House was in a tenement building in the slums of Rome. She simply designed everything around the children's needs. She then closely and scientifically observed how children responded to the environment, adapting it as needed.

She believed that every child was born with a Life Force, *hormê*. For her, this was God-given and God-driven. Her faith meant that she trusted the *hormê* to direct the child's early impulses and experiences.

Maria Montessori even quoted from Isaiah 61 at the opening of her Children's House, a proclamation of the vision she had for this 'new' approach and its potential. Her faith infuses her writings and training of teachers.

Faith and its relevance today

In our post-Christian society, we have become used to skimming over the 'religious' parts of her writings. In developed western societies, we have tended to disconnect the 'spiritual' from the tangible. In contrast, Maria Montessori thought faith is "a universal sentiment".

Most carers of young children value (rightly) the importance of children using real objects to learn about their world. This may further contribute to the disconnection of the 'spiritual' from the 'real'. We assume that Faith is



An unfathomable mystery... just too big for young children to grasp.

Can children grasp unfathomable mysteries?

Consider language acquisition. We accept that the young child effortlessly absorbs the spoken language around them. Yet the mystery of language acquisition is not easily explained.

Similarly, to the young child, the whole world into which they are born is an 'unfathomable mystery', They *can* (and do) absorb the HUGENESS of everything!

Most understand that a living faith is about revelation. And young children are surely best equipped and open to wonder and revealed mysteries.

Environment

Environment is key. We can *offer* spiritual realities to our young children in the routines, practices and rhythms of our lives.

Just as we prepare the environment to make it suitable and safe for young children, we can also prepare a favourable, spiritual environment... This might take the form of prayers at bedtime or grace at mealtimes. Simple regular practices become cornerstones for young children as they practise thankfulness and blessing.

Are we trying too hard?

A re-interpretation of the proverb is helpful here.

'Teach (train) a child the way they should go and when they are old they will not part from it'

For young children, learning is absorbed through regular experiences and routines.

The Barcelona Children's House and Children's Church

Adjoining the Montessori Children's House in Barcelona was a Children's Church, adapted for the children to use and care for independently. The children cared for the flowers, trimmed the candles, cleaned (child-level) icons and paintings, used the font... The children would have absorbed spiritual truths as they carried out these daily practices.

Contrast this with a one-off Sunday school lesson on candles and their meaning.

The adult is PART OF the environment

Seeing ourselves as a vital *part of* the environment will also encourage us to be sincere in our faith, adopt spiritual practices that our children can see and copy.



Tending to faith in our children's environment depends on tending to our own spiritual needs...

The next stage...

Montessori described children under 6 as developing embryos. Pre-birth they are physical embryos, 0 to 3, they are spiritual embryos and 3 to 6, they are social embryos.

In the next stage, children leave the embryonic stage as they gain moral awareness, developing an acute sense of right & wrong.

Careful support as they transition into this stage will help children absorb the graces of forgiveness and mercy.

Faith and inclusion

Maria Montessori's legacy rests on her living faith. Yet her teaching methods are widely used across the world among many world faiths and none. Her approach is respectful to the core.

In the developed world (largely western), we have tended to disregard the faith element of her legacy for fear of offending. Yet Montessori promoted peace and never offence. It is perfectly possible to be honest about our faith without disrespecting others'.

Her point is that all humanity are spiritual beings. As children's spirituality is nurtured, they will be better prepared to embrace their own faith in the future...

because God has no grandchildren!

Further information, practical guidance and advice are available through

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