



Queen of Angels

MONTESORI

Elementary Program Vision Statement

INTRODUCTION

The mission of Queen of Angels Montessori School is to assist the educational and spiritual formation of the child. The implementation of this mission rests on the philosophy and methodology of the Montessori approach and the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd (CGS).

As stated in one of the elementary catechesis materials, "Since the beginning of time, a plan has been present in the mind of God to give mankind His life in His kingdom." The ultimate goal of an education that rests on Montessori and CGS is to:

1. Help the child recognize this plan.
2. Help the child recognize his or her unique role in this plan.
3. Help the child develop the requisite skills to fully participate in the plan and to fulfill his/her unique vocation in the building of God's kingdom.

In the elementary program, three important factors should serve as a foundation to assist the child in attaining this goal:¹

1. **Cosmic Education and the Plan of God:** A focus on a unified view of the universe and human history (Cosmic Education/The Plan of God).
2. **Psychological Needs:** A recognition that every child has specific psychological needs which must be stimulated in order for him or her to grow and for society to progress. These needs include the psychological tendencies, which should guide the educational process; imagination; reasoning; and the need for hope.
3. **Prepared Environment:** A realization that it is essential to provide a specially prepared environment to support the child's growth.

COSMIC EDUCATION AND THE PLAN OF GOD

"The ultimate goal of a Montessori education is to encourage the child's sense of social responsibility and participation in the grand plan of the universe which Montessori calls the Cosmic Plan."² The adult has a serious responsibility to prepare the child to take "responsibility as a human being towards the

environment and human society”³, and towards making his own unique contribution to the building of God’s Kingdom.

Presented through the Montessori Great Lessons, Cosmic Education presents to the child (and seeks to inspire him with) a sense of the order, beauty, and interconnectedness of the universe and all of life; and a broad view of the sweep of human history. The Montessori approach models that “all things are part of the universe and are connected with each other to form one whole unity.”⁴ . Understanding and appreciating the interdependence of all things is the work of the elementary child. It is to this theme that the child is continually called and directed.⁵

In the Montessori elementary class, there is a continual unfolding of how the world was prepared for humanity (the focus of the lower elementary years, ages 6-9) and the development of human civilizations (the focus of the upper elementary years, ages 9-12). These might be called the “supra-themes” of Montessori Cosmic Education. The value of relating curricular subjects to a central theme is now commonly recognized in education. In the Montessori elementary class, curricular foci are always brought back to the grand vision of the Cosmic Plan and are guided by the Great Lessons.⁶

The Great Lessons

The first three Great Lessons open the doors to the drama of the universe: first the establishment of the universe and our earth, then how plants and animals were placed on it, and finally the coming of human beings to earth. The Great Lessons continually call the children to “the immensity of this act of creation” and to the pattern of rule and order.⁷ These three Great Lessons provide the framework for unfolding the lower elementary curriculum.

Two other Great Lessons “draw the attention of the child to the two great achievements of man – the language of communication and the language of invention – ‘The Story of Communication in Signs’ and ‘The Story of Numbers.’”⁸ These lessons inspire gratitude not only for the process itself but also towards humanity and the role that countless, nameless people played in developing the gifts of language and numbers. These two Great Lessons, plus a sixth lesson called “The River of Life”, provide the framework for unfolding the upper elementary curriculum.

These great stories relay the Cosmic Plan and call the child to participate in the Plan’s “grandeur, majesty, pageantry, and glory.”⁹ Through these stories we begin “to realize the interconnectedness of all elements, the interrelatedness of stars and planets, of matter and liquid and air, of plants and animals, of spiders and butterflies, of men and women and children. It is through these Great Stories ... that we introduce the children to the idea of respect of all of us for one another.”^{10 11}

The Plan of God

The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd completes Montessori Cosmic Education by expressing the spiritual reality of the Cosmic Plan, a plan which we can more fully describe as the Plan of God. At the lower elementary level, the preparation of the world for humanity is presented to the child as a HISTORY OF GIFTS from God to man. These gifts, in turn, call for a human response. At the upper elementary level, the history of human civilization is presented to the child in light of the COVENANT RELATIONSHIP between God and man. This is particularly displayed in the “Plan of God” material. This covenant, initiated by God, also calls for a human response. The depth of this response from the child is an expression of the child’s interior life of faith, morality, and social consciousness.

Relying on Cosmic Education/The Plan of God, the elementary class at Queen of Angels Montessori School must daily revisit and live out a vision that includes:

- **The Plan:** a recognition of the plan of God (cosmic plan) as an objective reality which runs throughout time and history;
- **Our Place:** a recognition that “only by acknowledging this reality can we find our place within it and cooperate with it”¹² ;
- **A Global View of the Universe and Human History:** this entails
 - a) a continual reference, amidst the details of daily instruction, to a “perspective that allows us to transcend the immediate and fragmented present”¹³
 - b) a continual reference, amidst the details of daily instruction, to the “deep currents running through reality and history”:¹⁴ i.e. – God’s continual giving, which calls for human response; the covenant relationship between God and man which calls for a continual human response.¹⁵
- **A Personal Response:** an emphasis that, in the end, the child’s work and study must elicit a personal response. We must each respond personally to God’s gifts. We each have a personal role in the realization of the covenant. “The moment of delight and enjoyment leads to the moment of action. The moral solicitation to respond to the gift on the level of behavior is made for cosmic peace.”¹⁶

Both Drs. Montessori and Cavalletti stress that cosmic education is not a created, made-up ideal which humans think is nice sounding and popular to progressively minded thinkers. In contrast, cosmic education represents reality itself, how the world is set up and functions according to God’s design. Consequently, in order to really understand the world, cosmic education is not an option to be cast aside by lesser visions but a necessity and a basic fundamental in children’s education, both in its intellectual and moral aspects.¹⁷

PSYCHOLOGICAL NEEDS

The second factor that serves as a foundation to assist the child in attaining the primary goals of our school is meeting the child's psychological needs.

Psychological Tendencies¹⁸

Dr. Montessori observed that people have innate psychological tendencies that guide a person's development from birth to maturity. These basic human tendencies are:

- **Exploration/Manipulation:** to actively explore the universe and its wonderful secrets.
- **Communication:** the sharing of ideas, thoughts, and feelings through a variety of forms.
- **Orientation:** to know our time, place, and role in society.
- **Order:** to become aware of the many patterns in our universe.
- **Self-Perfection** and its close allies, **Repetition** and **Exactness:** the tendency to become better human beings.
- **Creation/Abstraction:** the tendency to bring into reality ideas unknown before.

On a societal level, these human tendencies contribute to the development of culture and the growth of civilizations. On a personal level, these tendencies help the child develop into a fully functioning, responsible human being. Therefore, the teacher must always be cognizant that these tendencies are innate and must be stimulated. Furthermore, the educational environment itself must nurture the growth of these tendencies.

The Montessori elementary curriculum, stemming from the Great Lessons, can demonstrate to the child the work of natural law and how human tendencies have operated through time. The children's cultural studies help the child recognize the many ways that human tendencies are manifested across time and place. Math, a reflection of the tendency of order, allows the child to see the beauty of patterns in the universe. Language, reading and writing encourage communication through the understanding of others' ideas as well as the child's sharing of his/her own ideas.

Imagination and Reason¹⁹

Also innate to the elementary- aged child are the gifts of imagination and reasoning. The child has an insatiable mind to know causes and reasons, and the child needs great work to inspire him. Every presentation needs a balance between these two forces. Dr. Montessori said, "The secret of good teaching is to regard the child's intelligence as a fertile field in which seeds may be sown to grow under the heat of flaming imagination. Our aim, therefore, is not merely to

make the child understand and still less to free him to memorize, but so to touch his imagination and to enthuse him to his innermost core."²⁰

Research shows that the learning process is stimulated when intelligence is inspired by imagination.²¹ In the Montessori environment key lessons spark the imagination and aid the reasoning process. Timelines, charts, etc. help to convey impressions of ideas rather than hard facts. They help the imagination see and construct. Within this context, the children's research naturally supports the development of basic skills. Reading and writing are tools to be used in exploration rather than merely end products in themselves.

Education to Hope

Finally, the integration of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd with Montessori's Cosmic Education addresses a psychological need that has probably never been more urgent than today: the need for hope. The need for hope is so fundamental to human existence that the Church recognizes it is one of the three fundamental virtues, "which are three modes of being, three ways of approaching and relating to reality."²² Without hope, any person leads an impoverished existence.

Dr. Cavalletti writes:

"I believe [hope] is the biblical value most needed in our modern day world...Very few speak about hope. In fact, most often we are presented with a rather pessimistic vision, where life is viewed in terms of its negative elements. The negative is surely present, but that is not all there is to reality.

...Darkness itself can be blinding. To fix our gaze solely on it can prevent us from seeing the shafts of light reality reveals and thus prevents us from beholding life with eyes of hope.

We must educate children to open their eyes to the positive elements in reality, not to encourage illusions, but to enable them to see the whole of reality. Education is to help create persons who are capable of looking beyond the surface agitation of the waves, so as to catch sight of the current flowing deep beneath the movements of history...We are speaking about the capacity of knowing how to catch hold of the positive, along with the negative, in the certainty that the positive will prevail.²³

Education to hope hinges on communicating the "unity and vastness" of time and history to the child in a way that lifts up the message of hope that is fundamental to the Judeo-Christian tradition. Education to hope is, therefore, contingent upon presenting history as the Plan of God.

The history we are living is not a succession of disconnected events; it is the realization of a plan which will have a positive conclusion... [W]e are awaiting a time of universal peace, a time when even death, the "last enemy," will be vanquished (1 Cor. 15:26). This is the hope held by Jews and Christians alike,

which is to say the hope of those who belong to two branches of the biblical tradition. **This perspective of history certainly does not mean that we ignore the many contradictions encountered in life's journey, but Jews and Christians hope and know that the outcome of history is positive.**²⁴

THE PREPARED ENVIRONMENT²⁵

Much of what has been said finds its practical application in the prepared environment. This is the third leg of the foundation that supports the attainment of our goals for children. In the elementary Montessori class, the prepared environment should reflect the focus on Cosmic Education/The Plan of God, and should strengthen and encourage the natural tendencies of the child.

A Montessori classroom should physically embody the cosmos in an orderly, sequential, and aesthetic way. "The concept is that the total environment design conveys the essential principles of all disciplines through sequenced order and aesthetic appeal."²⁶ The key materials of various disciplines need to be present for exploration. The room should give the children the impression of the entirety of the universe and the scope of the Plan of God through the display of all areas of knowledge.

The prepared environment becomes especially important when we realize that "experiences actually shape our brain and, therefore, shape future learning. Thus, we use the brain better when we enrich our experiences so that our brains can extract new and more complex ways of communicating and interacting with the world."²⁷ Brain-based research indicates that the classroom environment can encourage optimal learning by immersing the child in a multitude of complex and interactive experiences.

The prepared environment should support the development of the human tendencies. The prepared environment allows the child to *explore* (tendency) the cosmos through his reason and imagination, guided by key lessons. As the child explores the keys, he *orients* (tendency) himself to identify with human achievements and to see his or her own eventual role in society. This is further developed through "going out" experiences in which the child extends his or her research into the larger society.

The tendency of *order* allows the child to see relationships. The display of the key materials in the environment gives the child an impression of the order of the cosmos and its many possible relationships. At times in a child's development, external order helps build his or her internal order. This reinforces clarity of thought.²⁸

The prepared environment should allow for movement and all aspects of *communication* (tendency). It should allow for long, uninterrupted work periods

which encourage the child's growth toward *self-perfection* and is a basic component in the development of all the human tendencies.

The prepared environment must allow for social interaction and be multi-aged. Research suggests that "the human brain is a social brain."²⁹ The prepared environment supports cooperative learning, which in turn supports the improvement of important life skills: "listening, taking the viewpoint of others; communicating effectively; solving conflicts; and working together to achieve a common goal."³⁰

The Montessori environment can be viewed as a carefully prepared place of learning where the child's natural tendencies can be encouraged to develop and where a grand vision of the universe is laid out before him or her to explore. It is within this carefully prepared environment that the child is called to become a part of this great Plan and to use his or her tendencies and abilities to serve others and build a better world.

SUMMARY AND KEY AREAS OF IMPLEMENTATION

We have set out a three-fold goal for the elementary child:

1. Help the child recognize the Plan of God.
2. Help the child recognize his or her unique role in this plan.
3. Help the child develop the requisite skills to fully participate in the plan and to fulfill his/her unique vocation in the building of God's kingdom.

We have set out a three-fold foundation to help the child attain these goals:

1. **Cosmic Education and the Plan of God:** A focus on a unified view of the universe and human history (Cosmic Education/The Plan of God).
2. **Psychological Needs:** A recognition that every child has specific psychological needs which must be stimulated in order for him or her to grow and for society to progress. These needs include the psychological tendencies, which should guide the educational process; imagination; reasoning; and the need for hope.
3. **Prepared Environment:** A realization that it is essential to provide a specially prepared environment to support the child's growth.

Finally, and more precisely, we can set out certain key characteristics of the classroom that are necessary to support this vision.

1. It represents the plan of God as a fundamental reality of how the world is set up and functions.
2. It uses and makes continual reference to the Great Lessons, helping the child to understand and appreciate the interdependence of all things.

3. It promotes the child's psychological tendencies.
4. It helps the child develop a sense of social responsibility and the need for a personal response in writing his/her own "blank page" in the story of the Kingdom of God.
5. It encourages multi-age settings and cooperative learning.
6. It stimulates imagination, reasoning, and a sense of hope.
7. It immerses the learner in a multitude of complex and interactive experiences in a carefully prepared environment.
8. It supports uninterrupted work time.

These key areas of implementation will help to make our vision real and tangible for the child at our school. They will help the child come to know the "workings of reality" so that he or she can "enter into and live it" and, in his or her unique way, respond to the question, "how do I become a part of it?"³¹

Endnotes

¹ Cf. "Philosophy Statement for the North Avondale Montessori School," *NAMTA Journal*, Vol. 22, No. 1., (Winter, 1997).

² *Ibid.*, p. 175.

³ Margaret Stephenson, "Cosmic Education," *Association Montessori Internationale Communications* (Amsterdam, Holland: Association Montessori Internationale, 1993), p. 28.

⁴ Stephenson, p. 11.

⁵ Marlene Barron, "Summaries of Replies to Katz's Questions", in Margaret Howard Loeffler (Ed.), *Montessori in Contemporar American Culture* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1992) p. 203. Cf. *Philosophy Statement for Cincinnati Public Montessori Schools*.

⁶ Cf., "Philosophy Statement for the North Avondale Montessori School," p.179

⁷ Stephenson, p. 25.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 26

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ All of the Great Lessons should be offered annually, particularly at the upper elementary level.

¹² Sofia Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child, 6 to 12 Years Old* (Chicago IL: Liturgy Training Publications, 2002), p. 34

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Dr. Cavalletti: "Contrary to the popular mindset, reality does not consist of a secular history with sacred history being superimposed upon it. Rather, all of reality is moving toward its final destination ... Obviously, not all events carry the same weight in this global vision of history. 'All events of secular history do not pertain to sacred history in the same way, neither as to their meaning nor importance. But even with events such as the discovery of fire, the taming of the horse, the invention of writing, or the spread of the Roman Empire, the grace of salvation is at work in a more or less explicit way.'" *Religious Potential of the Child 6 to 12 Years Old*, p. 37.

¹⁶ Cavalletti, p. 37

¹⁷ This attitude is beautifully expressed by a passage from *The Religious Potential of the Child, 6 to 12 Years Old* (P. 39): If, in fact, I find myself in a universe in which the primary motivating force is propelling all things toward communion, and if I want to live harmoniously within such a universe, then I must embrace this "force." I must faithfully give my assent to it, in solidarity with past generations and with a sense of responsibility for present and future generations. Failing to do so would be to place myself at odds with reality and, thus, "to live poorly" in every

sense. If we succeed at placing before the children a truly panoramic view of reality and enabling them to perceive its deep mystery, then reality itself will teach them. The adult must “indicate” or “point out” reality for the child. Reality itself will then engage them in a profound educational process.

¹⁸ The core content of this section is taken from the “Philosophy Statement for the North Avondale Montessori School.”

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Montessori, cf. Stephenson, p. 21

²¹ Donald A. And Judith A. Sanders, *Teaching Creativity Through Metaphor: an Integrated Brain Approach* (NY: Longman, Inc., 1984).

²² Cavalletti, “The Montessori Cosmic Vision and the Bible,” *1984-1997* (Chicago, IL: Liturgy Training Publications, 1998), p. 216.

²³ Ibid., pp. 215-216.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 215.

²⁵ The core content of this section is drawn from the “Philosophy Statement for the North Avondale Montessori School.”

²⁶ David Kahn, *A Parent’s Guide to Montessori Elementary*, (Cleveland, OH: North American Montessori Teachers’ Association, 1980), p. 5

²⁷ Renate Nummela and Geoffrey Caine, *Making Connections, Teaching and the Human Brain*, (Addison Wesley), p. 39; Jane M. Healy, *Endangered Minds* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1990), chapter 3.

²⁸ Jean Miller, “The Prepared Environment,” in David Kahn, *A Montessori Operations Handbook for Teachers and Administrators* (Cleveland, OH: North American Montessori Teachers’ Association, 1988).

²⁹ Caine, p. 125

³⁰ Thomas Lickona, *Educating for Character*, (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1991), p. 187

³¹ Cavalletti, *Montessori Cosmic Vision*, p. 217.