



# 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.

## *First Moments*

In The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd method of faith formation the work of the catechist is to prepare the environment for the child. The child is introduced to the environment in such a way that the child will be comfortable in the space so they can work to know God. This prepared environment, is called an "atrium." The term "atrium" corresponded to the name of the space in the ancient basilica, which lay between the street and the inner sanctum of the church. It was like an entryway or foyer, and it was in this place that the faithful prepared themselves, both physically and spiritually, to enter the church and participate in the liturgy. If our aim is to help children enjoy relationship with God, we must ask, "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?" We want to create a space where it is okay to be small. Considering what we have come to know about the role of the prepared environment and its impact upon the life of the youngest child, have we considered the environment that welcomes the newborn child at birth?

The first hours and days of the newborn's life are most important. The newborn enters the world in an obviously fragile and sensitive state, for example, their eyes are closed and not accustomed to natural, let alone artificial light. The newborn needs low light, quiet moments, silence, and time for solitude with the mother. In recent years we have grown in our understanding of the needs of the newborn child in the first moments, hours, days, months, and years of life. It is important to pay attention to and prepare both the birth environment and the home environment that greets the newborn child.

### *In the Beginning...*

What does it mean to prepare the environment? We consider how God prepared the earth for us. The prophet Jeremiah proclaimed, "Before I formed you in your mother's womb, I knew you." God has known each of us for our whole existence, before we were formed in our mother's womb. His sacred plan includes each of us. How beautiful for us to know and reflect upon this gift: that our first environment was in the heart of God, which was followed by our mother's womb. The psalmist wrote in Psalm 139, "You wove me in my mother's womb." Our mother's womb was an environment prepared by God, an environment that can give us everything that we need to grow and to develop. What does the newborn need as he or she transitions to life outside the womb?

## First Hours

In those first moments after birth, the child is often placed skin-to-skin on the mother's stomach. It is important for the child to feel safe and secure on the mother's body. The baby recognizes the mother's voice, smell, and her body will provide warmth for the child. During pregnancy the child begins to hear sounds: the mother's breath and voice, the voices of the rest of the family, and the sounds of the world outside the womb. As a newborn, the child responds to those familiar voices and sounds by listening carefully. As soon as the mother holds her baby after birth, she begins to communicate by exchanging the first looks, sounds, and touches. Babies quickly learn about the world through their senses; the infant will get used to seeing the mother and begin to focus on her face. The senses of touch and hearing are especially important. The baby will be curious about noises, but nothing will interest the infant like the spoken voice.

These first hours provide intimacy between the child and mother (and father or other siblings, etc., if present). The temperature in the room should be as warm as possible for the child and mother. Conversation and noises that may startle the child should be avoided. Silence during this time is a gift. Lights should be dim, as low as possible. Movements should be slow. The quiet, the slowness, and low light are all done to protect the child from over stimulation, as both the mother and child need time to rest following the birth. While the child is on the mother's stomach, she may eventually place her hands under the child's feet, so that the child's stepping reflex will help push him up towards the mother's breast.

Italian educator, Adele Costa Gnocchi (1883-1967) was a pioneer in the field of assistance to infancy. She wrote, "No movement will ever be slow enough or delicate enough for him. No clothing will ever be soft enough for his body, which has until now been naked. No one can substitute for the warmth, the presence, and the instincts of the mother. Mother's milk is irreplaceable nutrition, which creates a communion and comprehension between mother and child." (15 points on the newborn - a guide by Adele Costa Gnocchi, *Educazione dalla nascita (Education from birth)*, E. G. Belotti and G. H. Fresco, Emme Publishers (Milano) 1983.

A special collection of newborn clothing that was so very sensitive to the newborn's skin was developed by Gianna Gobbi. The silk undershirt had no tags or seams. She also developed the Cestina and its "riduttore" or reducer (see photo, right) which can be described as the replacement for the womb, a cuddle from a soft tube circling the rattan boarder of the basket to give the baby the same sensation of closeness the womb provided. The Cestina is an environment for early movement and observation. Not to be confused with a Moses basket, which is too narrow for movement and too deep for observation. Because the sides of the



Photo by Karin Slabaugh

Cestina basket are relatively low, the baby can observe a large space, the lights and shadows, the faces, even to hear voices and other noises or sounds, in this new environment. The “reducer” reduces the size of the space for the early days and weeks of giving the newborn a feeling of containment, like being in the womb. This allows for a gradual transition as the infant adapts to a more open space. It is shaped like a stuffed tube that follow the inner curve of the Cestina. Both the Cestina and the seamless layette were Gianna’s work. Prior to this development, wool sweaters were used to keep the babies warm, and this material would have been very scratchy. Adele and her team knew that anything that touched the skin needed to be soft and without lumps from seams or closures, so the layette was developed starting with a silk long sleeved undershirt closed by having an overlap.

Gianna was a Montessorian and collaborator in the development of *The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd* method of faith formation. The first national director of CGSUSA, Tina Lillig, writes of Gianna, “All of Gianna's knowledge and experience of Montessori education she brought to the field of the religious formation of children. Her Montessori roots go very deep. Even in her late teens, she had a respect for the dignity and the preciousness of the child. This was noticed and encouraged by the Montessori educator Adele Costa Gnocchi who invited Gianna to work with the littlest ones, and the ones with special needs, in her school in Rome.” One quote of Gianna’s that we carry in our hearts, “What face of God does each child need at each phase of life?”

As we consider and prepare for the birth and home environments, we also observe the environment to remove potential obstacles. A noisy environment or a place where there is background noise, such as a television on, can hinder language development, because not only do you prevent the baby from hearing clearly what is being said, but you also risk subjecting his or her brain to too many stimuli. A pacifier can also be a hindrance to language development: it is difficult to let out little cries, make first lullabies and talk if you constantly have something in your mouth, especially at an age when you cannot remove it yourself.

### *Sacred Images*

In the book *The Good Shepherd and the Child: A Joyful Journey*, Silvana Quattrocchi Montanaro, MD and Gianna Gobbi discuss ways to support the spiritual life of the child from prenatal life through age six. They offer information on the prenatal life, as well as many practical suggestions for creating a general environment at home, as well as a religious environment, “Put a sacred image of the Risen Christ, or the Mother of God with the child Jesus, close to the crib and point it out to your child. (For example, the works of Giotto or Fran Angelico are suitable for their solemnity and beauty of design.)”



*Photo by Elisabeth Sheaff*

*In the coming months we will explore the infant's First Days, First Weeks, and First Months, as well as First Works in the Atrium.*