



The Response of the Child

It is common in the atrium for a child to show a joyful response through artwork and signing. I have even had a child respond to work by doing a joyful cartwheel in the atrium. But there are many children who do not have the ability to hold a pencil and draw, to sing, or to move in response to joy. But the response of the child in the presence of the Good Shepherd can be seen in many other

ways. Perhaps a change comes over the child, perhaps one of stillness or attentive listening or an expression of serene peace may be observed. Some responses are perhaps miraculous such as speaking out for the first time or performing a movement the child was previously unable to do. These responses can touch us deeply and make our hearts sing with joy!

Below I share a few of the responses of these children observed throughout my 32 years as catechist.

When my daughter, who suffered a severe brain injury at five months of age, was almost two years old, I was assisting in the three-to-six atrium. I remember the lead catechist was giving a presentation, although I can't remember which one. I was sitting back behind the children with my daughter propped up before me. She had no useful mobility at that point. The Good Shepherd work was placed over to the left on the floor. All of a sudden, she leaned forward, got on her hands and knees, and crept over to the Good Shepherd work, sat back and just gazed at it. I just gazed at her sitting there before the Good Shepherd, not only because our immobile daughter had just crept for the first time in her life but because it seemed as if the Good Shepherd called her name and she answered. It was a miraculous moment not easily duplicated.

In my first year as a catechist in the three-to-six atrium, I had a 5-year old girl diagnosed with Down Syndrome. She had a rich opportunity to explore and deepen her relationship with Jesus for she came from a loving family who attended Mass daily. After the presentation of The Offering she took the materials and with reverence and awe, she lifted the host up high and could be heard saying, "This is My Body". With all the love she held in her heart for Jesus, she raised Him up in praise and glory. She repeated this many times, sometimes holding the host up high for a prolonged period of time, always with a serenity about her and a look of joy on her face. I pondered on her switch of focus from the Offering to the moment of Consecration and the peace she seemed to find in these moments. To me it was as if she was experiencing a

metaphysical moment in which she was experiencing a joining of her soul with the one she loved so dearly. At least for me, I took from her the gift of simply being with God.

A four-year-old boy diagnosis with Down Syndrome would often come in "out of sorts" but as soon as he found his way to the crucifix on the Altar, his mood would change to one of joy. He would lovingly carry the "Jesus cross" around with him, kissing and caressing it. My heart would just melt and happiness would flood over me when I saw his serenity and joy. One day when the children had gone home, I went to tidy up. I found that he had placed the cross on the "altar table" in the Cenacle. Great peace came to me as I tried to comprehend his vast knowledge and love of God.

One day I invited a three year old who faced emotional challenges into the atrium. He entered and upon hearing quiet music playing, he stood still, stopped crying, and walked over to the Altar. I invited him to do the work. After placing the cross on the Altar, he gazed at the cross and then held it in his lap. He started swaying very gently back and forth, closed his eyes and held tight to the cross. He continued to do this for about five minutes alternately raising the cross in the air, placing the cross over his heart, and placing it in his lap. He proceeded to work calmly for the remainder of the day. He would often return to the Altar. Sometimes he would kneel, put his arms in the air, and sing out phrases of praise.

Children facing many hardships and challenges rely on their love relationship with the Good Shepherd and do not hold back the joy experienced. In fact, these children eagerly express this joy with anyone who is present. Their joy is a very special gift given to us.

Linda Allen

Stone Harbor, NJ