

Opening Address

1999 Assembly Educateurs sans Frontières

Opening

The organisers of this First Educateurs sans Frontières (EsF) Assembly were honoured and delighted that the Mayor of Citta di Castello had so readily accepted their invitation to the Assembly's opening. Adolfo Orsini spoke a few words of welcome to the gathering, referring to the historical setting filled with momentous memories.

Recalling the Past

Camillo Grazzini and Renilde Montessori addressed the Assembly on behalf of the organising committee of the Educateurs sans Frontières. Camillo Grazzini mentioned how ninety years ago, almost to the day, Maria Montessori gave the inaugural lecture for her very first training course. It was held in the same room as the one in which the EsF group found itself - the grand salon of the Villa Franchetti, as it was named by journalists of the time. Mr Grazzini introduced Renilde Montessori - a Montessori in both name and deed - who was to read the beginning and conclusion of Maria Montessori's inaugural lecture in order to recall the past, a past that merged with our present.



Renilde Montessori



Camillo Grazzini

He stressed that ... "Remembering and recalling the past, creating a history, has always been an indispensable instrument for human beings: a means for developing a sense of identity and a sense of belonging. Shared memories create bonds that strengthen families and consolidate communities; and also within our Montessori community, we can rediscover our unity through our shared history. It has been said that, both collectively and individually, identity is a function of memory. Without memory there is no sense of identity, and both history and memory structure and nourish a sense of identity. Those who are on the side of memory, of remembering, are - in the end - the ones who are on the side of hope." At his invitation Renilde Montessori then read some excerpts from Dr Montessori's Inaugural Lecture, Citta di Castello, 1909.

"If truly this magnificent mansion were lent to me because of a work I had accomplished, if this generous hospitality were offered solely to me, if the teachers and noble ladies present had put themselves out only for me, then I would be really bewildered. I am not the one who has created something new in the art of education, for it is the child's spirit that has revealed itself to me and that I have been able to behold in its true manifestations. It is this that is truly grand in the new method: this voice of the child's soul, of a new mankind, that speaks through us. It is this voice and only this voice that has made us come on a pilgrimage to this place. It is as though a great inner fire has driven us beyond a materialistic life to raise us up to a higher spirituality. Once upon a time minstrels wandered from castle to castle to lift the spirits of the lords that dwelt there; today the new voice of the child reaches people's hearts, provokes powerful inner reverberations and echoes throughout the civilised world. ... Among the first to be enthused by the new method, there were - and we have to name them today - the Baron and Baronessa Franchetti. They have welcomed it with bountiful generosity and have desired its experimentation in this land that is theirs by adoption. May your inner faith and apostolic fervour equal their ardour!"

Mr Grazzini continued, emphasising that Maria Montessori's words just read were heard then by seventy students gathered at the Villa Montesca. He then added: "Perhaps Maria Montessori's words seem dated and overly emphatic. Well, of course, they are almost a century old. Moreover, given the occasion, the words belong to the spoken and not the written form of language: and, given the moment, with its pivotal importance for Montessori's message, dramatic impact was clearly called for. If the form of expression seems old-fashioned or dated, it is in any case only a question of form; the substance is quite a different matter. The actual message, the actual thinking that lies behind the words, that which I should now like to call our Montessori 'mandate' or 'charisma', seems all too relevant to the present day. Thus, Montessori said: 'It is the child's spirit that has revealed itself to me and that I have been able to behold in its true manifestations.'" And she went on "It is this that is truly grand in the new method: this voice of the child's soul." None of this is limited by time or place; the message is timeless for the child's voice is omnipresent and eternal.

Of course, there is also a great difference between those course participants of ninety years ago and all of you here today. At that time, virtually all of the sixty-five Italians and five foreign students enrolled in Montessori's course were being exposed to Montessori's thinking for the very first time, a thinking which was nothing short of revolutionary.

Interestingly enough, two of the students present for that first course were Adele Costa Gnocchi and Anna Maria Maccheroni; these were individuals destined to become important collaborators of Maria Montessori. The first, Costa Gnocchi, initiated and organised that which today we call the course for Assistants to Infancy and the second, Maccheroni, is well known to all of us, if only for her 'Montessori Music'.

Today, all of us participating in this First Assembly of Educateurs sans Frontières are revisiting our Montessori work with in a context given by the history of the Montessori Movement. What is our aim? That of reinvigorating the Montessori Movement by returning to its original dimensions. To use Maria Montessori's image of ninety years ago and Renilde Montessori's metaphor of just this year (see AMI Communications 1999, No. 11), the Educateurs sans Frontières can be likened to the wandering minstrels of medieval times. They, the Educateurs sans Frontières, give voice to the child's voice in order to reach the hearts of those living in all societies.

The Association Montessori Internationale has been fortunate enough to find a publication of great interest for us and for education in general; or better still, a publication of great sociological significance, given the exceptional scope of Dr Montessori's work. This publication is nothing other than the text of the Corso di pedagogia scientifica [Course of Scientific Pedagogy] held by Maria Montessori in Citta di Castello, in 1909. We have reproduced a few pages which we will display on the board so that they can constitute a manifesto for our First Assembly of Educateurs sans Frontières.