

# Faith, Language, and Heritage: A Montessori-Based Religious Programme in the Romanian Diaspora in North America

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**ABSTRACT.** The present study analyses the role of the Montessori approach as a complementary instrument for developing the Sunday School curriculum in the Romanian Orthodox community in Chicago, as part of the Romanian Orthodox Metropolia of the Americas. The conceptual framework is centred on Orthodox faith and the religious formation of children. Core universal principles focus on religious content, teacher training, and parental formation. The assessment of the pilot programme *Let the Children Come to Me* included two surveys, addressed to parents and church teachers, to collect and interpret results, use the outcomes to improve and further develop the pedagogical process, and improve the programme overall.

**Keywords:** religious education, religious curriculum, Montessori approach, pilot programme, Romanian as a heritage language

## 1. Religious education of children in the diaspora

The paper examines the effects of implementing the Montessori method as a complementary pedagogical instrument for developing the religious curriculum of the pilot Romanian Orthodox Sunday School Programme, *Let the Children Come to Me* (Matthew 19:14)<sup>1</sup>, in the diaspora, at the Romanian Orthodox Metropolia of the Americas in Chicago, Illinois. The analysis is based

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<sup>1</sup> King James Bible *King James Bible Online* (2017). <https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org>



on responses from church teachers and parents who worked together to create a context grounded in the mission of instilling the Orthodox faith, identity, and Romanian as a heritage language in second-generation children who are actively invested in the life of the Church. It is the responsibility of teachers and parents to create an environment that does not hinder children from attending and living the life of the Church.

A catechetical approach to religious education for children within the Christian tradition is evident in the patristic writings, particularly in the homilies of St. John Chrysostom on raising children in the Christian faith. The selected teachings for analysis in this section include the roles of teachers, parents, and the child as a teacher and a disciple. As such, parents bear the sacred duty to educate their children, and they must attend to their religious education as well as their secular upbringing by taking the children to church. In Homily LIX on Matthew on discipleship, the duties of teachers and adults in the education of children are set out as part of the interpretation of the roles of teachers and parents in the education of the little ones, namely, the cultivation of the soul and the love of virtues: “Take heed that you despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you, that their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in Heaven” (Matthew 18: 10)<sup>2</sup>.

In Homily LXII on Matthew, the child is presented as a teacher and a moral example of discipleship, as children are blessed and express humility and an inner life that becomes a pattern for all to follow. Young children have a natural sense of wonder, and virtues can be cultivated in their minds: “Then were there brought unto Him little children, that He should put His hands on them, and pray: and the disciples rebuked them. But He said unto them, Suffer the little children to come unto me, for of such is the kingdom of Heaven. And He laid His hands on them, and departed thence” (Matthew 19: 13-15)<sup>3</sup>. Adults are also taught to be lowly, as the child’s soul is pure from all the passions. Agency is manifested both in the child and in the parent as a teacher, with the greatest quality being the attention given to the child.

Metaphorically, associations are also made with the lost sheep, “For how think ye? says He; If a man have an hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray, does he not leave the ninety and nine, and goes into the mountains, and seeks that which is gone astray? And if so be that he find it, he rejoices over

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<sup>2</sup> Sfântul Ioan Gură de Aur, *Scrieri, Omilia la Matei, Partea a III-a*, transl. Pr. D. Fecioru, (Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1994), 689.

<sup>3</sup> Sfântul Ioan Gură de Aur, *Scrieri, Partea a III-a, Omilia la Matei*, trans. Pr. D. Fecioru, (Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1994), 722.

it more than over the ninety and nine, which went not astray. Even so it is not will before your Father, that one of these little ones should perish” (Matthew 18: 12-14)<sup>4</sup>. On parental responsibility, in Homily IX on 1 Timothy (Timothy 2: 15), the exhortation to parents is to bring up their children with great care and reverence; the patristic writings affirm that salvation for parents comes from bearing and raising children, as the fathers and mothers benefit from their children’s virtue and shall be rewarded<sup>5</sup>.

In the Christian tradition, within the church, children hear the word of God, a word that must be brought down from the abstract plane, as it is hard to grasp and understand. This is made possible only in the church, a space whose mission is to nourish spiritual growth. Children’s spirituality and faith enable them to understand with their whole being. The educational approach proposed for religious teaching at Sunday School in the North American diaspora is based on recognising sensitive developmental periods that enable them to experience faith and joy through all their senses, to participate in divine services, and to live the life of the church. Such an approach resonates with the theological mission of the Orthodox Church, where children experience joy and peace by attending church services solemnly and in silence, with respect for the sacred environment, and by preparing the festive rooms and the clothes that must be in order and clean. As such, parents and church teachers are the ones who imprint the child’s religious consciousness, since the home and school environments mirror the church in worship<sup>6</sup>.

In modern society, early childhood, as a developmental phase, is paramount to a child’s formation, and the sensitive periods must be nurtured by the family. Training programmes that support the family in the upbringing of their young children are essential. To nurture religious education in children, parents must actively participate in the life of the Church to bring children closer to self-directed education, self-control, emotional balance, and a good state of mind. The main educational resources are the prayers that Christian parents should say with their children, instilling, by the power of example, the cultivation of virtues and good deeds<sup>7</sup>. The Montessorian principles align with

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<sup>4</sup> Sfântul Ioan Gură de Aur, *Scrieri*, 690.

<sup>5</sup> Sfântul Ioan Gură de Aur, *Tâlcuiri la Epistola I către Timotei a Sfântului Apostol Pavel*, (Nemira, București, 2020), 44-45.

<sup>6</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *Liturgy and Life: Lectures and Essays on Christian Development Through Liturgical Experience*, Department of Religious Education, Orthodox Church in America, (New York, 1974), 16-17.

<sup>7</sup> Mihaela Brânză, “Early Childhood in Today’s Family. The Christian Landmarks in the Lives of Our Children”, in SUBBTO 67, no. 1, (2022), 110-112.

this framework, as all the spiritual endeavours and the way the materials are created support the child's development from early childhood to adulthood and aim to prepare for active participation in and living the life of the Church.

Apostle John was the apostle of unconditional love and understanding. Regarding the education of children, their bearing and upbringing must be rooted not in fear but in freedom, as children do not need possessions but good teachers for Christian formation and transformation<sup>8</sup>. Thus, God is love, "He that loveth not knoweth not God: for God is love" (John 4: 8)<sup>9</sup>, and the very principle of creation is love, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness" (Genesis 1: 26)<sup>10</sup>.

## 2. The Montessori Method

A Christian understanding of the child and of agency, developed from a religious perspective, is reflected in Montessorian pedagogy. Religious education encompasses silence, independence, self-directed education, independent movement, and purposeful order in the environment. In this sense, these pedagogical elements were adopted in proposing the Christian Orthodox religious curriculum as part of the Sunday School programme, with the child in mind, to enable mastery through agency throughout the sensitive phases and to provide the freedom to learn and move in an orderly way within a carefully thought-out and prepared environment. From a pedagogical perspective, the main theme in the interpretation was the role of the teacher as a spiritual guide who oversees and, like a missionary, directs lives and souls<sup>11</sup>.

The method serves as an instrumental pedagogical model for developing religious knowledge and language. Other programmes that adopted the Montessori approach include *The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd*, a very successful programme<sup>12</sup>. Some of the core concepts for implementing the model in a Sunday School curriculum include preparing children for life in the Church, and acknowledging that the process is natural, implicit, sensorial, and experiential

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<sup>8</sup> Olimpiu Nicolae Benea, "The Education of the Apostle John Between Discipleship and the Fourth Gospel", in SUBBTO, 66, no. 2, (2021), 14-15.

<sup>9</sup> King James Bible, (online edition, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> King James Bible, (online edition, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> Cristina de Stefano, *The Child is the Teacher. A Life of Maria Montessori*, transl. from Italian by Gregori Conti, (Other Press New York, Kindle Edition, 2022), 222

<sup>12</sup> Cavalletti et al., *The Good Shepherd and the Child: A Joyful Journey: Revised and Updated*. Archdiocese of Chicago: (Liturgy Training Publications, 2014).

rather than based on imitation and memorisation of religious content. Learning progresses in accordance with the child's sensitive developmental stages, resonating with the child's inner being. According to the framework, periods of creative growth and the child's mental and spiritual transformation occur rather unconsciously from early childhood to adulthood, moving from a highly creative phase to calm, to strength and maturity<sup>13</sup>.

The spiritual and mental development of children depends on seizing windows of opportunity and being attuned to what the child represents and to what is available to them in the environment, as they are highly receptive to language and knowledge. Under this framework, sensitive periods reflect complete acquisition, achieved with ease, unconsciously, and at no cost. Such sensibilities are at their fullest during these periods and contrast with how they are later absorbed by the mind, underscoring the role of adults in fostering an environment in which such opportunities are not missed. These periods have a spiritual dimension and inner energies that enable the construction of the child's world and the more complex order centred on independence and creativity. Although empirically grounded, the method asserts that spiritual sensibility in childhood is part of the sensitive-period approach to development and precedes any pedagogical and religious formation of the child. Thus, it needs to be nurtured by providing an environment that exudes beauty and joy, because what the child receives during this time cannot be acquired in the same way later in life<sup>14</sup>.

The sensitive periods are connected to children's linguistic potential and to how language develops, especially during the first two planes of development, as language acquisition begins before the first words are spoken<sup>15</sup>. Given the bilingual setting, the responses regarding the use of Romanian as a heritage language, as the mother tongue, resonate with the Montessori approach to language acquisition, as the propensity towards the acquisition of words and the construction of phrases goes beyond what can be controlled by the child, as the grammar and the rules are available and can be accessed by the child<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> Maria Montessori, *The Absorbent Mind*, (The Theosophical Publishing House, Adyar, Madras, India, 1949), 24-29.

<sup>14</sup> Maria Montessori, *The Discovery of the Child*, transl. M.A. Johnstone, Thiruvannamiyur, Madras: (Kalakshetra Publications, 1966), 221.

<sup>15</sup> Maria Montessori, *The Formation of Man*, trans. A. M. Joonsten, (The Theosophical Publishing House, Adyar, Madras 20, India, 1962), 81-82.

<sup>16</sup> Maria Montessori *The Child in the Church. Essays on the Religious Education of Children and the Training of Character*, edited by Mortimer Standing, (Kemp Hall Press, Oxford, Great Britain, 1930), 93.

The child's linguistic creativity is evident throughout development; thus, language, namely the mother tongue, becomes the primary means of understanding, interpretation, and deep engagement with the world, and this period cannot be missed. The sensitive phases of cognitive and spiritual development are associated with burning flames that do not reach the point of consumption<sup>17</sup>. Regarding language development, the sensitive stages mark the transition to conceptualisation and metaphorical understanding through an action-oriented approach and exposure adapted to their needs, while remaining authentic and resourceful in developing spiritual awareness and language acuity. The materials must be specially designed to use sensorial objects and learning through action, first emphasising active listening and then reading as abilities and strategies for learning<sup>18</sup>. The psychological development of the child, movement in the environment, and the development of religious metaphors are connected with the child's spiritual journey and the sacred obligation of the parents to accompany the child. The second and third parts of *The Secret of Childhood* are dedicated to education and the roles of teachers and parents, the method, and the child in society. In this framework, children's agency is understood as an emergent, not imposed, capacity and as the ability to manifest their will through self-directed education, guided by teachers and parents, and to develop their inner spiritual life in an active, experiential manner, rather than as passive recipients. Thus, agency must be understood as an intrinsic, predetermined drive manifested in spiritual and religious formation through work, and teachers and parents must support rather than disrupt this architectural process in the child. Agency is already instilled, and the child is endowed with covert inner abilities to construct and co-construct from a psychological and linguistic standpoint<sup>19</sup>.

The applicability and practical implications of religious education recur as themes in many of the books, guiding children in their active life in the Church and in the relationship between God, the Creator, and the child, the creation and image of God. Through the fundamental writings on religious education as liturgical education, Dr. Montessori reflected that religious education was integral to her work, as she expressed her faith and her pedagogical philosophy. The heritage of her perspective on religious education lies in the divine mission to accompany the child on the sacred self-educating journey<sup>20</sup>. The reference is made to the creation. We are created in the image of God as personal beings; thus,

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<sup>17</sup> Maria Montessori, *The Secret of Childhood*, 37-40.

<sup>18</sup> Maria Montessori, *The Child in the Church*, 38.

<sup>19</sup> Maria Montessori, *The Secret of Childhood*, trans. and edited by Barbara Barclay Carter, (Sangam Press Pvt. Ltd, India, 1985), 17-19.

<sup>20</sup> Maria Montessori, *The Child in the Church*, 150-151.

our freedom reflects the divine freedom with its inner order, and, as personal beings, we are the result of the manifestation of the rationality of creation.<sup>21</sup>

Normalisation is another way of expressing agency and of channelling inner energy through the purposeful work the child does in the prepared environment. If the child's will is not hindered and the approach to knowledge is not imposed by the adult, the child will instinctively and joyfully go towards work, as part of human nature, and will find order, the ability to self-direct and concentrate, and will approach the materials with calm. Also, freedom has to be understood as the child's capacity to act willingly, independent of the adult who is there to guide spiritually, and the child has to follow the inner plan in an environment prepared so that the plan can be fulfilled. As such, adults have to understand, discover, and embrace the mystery and the agency existent in the child, and they have to let it unfold; they have to let the child learn through work, concentration, self-instruction and self-correction. Freedom to acquire knowledge must not be withheld in any form; the family has to help the child experience, exert creative energy, manifest freely, and develop naturally. Normalisation is metaphorically like the lotus flower unfolding as the child flourishes spiritually<sup>22</sup>.

As education must be empirically grounded in the child, teachers and parents have the role of guiding and discovering the child in this pedagogical process. Placing the child at the centre of the educational process, with an emphasis on inner goodness and spirituality, has religious roots. In this context, the development of theological language would lead towards a deeper understanding of sacralisation and the meaning of religious metaphors. The orderly inner and outer environment is like water to the fish. Children acquire early on the elements of environmental orientation, which must be understood as a spiritual journey forward, with the purpose of achieving mastery<sup>23</sup>. A precondition in a child's education is the formation of the adult, be that teacher or parent. The spiritual formation of the caregivers, as teachers of love, implies striving and sustained effort, as well as open consciousness. A child surrounded by love awakens a parent's spiritual side<sup>24</sup>. In defining the new teacher and the relationship between the adult and the child, the former must no longer exert power but rather show humility as a servant of the new life in his hands<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> Valer Bel, "The Freedom of God and the Freedom of Man in Father Dumitru Stăniloae's Theology", in *SUBBTO*, 61, no. 2, (2016), 78-79.

<sup>22</sup> Maria Montessori, *The Secret of Childhood*, 137.

<sup>23</sup> *Idem*, 52.

<sup>24</sup> Maria Montessori, *The Child in the Family*, trans. by Nancy Rockmore Cirillo, (Henry Regnery Company, Chicago, 1970), 27-29.

<sup>25</sup> *Idem*, 115.

The prepared environment is instrumental in harmonious development and is one of the primary dynamic components of the framework, scaled down to help the child better experience reality and act independently. The materials are designed so that children discover and correct errors, helping them deepen their reasoning and other faculties, as well as attention, interest, and curiosity. The fragility of the objects gives children the chance to act with agency, to correct and control their movements without assistance from teachers, to genuinely express preferences, and to stay focused regardless of external stimuli. The environment is built around the concept of freedom, both in the free choices specific to the child's nature and in emergent movement. It must exude beauty and invite the children to act, explore, and engage in the approach and manipulation of objects throughout learning, without overloading the space, as the intrinsic need of the child, who is already connected to the world, is to bring order into the chaos, not more stimulation through sensorial experience. One must discover and explore the mystery of the spiritual child and give the child the freedom to develop in the environment<sup>26</sup>.

### 3. Description of the Pilot Educational Programme

The pilot programme *Let the children come to me* is underpinned by a Montessori-designed curriculum that uses the educational alternative as a complementary approach to enhance the development of children attending Sunday School in the North American diaspora. It was implemented in Chicago, Illinois, at the Romanian Orthodox Metropolia of the Americas, with the blessing of His Eminence Archbishop and Metropolitan Nicolae<sup>27</sup>. The programme's promoter is Presbytera Andaluiza Ioana Mureșan<sup>28</sup>, a Montessori-trained teacher and church teacher who initiated and sustained this endeavour by training teachers across the Romanian Orthodox parishes in North America and by creating a curriculum for different age groups based on the Montessori method.

The pilot programme was initially designed for the 3-6-year-old group, when mental capacity is highly *absorbent*; environmental experiences are absorbed and instilled, laying the foundations of language, culture, and mental

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<sup>26</sup> Maria Montessori, *The Discovery of the Child*, 148-150.

<sup>27</sup> His Eminence Archbishop and Metropolitan Nicolae consented to being mentioned in the present study.

<sup>28</sup> Presbytera Andaluiza Ioana Mureșan agreed to being mentioned and offered great support with the administration of the questionnaires and the presentation of the design of the curriculum.

processes, from impressions to goal-oriented, heightened receptivity towards religious sensibility, language, movement in the set environment, and social attitude. From a Montessorian perspective, the child's nature is divine and transformative. In this respect, the three educational age groups included in the pilot programme correspond to three planes of development: Level I (3-6-year-olds), Level II (6-9-year-olds), and Level III (9-12-year-olds). In designing the curriculum for each age group, the specific characteristics of cognition, language, and movement were taken into account. All curriculum levels include progressively more content in areas such as *Practical Life*, *Creation of the World*, *Infancy Narratives* and *Saint Boxes*, *Parables*, *Holy Sacraments*, and *Sacred Art*, to name a few, and, at the higher levels, add areas such as *Messianic Prophecies*, the *Miracles*, the *Mysteries*, and the *Liturgical Calendar*. Given that the programme is continuously developing, the main areas are presented here to illustrate how the religious content is scaffolded across different levels.

Within the programme, the main cognitive and linguistic developmental attributes for each level were considered: independence, sensorial awareness and agency in the environment, learning through hands-on experience, and wonder in the presence of great mysteries (Level 1). Gradually, at Levels II and III, children become more sensorially and mentally independent, can concentrate for longer periods, focus on intentional interaction, and become more social, transitioning towards abstract thinking, reasoning, and awareness. The learning environment follows a structured Christian Orthodox framework, with designated areas for icons, liturgical objects, flower arrangements, materials for learning about the Holy Sacraments and the Sacramental Life of the Church, Feast Days, the Lives of the Saints (Saint Boxes), and Parables of Jesus Christ, all at a child level, with specific areas designated for practising quiet movement. Another important aspect of the model is the teacher's spiritual formation, which is associated with inward spiritual and moral preparation as well. The framework resonates with the Christian approach to teaching. The teacher must be a passive observer and let the child act in the contained environment, but this passivity must not be understood as indifference; the intensity and the complexity of the teacher's actions translate into the way the environment is created and what it contains for the children, and into the active observation of the choices made by the children<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup> Maria Montessori, *The Secret of Childhood*, 118.

#### 4. The Analysis of the Responses of Church Teachers and Parents

The methodology for interpreting the results is mixed, combining qualitative and quantitative analyses of responses from teachers and parents who agreed to complete the questionnaires. The strands used in the parents' and teachers' questionnaires included multiple-choice, nominal, and ranking items, 5-point Likert scales, and open-ended questions. The two surveys were administered online, with permission requests and assurances of anonymity<sup>30</sup>. The 8 Montessori-trained church teachers (n=8) and 26 parents (n=26) responded to the survey. *Questionnaire 1*, for the Montessori-trained teachers (n=8), was structured into 10 sections and 58 items; *Questionnaire 2*, for the parents who have children enrolled in the programme (n=26), contained 10 sections and 106 items, some of which are used in this interpretation. In both questionnaires, the quantitative strand included questions ranging from nominal and multiple-choice items to 5-point Likert scales, while the qualitative strand included open-ended questions. Both questionnaires were administered online, with permission for data processing and assurance of anonymity. The goal was to assess the quality of the pilot programme, as well as attitudes, motivation, satisfaction levels, and shared experiences among teachers and parents regarding the implementation process, and to trace future steps towards growth. From *Questionnaire 1*, the following sections were selected: Sociobiological background, Bilingualism, Heritage Language and the Diaspora Context, Development of Virtues, Student Autonomy, and the open-ended *Question 36*. From *Questionnaire 2*, for the parents, the sections used were: Biographical background; Language background and abilities of the children; Reasons for enrolling the children; Religious development; Parental involvement; Challenges; Overall satisfaction; Open reflections, and *Question 58* with an open response.

##### 4.1. Sociolinguistic Profile of Teachers, Parents, and Children

For Romanian as a heritage language, studies on language assessment indicate that US-born simultaneous bilinguals, who speak Romanian and English from birth, have lower proficiency than bilingual children born in Romania and who immigrated to the United States. The results showed that Romanian is better

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<sup>30</sup> For the construction and administration of the questionnaires, we used the methodological principles proposed by Zoltán Dörnyei and Jean Marc Dewaele, *Questionnaires in Second Language Research. Construction, Administration, and Processing*, Third edition, (Routledge, New York, 2023).

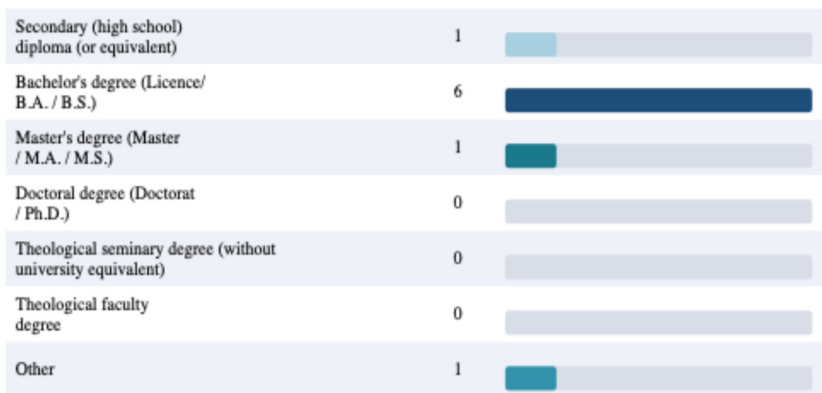
preserved in these communities than, for example, Spanish. For Romanian bilinguals, the main motivation for speaking and improving Romanian is communication with the family and the community<sup>31</sup>. The Romanian communities are striving to create development programmes; therefore, an instructional linguistic context can be outlined. In this sense, the pedagogical approach of the pilot programme addresses the need to continue the children's psycholinguistic and religious development by identifying the specific needs of children and young adults and offering a space where they can grow. As shown below, the linguistic profiles of the teachers who participated in the survey are diverse; see **Figure 1**. The majority of the teachers speak Romanian as their mother tongue (n=6) and were born in Romania, with one teacher speaking Kyrgyz and another Mandarin Chinese as their L1. Overall, the language of instruction fosters a bilingual pedagogical setting, with Romanian and English as the two codes, Romanian predominant (n=6) and English the dominant teaching language (n=2) for teachers who speak Kyrgyz and Mandarin Chinese as L1. All the teachers speak English and Romanian, and other languages spoken include Russian (n=3), Spanish (n=2), French (n=2) and Turkish (n=1), making the educational setting plurilingual and pluricultural.



**Figure 1. Linguistic profile of teachers**

<sup>31</sup> Silvina Montrul, *The Acquisition of Heritage Languages*, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2015), 306-307.

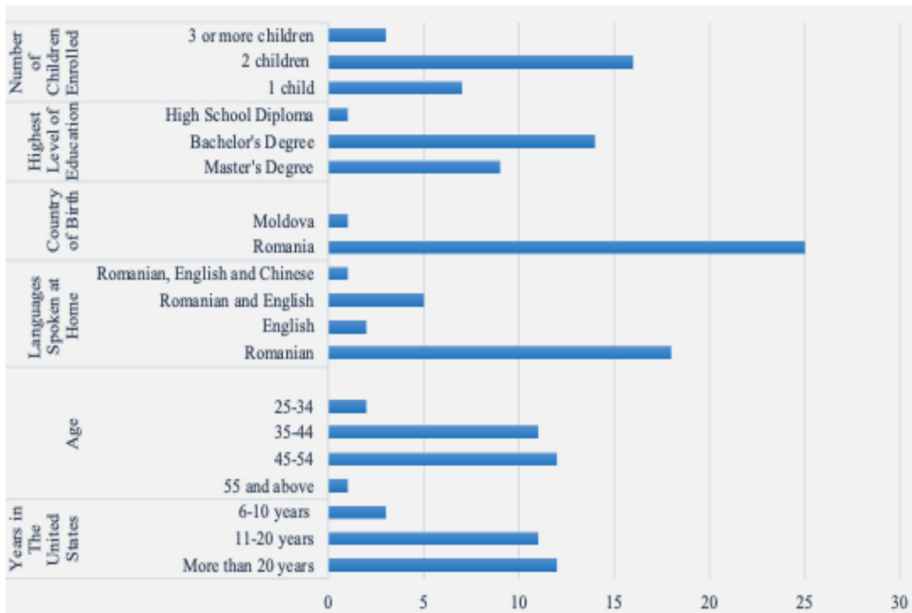
The teachers' academic qualifications indicate a higher level of attainment; highly trained individuals in specific domains are shown in **Figure 2**. All the teachers who participate in implementing the pilot programme are Montessori-trained, with the majority holding a Bachelor's degree (n=6), a Master's degree (n=1), or currently pursuing a Bachelor's degree (n=1). Given that all the teachers are trained, continue with Montessori training, and hold higher education degrees, this stands as evidence of the programme's quality and as a premise for greater achievement to follow.



**Figure 2. Academic qualifications of teachers**

Most of the respondents among the parents were female, with age ranges of 25-34 (n=2), 35-44 (n=11), 45-54 (n=12), and 55 and above (n=1), see **Figure 3**. Questions addressed included the number of years lived in the United States, languages spoken at home, country of birth, highest level of education achieved, and the number of children enrolled. The majority of parents have obtained a Bachelor's degree (n=14) or a Master's or Doctoral degree (n=9), with a small number having completed a trade certificate course (n=2) or high school (n=1). Most of them were born in Romania (n=24), with some in Moldova (n=2). They have been living in the United States for more than 20 years (n=12), 11-20 years (n=11), or 6-10 years (n=3). A large number have 2 children enrolled (n=16), followed by 1 child (n=7) and 3 or more children (n=3). The languages spoken at home indicate that most children speak only Romanian (n=18), with some raised in a bilingual setting using Romanian and English (n=5), Romanian, English and Chinese (n=1), or English

(n=2). The community samples show that the parents are highly educated and invested in supporting their children's development through programmes that promote religious education and linguistic development in their heritage language.



**Figure 3. Profile of parents**

As shown in **Figures 3 and 4**, the linguistic profiles of the parents and children indicate that Romanian is the most commonly spoken heritage language at home, whereas English is less commonly spoken in the household for many children (n=13). Some use both English and Romanian equally (n=11), and a few speak English at home while Romanian is used very little (n=2). Although the pilot programme has been implemented recently, a considerable number of children had attended the Sunday school before its implementation, for five years or more (n=11), 3-4 years (n=7), with a smaller number attending 1-2 years ago (n=7) and less than 6 months ago (n=1). The children's ages range from 4 to 13, representing three planes of development according to the Montessori approach. They are second-generation bilinguals who need support in expressing and maintaining the dominance of their heritage language.



Figure 4. Profile of children

#### 4.2. Heritage Language, Religious Knowledge, and Academic Motivation

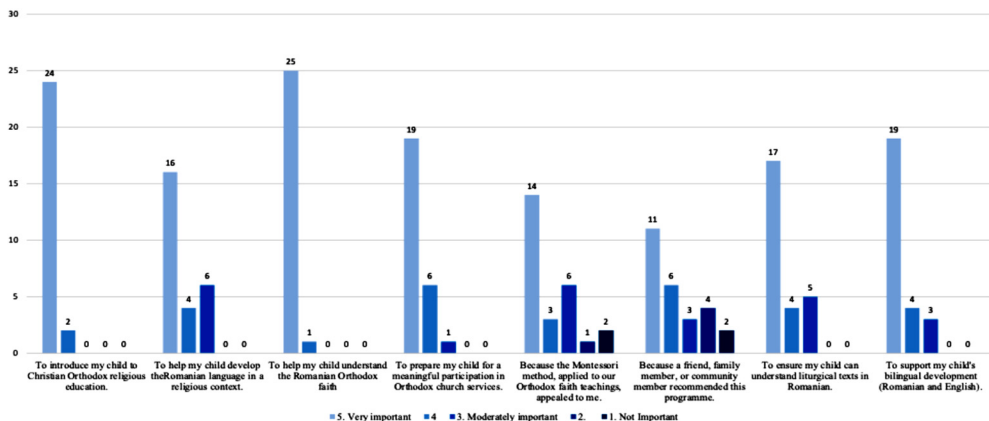
In the community, the preservation of Romanian as a heritage language is closely linked to religious, ethnic, and identity-based factors. Heritage speakers approach language and culture from within the community, and their motivation likewise flows from inward to outward<sup>32</sup>. In preserving language and culture, many communities in the United States have as their mission the provision of education in language and culture in centres specifically designed for language acquisition and cultural development in the construction of their identity<sup>33</sup>. The needs of Romanian children as second-generation speakers are addressed in the same way as they attend Sunday School programmes, in their quest to foster their ethnicity and religious and linguistic identity. The educational context creates continuity among faith, language, and culture; Sunday School activities and social and cultural gatherings foster an environment in which second-generation bilingual children use the language. These children are experiencing a shift from Romanian, the oral language spoken at home and in the community, to English, the dominant language spoken in instructional settings outside the household and the parish. Given this linguistic context, programmes such as *Let the children come to me* serve as bridges that connect children, through a structured environment, to their heritage language, culture, and faith, contextualising their learning and giving them a sense of purpose and the choice to act willingly. The Romanian Orthodox Metropolia of the Americas plays an important role in

<sup>32</sup> Silvina Montrul, *The Acquisition of Heritage Languages*, 306.

<sup>33</sup> *Idem*, 26.

fostering the expression of Romanian as a heritage language, as is evident in the Chicago area. From a linguistic standpoint, Romanian as a heritage language is well preserved by second-generation bilinguals in the United States, reflecting that families, cultural spaces, and, one might add, religious communities, among other factors, create environments that nurture the development and preservation of the heritage language from early childhood through adulthood<sup>34</sup>.

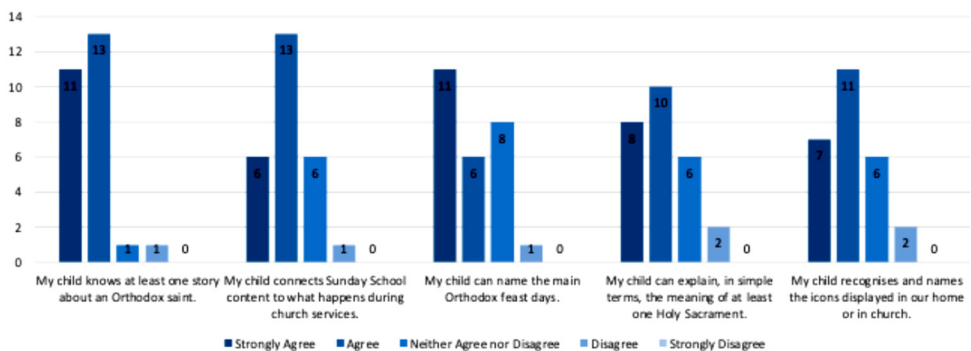
When assessing the reasons for enrolling the children, items were rated on 5-point Likert scales. The main criteria included becoming more familiar with religious education, exposure to religious education, heritage language exposure and development in a religious context, development in a bilingual context, a deeper understanding of faith and the liturgical texts, readiness for active participation in the life of the church, the introduction of a Montessori approach, or a recommendation of the programme by friends or family members. **Figure 5** summarises the main reasons parents enrolled the children. The majority of parents rated exposure to religious education (n=24) and a deeper understanding of the faith (n=25) as very important, followed by active and meaningful participation in the life of the church (n=19), education in a bilingual setting (n=19), a better understanding of the liturgical text in their heritage language (n=17), development of Romanian as a heritage language in a religious context (n=16), interest in the use of the Montessori method in this setting (n=14), and recommendations from members of the community, family or friends (n=11). The only items rated as unimportant were the programme recommended by others (n=2) and the use of the Montessori method (n=2).



**Figure 5. Reasons for participation**

<sup>34</sup> Silvina Montrul, "Heritage language acquisition: contributions from Romanian children", in *Bucharest Working Papers in Linguistics*, 27 (1), (2026), 113.

The acquisition of religious knowledge is assessed across five items based on what has been observed at home (see **Figure 6**), covering the lives of the saints, religious feasts, church services, the Holy Sacraments, and the meaning of icons. The scores indicate that parents observed significant improvement in knowledge of the lives of the saints; the majority strongly agree (n=11) and agree (n=13). There was also strong agreement on understanding the meaning of church services; a large number strongly agree (n=6) and agree (n=13). Similar results were recorded for knowledge of religious feasts (n=11 strongly agree, n=6 agree, n=8 neutral), the meaning of the Holy Sacraments (n=8 strongly agree, n=10 agree, n=6 neutral), and icons and their meaning (n=7 strongly agree, n=11 agree, n=6 neutral). Very few parents disagreed (n=1 and n=2), and none gave answers in the strongly disagree category, reinforcing the premise that the programme’s objectives are already fruitful and the results are positive.



**Figure 6. Religious knowledge**

The parents also assessed lexical complexity, understanding of what was learned, and use of the two languages of instruction (see **Figure 7**). Although many responses fall within a neutral range, an upward trajectory is evident in asking more questions, being more receptive, and addressing questions (n=3 always, n=5 often, n=17 sometimes), and in making unmarked references to what was acquired (n=4 always, n=5 often, n=16 sometimes). They tend to demonstrate their learning more by saying prayers and singing at home (n=3 always, n=10 often, n=9 sometimes) and to show more agency by explaining to siblings and family what was taught at school (n=4 always, n=5 often, n=12 sometimes). Given the bilingual context, it was noted that children tended to use English at home as well to express what was acquired (n=7 often, n=11 sometimes, n=7 rarely).

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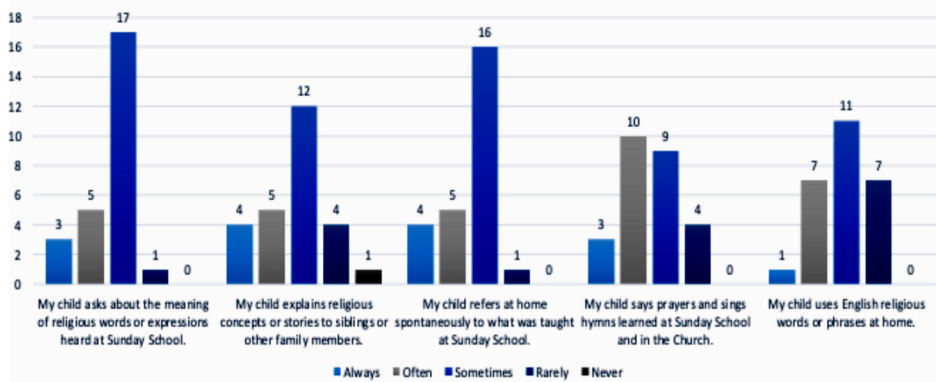
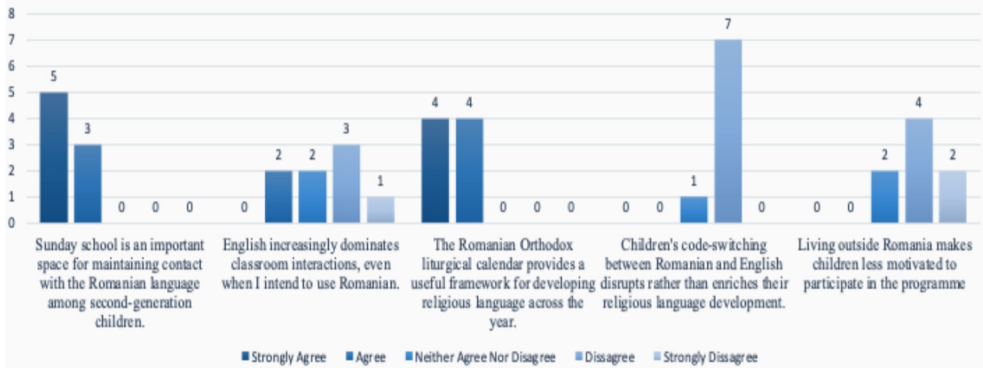


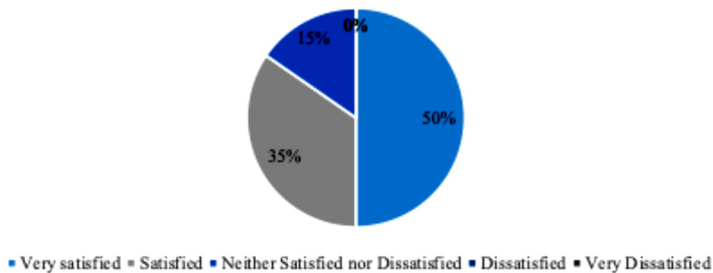
Figure 7. Religious language

The religious vocabulary is acquired not through abstract pedagogical instruction but through lived experience. This approach makes understanding and participation in the community's liturgical life natural, thereby developing the child's religious sense. The teachers assessed the role of the two dominant languages as instruments of communication within the programme. The items were thematically grouped to examine how Romanian, as a heritage language, develops alongside faith among children born and living in the diaspora; see **Figure 8**. The highest scores were recorded for the role of the two languages, Romanian and English. The majority of the teachers believed that a bilingual teaching environment enriches children's experience and makes the learning process more efficient (n=1). However, responses were split on the dominance of English as a language of instruction compared with Romanian, with some agreeing (n=2), some adopting a neutral position (n=2) or disagreeing (n=3), and one respondent strongly disagreeing (n=1). The teachers also strongly agreed (n=5) and agreed (n=3) that the environment envisioned for the children who attend the programme fosters language contact and heritage language development for children born and raised in the diaspora. All the respondents strongly agreed (n=4) and agreed (n=4) that observing the liturgical calendar and integrating it into the curriculum also enhanced language development. Responses were divided regarding the motivation that drives children living in the diaspora to use their heritage language; although many strongly disagreed (n=2) and disagreed (n=4) that they are less motivated, some adopted a neutral position (n=2).



**Figure 8. Diaspora and Romanian as a heritage language**

The parents were asked to assess the programme as a whole, and half of them were very satisfied with it. Of the parents who responded, 35% were satisfied, 15% were neutral, and none of the respondents was dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the programme, reinforcing once more the programme's quality and the efficacy of the approach.

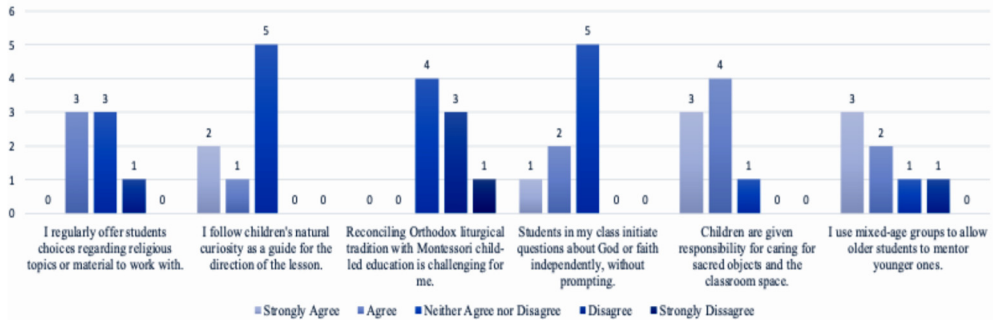


**Figure 9. Overall satisfaction**

### ***4.3. Agency and Core Curriculum Concepts***

The teachers were asked to assess how children manifest agency while working in the prepared environment, as shown in **Figure 10**. Although a good number of the respondents adopted a neutral position on following the natural curiosity instilled in children (n=5), on agency and unprompted initiative in the environment (n=5), on the challenges regarding the use of the Montessori approach (n=4), and on the choices the children have (n=3), the rest of the responses were on a positive track, as most of them either agreed or strongly

agreed that they could see improvement in the way the children perform independently in the environment, show initiative in using the materials, are instinctively curious and do not need prompting for the most part, are responsible in the environment, and engage with their peers of different age groups.



**Figure 10. Agency in children**

The teachers were asked to assess the autonomy demonstrated while working in the prepared environment and to rank the indicators of child agency based on their experience (Question 102). The item that ranked highest was the child's ability to independently choose the work, followed by their innate capacity to connect faith with life in the church and life outside the church, and by their demonstrated willingness and care for the sacred space and the liturgical objects. The last two options were manifestations of mentorship in the child, namely explaining concepts to younger peers and their inquiry in the form of unprompted questions about religious matters. On the same note, the cultivation of moral virtues was also inquired into (Question 90) – the virtues that the teachers find to be most recurrent during classes. The responses were not interpreted in terms of ranking the virtues, but rather in terms of how often they were present during the presentations of the materials or in interactions. The responses placed love (agape) first, followed by forgiveness, then faith, patience and humility, and ending with mercy and truthfulness. Of the virtues, love was the one most frequently used in the teachers' responses.

#### **4.4. Analysis of the Open Responses**

From *Questionnaire 1*, two open-ended questions were selected for analysis in the study. The first open-ended question was *Question 36*: "Describe a specific lesson or activity in which you successfully helped a child acquire

*meaningful religious language. What did you do, and what was the child's response?"* Of the 8 responses, 3 were related to the Holy Sacraments, 2 concerned teaching the Gospel parables, one focused on the Fourth Sunday of Great Lent, the Sunday dedicated to Saint John Climacus (also known as Saint John of the Ladder, the symbol of the ladder representing spiritual virtues), and one on the celebration of Easter; one respondent did not provide an answer. All teacher responses reflected the use of Montessori materials, including symbolic miniature objects on trays, Saint Boxes, and child-led education, as well as presentations within the environment, demonstrating a Montessori-influenced approach to teaching the curriculum and a correlation between the sensitive periods, sensorial experience, and abstract religious concepts. The examples given for meaningful language development through the use of the materials indicate that the intrinsic goal is the acquisition of knowledge and language in a well-designed setting. The examples provided by the teachers in their responses are evidence of deeper understanding and internalisation of the concepts.

The children's responses provide evidence of deep learning and language processing, demonstrating the complex acquisition of vocabulary as a learning goal, with materials scaffolded from the youngest children to the oldest. Agency is evident in the language as well, as the children pose profound, unprompted questions, indicating that they grasp meaning and, as the ladder example shows, are evidence of the internalisation of understanding. When the teachers provided a representation of going up and down the ladder and the steps in cultivating virtues, the meaningful, unprompted question the child asked was, "What do we have to do to get up and keep going through each step of the ladder?" reflecting a deeper understanding. The Holy Sacraments were a shared theme, as they were included in a number of responses, indicating that they are a priority for the teachers in their presentations. The children use the terms appropriately and reflect a deeper understanding in their engagement with the work, labelling and using the vocabulary associated with liturgical objects and using their working memory as a language acquisition function.

The Gospel parables were also present in the responses, and the parable that stood out was *The Multiplication of the Loaves and Fish* (John 6:1)<sup>35</sup>. In the response, the teacher emphasised presenting the parable slowly and simply, using three small objects: a basket, pieces of bread, and fish. The teacher also emphasised blessing the food and ensuring there was enough for everyone. This created an environment in which the child could *observe* and *absorb* independently, without

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<sup>35</sup> King James Bible, (online edition 2017).

being rushed. Given the chance to acquire and internalise the meaning of the parable, one of the children softly expressed: “Jesus made enough for everyone”. The responses indicate that the teachers share the same pedagogical values and that children convey meaning about their experiences in a calm environment. The materials are designed according to the planes of development, and even the teachers expressed their wonder at how even younger children, as young as 3-year-olds, were able to assimilate and use, in context, vocabulary connected to each Sacrament and gain a better understanding of what they are.

In *Questionnaire 2*, parents had to answer one open-ended question, *Question 58: What is working best about the programme for your child?* The vast majority of parents reported that exposure to hands-on materials, the Montessori approach, and the ability to work independently greatly benefited their children, giving them the opportunity to be more engaged, make the learning process more efficient, and find the curriculum easier to understand. Some of the expressions used by parents to describe the role of such materials were *very attractive, simple, engaging, and easy to understand*. The answers were consistent across age groups.

Another recurring theme in the responses was the benefit of a teaching environment in which both Romanian as a heritage language (RHL) and English are used, with English becoming dominant because it is used in instructional settings, as all the children are enrolled in the school system. The format was valued by the majority of respondents, as it contributes to a deeper understanding of the core religious concepts taught, helps preserve cultural and linguistic heritage, and fosters a stronger sense of their identity. In this sense, group open discussions and talks with the older children on religious topics were appreciated; there were also proposals to continue at home with research projects that would enrich their knowledge. Other positive points noted in the answers were the presentations, which were age-appropriate, as the complex concepts and content were adapted and presented in accordance with their cognitive and linguistic developmental stages and needs, thus motivating them.

## **5. Conclusions**

The Romanian Orthodox Programme, *Let the Children Come to Me*, has as its mission to bring children to the Church and, organically and implicitly, to help them experience the life of the Church and the Orthodox faith. The curriculum and methods are designed with the child in mind, aiming to develop agency through well-designed, hands-on materials, quiet exploration, guided discovery, and exploration of natural endowments, awareness, and openness to knowledge.

The assessment of the church teachers indicates that the programme is resourceful and nurturing, with potential for expansion. The majority of parents praised the quality of teaching and the constant care and love shown towards the children, and their responses served as tokens of appreciation for their work and the programme. Many responses also expressed appreciation for age-appropriate materials, valuable opportunities for peer interaction, and the ability to work independently, which motivated them. A smaller number of parents added that a workbook as a complementary instrument would be helpful, as would homework and projects to do at home; some believed that the chance to read in advance some of the texts, in the case of older children, would also be beneficial, as would integrating more of the curriculum designed for the Religion Olympics.

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