

The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd: Where a Child Can Fall in Love with God

Mary Heinrich



For the past year, my 16-year-old daughter, Clare, has been enrolled in our parish process for the Rite of Confirmation. I find that on the eve of this sacrament of initiation, I am reflecting on her journey as a child of God. I recall that as I held her in my arms on the day of her baptism, my prayer was that she would “fall in love with Jesus and with his church.” I am grateful for all the ways she has been formed in faith, whether that occurred at home, in school, or at the parish. There is one particular method, the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, that has been an answer to my prayer as a parent and a catechetical leader, because it allowed her, and subsequently the children in our parish community, to fall in love with God.

EXPERIENCING FAITH THROUGH A CHILD’S EYES

Monica is nine. The seed of faith, alive in her heart, has been deeply sown and nurtured in her since she first came to the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd when she was three. Entering the Atrium, the environment prepared for the religious life of children, she carefully chooses a lovely sheet of paper and the perfect calligraphy pen. She silently sits down at a small table. In peace and with enjoyment she writes:

There’s a place where I can be myself;
a place with treasures on every shelf.
A place to learn about God and pray;
A place where I’d like to be all day.
It’s just called “Atrium,” quite a short name,
but it’s still a wonder all the same.
I just love that little room where I can be myself,
and I can explore as I please,
those treasures on the shelves.

Such poetry from the heart of a child! It is easy to see she enjoys her work. The gospel has been sown lavishly in her heart through the announcement of a catechist who has studied long and hard to serve the religious needs of the child and an environment prepared with simple and essential materials she calls “treasures.” She finds this little room “a wonder.” She loves the freedom found in this place set apart where she can truly “be herself.”

Monica’s experience is at the heart of the work. It is an experience found in children throughout our nation and our world. It is sown with care by the catechists, who share a particular commitment to the religious dignity of children.

THE ATRIUM

The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is an approach to the faith formation of children ages three through 12. It is based on Sacred Scripture, liturgy, and the educational principles of Maria Montessori. The children gather in an Atrium, a prepared environment, containing beautiful yet simple materials. The materials are given to the children to aide their meditation on and absorption of the theme presented whether the theme be the Incarnation, the Paschal Mystery, or the kingdom of God. The term “Atrium” refers to the place in basilicas of the early church where catechumens were prepared. For the child, too, the Atrium is a place of preparation for life in the church. The Atrium is one of the elements that assists the relationship between God and the child.

Catechesis of the Good Shepherd takes special care in preparing the religious environment suited for the child. Everything done in the space is aimed toward helping the child enter into a more authentic relationship with God.

For a virtual tour of a Level I (age 3 – 6 year old) Atrium, go to: stpiushome.org/#!catechesis-of-the-good-shepherd/c18h8.

The materials in the Atrium are often three-dimensional wood representations of a Scripture text, or items that represent what is found in the Mass or the sacrament of baptism. The materials are linked to the biblical and liturgical sources. The materials may include a relief map of the land of Israel, dioramas representing Infancy Narratives or Kingdom Parables or a model altar and articles of the Mass. The most essential truths of the Christian message are presented to the youngest children. After receiving the presentation of the gesture of the Epiclesis, at age four, Clare quietly worked with the chalice and paten, slowly repeating the gesture of the priest at Mass. She then took paper and pencil to draw an image of the priest’s hands making the gesture. On each hand, she drew a large red heart. When asked about the heart, she said, “That is God’s love coming down through the priest’s hands.”

Our parish, Saint Pius X in Urbandale, Iowa, offers both a traditional model of faith formation as well as the Catechesis

of the Good Shepherd. When parents ask me to explain the difference between the two or which one they should choose for their child, I begin by talking about the traditional model, as parents are familiar with the classroom setting, where the children will have a textbook, accompanied by prayer, service music and art expression. In the traditional classroom, the primary relationship is thought to be between the teacher and the child. I explain to the parents that Montessori discovered a third, often silent partner in education: the environment. Even though the environment is silent, it can be intentionally prepared so that it better meets the developmental needs of children.

In the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, instead of reading from a textbook about the altar and the vessels the priest uses during Mass, the Atrium materials include a model altar, with a small model chalice, paten, crucifix and candles along with other articles. The child is offered the names of these articles and given the opportunity to prepare the altar using the articles. It is believed that young children learn best through the work of their hands. In their engagement with three-dimensional materials first given to them in a presentation, children are better able to absorb the Christian message being announced by the catechist or the themes they find most vital in their religious life. Following the presentation, the children are given the opportunity to choose and work with the materials on their own.

Sofia Cavalletti and Gianna Gobbi, who founded the work of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, observed with children that children's way of engaging in relationship with God is very different than for adults. It is during a process of repeating freely chosen work of their hands that children begin to listen to the interior teacher and hear the message of a particular truth. It is through such a sensorial experience, that children are invited into a relationship with God. It is an opportunity to enjoy the love God has for them.

THE ROLE OF THE CATECHIST IN CATECHESIS OF THE GOOD SHEPHERD

The role of the catechist is taken very seriously in the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. In CGS, the catechist is first the preparer and facilitator of the environment. It is an essential part of the catechist's own formation in this method of catechesis to make the materials by hand, as much as possible, that are used by the children in the Atrium, as well as to prepare and care for the environment. In the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, the catechist is both the one who proclaims the kerygma and at the same time, the one who sits side by side with the child and meditates on the meaning of the Scripture or a particular rite of the church. The aim of The National Association of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd speaks to the relationship between the child and the adult in the Atrium. Its purpose statement is: "To involve adults and children in a religious experience in which the religious values of the childhood are predominant, keeping in mind that the contemplative nature of the child indicates to the adult a

certain way of drawing near to God." We offer our parents the opportunity to visit the Atrium and to experience a presentation just as it is offered to the children. Upon entering the Atrium, parents recognize that they want to share this gift with their child.

The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd emphasizes the value of forming the adult catechist in order to best prepare the adult to work with children. There are three levels of formation an adult can receive in order to work with children from the ages of three through 12. Level I formation is for working with children age three to six. Level II formation is for working with children six to nine and Level III formation is for working with children nine to 12. Each formation experience for adults offers a wealth of information on theological, biblical, and liturgical themes as well as the methodology used with the children. A presentation as it is given to the child, is shared with the catechist during the formation course. The catechist also receives background in the vision and discoveries of human development made by Maria Montessori, which gives a particular respect and understanding to children's develop-

RESOURCES FOR CATECHETICAL LEADERS

- * *Like Leaven: Accompanying Children on their Spiritual Journey* by Patricia Coulter.

This book provides a thoughtful, serious look at the adult's formation in this method. Patricia Coulter's research with seven catechists explores the experience of formation for adults who accompany children on their spiritual journey that not only prepares adults to nurture children, but also reveals how children nurture adults through this method of catechesis. Published by The National Association of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd.

- * *The Religious Potential of the Child: Experiencing Scripture and Liturgy with Young Children*, by Sofia Cavalletti.

This book describes an approach to religious formation that is biblical, sacramental, and at the same time, deeply respectful of children. Published by LTP.

- * *The Development of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd: Inside the Atria in Rome*, by Sofia Cavalletti.

This book contains a photographic record of the materials for the three age groups as well as historical photographs, and drawings by the children in Sofia Cavalletti's Atrium *Centro di Catechesi Buon Pastore*, in Rome. The commentary is by Cavalletti, who along with Montessorian Gianna Gobbi, developed this approach to the religious formation of children. Published by LTP. Finalist for the 2015 Excellence in Publishing Awards from *The Association of Catholic Publishers*.



ment. Each formation course is approximately 90 hours. For the catechist beginning a formation course, it takes time to enter into the rhythm of the Atrium. The catechists in my parish community have shared numerous times how this new pace has influenced not only their work with the child, but their home life and their relationships with their families and co-workers.

As a parish catechetical leader, I have found the formation my catechists receive through Catechesis of the Good Shepherd not only prepares them for their role as catechist with children, but also, personally benefits them and deepens their involvement in the life of our parish community. The catechists have often remarked how their own faith is enriched by this formation. Several catechists have gone on to other areas of ministry within our parish community and the background they received in CGS continues to be a gift for our entire parish family. We have presented the baptism materials to parents at baptism preparation, used the altar and baptism materials for those children who are “out of sequence” in their sacramental preparation, presented many of the themes offered in CGS to the adults in RCIA, and to families in our intergenerational events. Parents, both mothers and fathers, speak regularly with other parishioners, with family members, and their co-workers about how they value the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd for their children. I hear them comment

about their son or daughter’s anticipation and joy as they look forward to their time in the Atrium each week.

Adam is four. As he returns to the Atrium after a long summer break, he walks peacefully from shelf to shelf. He lingers at the nativity diorama. His small hand reaches out to gently touch the Good Shepherd material. He looks at the small model chalice. He approaches the prayer table and sits before it and quietly whispers: “I have missed you so much!”

Moments such as this one with Adam, occur as children return to the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd Atrium to contemplate and enjoy their relationship with God. The children who come to the Atrium share a similar enjoyment as they grow in the love and knowledge of God. ■

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