

Catechesis of the Good Shepherd: A Brief Overview

In the early years of the twentieth century, Dr. Maria Montessori discovered a great many things about the development of the human person from conception to maturity through long and intense observation of children throughout the world. She recognized four planes of development, spanning the ages from birth to 24. Her most valuable discoveries were in the field of early childhood education, wherein she pinpointed what she termed "sensitive periods". Her findings have since been validated by scientific brain research.

Using her discoveries, Dr. Montessori established rooms that were specially prepared environments, utilizing her original didactic materials, which enabled children to reach a higher level of development as their inner needs were met. These specially prepared environments have become internationally known and used.

Dr. Montessori believed the pinnacle of her work was reached in the creation of the Atrium, a dedicated space specially prepared to meet the spiritual needs of the child. The use of particular materials and environments affected the child spiritually in a way that almost seemed miraculous to some observers. Dr. Montessori's view was that it was not miraculous but normal - that the child, when ready and when given the freedom, would receive religious instruction in the form of presentations with joy, awe, and often extraordinary understanding.

In the 1950's, Sofia Cavalletti, a Hebrew scholar, and Gianna Gobbi, a Montessori teacher, further developed the work of Maria Montessori and established the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, a way of religious formation now used by Catholics and Protestants worldwide.

The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd presents the most important realities of the Christian faith to the youngest members of the Church. This manner of Christian education assumes that young children have religious potential. That is, since God is already present to them in their deepest being, they are capable of developing both a conscious and intimate relationship with God. They only need the guidance and vocabulary to enable them to become aware of their relationship with God and give expression to it.

This is done by means of a **prepared environment** and a **trained catechist** who reads directly from the Bible and makes presentations to explain the Scripture and Liturgy.

The prepared environment contains materials that are models of things used in the Church's worship such as altar, Eucharist, baptism, liturgical colors, etc. The environment also contains materials relating to the proclamation of the faith such as parables, prophecies, geography of Israel, and the life of Christ. These are manipulatives for use by both the catechist and the child. The trained catechist makes presentations to the child using the materials. These presentations are chosen to convey the essentials of the faith in a manner appropriate to the child's development. The child is then invited to internalize and respond to the presentation by working with the materials themselves. The catechist does not give answers or impart information. The

catechist presents the reality, and asks questions. The catechist assists in the child's own discovery of the meaning. The motto of Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is "Help me fall in love with God by myself."

About the Atrium Levels

The "Atrium" is a place of prayer, prepared especially for children to contemplate the life of Jesus and the Liturgy. Through the use of sensorial materials, the presentations encourage a sense of wonder in the child, a deep love for Jesus as the Good Shepherd, the Scriptures, and the sacramental life of the Church community.

Some of these materials include: infancy narrative figures, a raised surface map of the Land of Israel, a model altar and a model baptismal font. This concrete method of presenting the faith is similar to the way the Church teaches us through the sacraments, holy water, incense, and statues. The children also spend time with Practical Life materials like dishwashing, scooping and pouring exercises, and hammering. These exercises help develop small motor skills, concentration, and their love of work.

In **Level 1, ages 3-6**, the controlling image is Christ the Good Shepherd who loves his sheep and gives everything he is for them. The Good Shepherd knows his sheep and calls them by their name. The child comes to discover who the Shepherd is and who the sheep are. What stands behind all this is the first moment of the covenant, the moment of gift. Level 1 stays focused on the moment of gift with the aim of children coming to a deep enjoyment of it. The enjoyment of the gift of God's own self to the child is the foundation of further religious insight and moral development.

Level 2, ages 6-9, continues the reflection on the moment of gift and begins to awaken in the child the question of their personal response. The controlling image is Christ the True Vine, and the History of the Kingdom of God. The child begins to discover the vast cosmic history of God's plan of salvation and that they have something to contribute to it. Moral sensitivity/awareness begins here and grows with the presentations of Jesus' Maxims, Moral Parables, and Reconciliation. The child's desire to carry out the requests of the Good Shepherd naturally flow from the relationship of loving trust that was established in the previous level.

****Level 3, ages 9-12**, carries the human response further. The controlling image is the Plan of God as worked out in the Bible and human history. The child begins to deal with the advance of the Kingdom and people's opposition to it. The paradigm of Creation-Redemption-Parousia guides a more thorough exploration of Scripture, particularly the Old Testament.

Throughout all 3 levels, the child encounters the essentials of the Faith. All 3 levels include presentations on the Sacraments, the Bible, Geography, Infancy and Passion Narratives, Prophecies, Parables, Maxims in a manner developmentally appropriate. The presentations increase in detail and sophistication as the child matures. However, the role of the catechist as facilitator of the child's own discovery of the meaning of these things for themselves remains throughout. Both the child and the catechist find their faith nourished in this process.

** The Colm Cille Club does not currently offer a Level 3 Atrium but intends to do so in the future. For the time being, a catechism class, visited regularly by priests and religious, is offered to grades 5-8. The fifth grade uses the *Faith and Life Series, Grade 5*. Religious instruction for grades 6-8 is organized around Father Laux's four-part catechism series: *Chief Truths of the Catholic Faith, Mass and the Sacraments, Catholic Morality, and Catholic Apologetics*.

The Role of the Catechist

An interpersonal relationship is always a mystery, and all the more so when that relationship is between God and the Child. We believe that there is a deep bond between God and the child which produces in the child the desire to draw near to God. The catechist's role is to prepare the environment and to make presentations that "call forth" the child's response rather than "pour in" information. They listen with the child and together ask, "God, who are you? How do you love us?" The adult is a co-wonderer with the child as they together enjoy meditating on the questions generated by the Scriptures with the prepared environment as a developmental aid.

In the words of Dr. Sofia Cavaletti, who developed the program, "If we want to help the child draw nearer to God, we should with patience and courage seek to go always closer to the vital nucleus of things. This requires study and prayer. The children themselves will be our teachers if we know how to observe them."

The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd nurtures the child's relationship with God, and educates the child in the faith. As Blessed John Paul II says in his Apostolic Exhortation *On Catechesis in Our Time*, "The definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch, but in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ."