



CATECHESIS OF THE GOOD SHEPHERD

General Introduction

Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is a method or approach to the spiritual and religious formation of children—not a program. It originated in 1954 in Rome, Italy. Sofia Cavelletti, a reputable Hebrew and scripture scholar, known for her expertise in Jewish-Catholic relations and liturgy, was asked by her neighbor to give some religious instruction to her 7 year old son. In collaboration with Gianna Gobbi, she drew on Montessori principles to undertake this task.

Maria Montessori was an Italian medical doctor who was given what was considered the impossible responsibility of overseeing the welfare of poor children of factory workers in the early 1900's. Their living conditions and health were near destitute. Over time, she developed an approach to education that produced remarkable results, capturing world-wide attention. Montessori methods have had a tremendous influence on the education of children ever since as evidenced by the way that Montessori schools have thrived in many parts of the world.

Cavelletti's aforementioned background can be seen to have had an influence in the way Montessori principles have been adapted to catechesis. For example, the Word of God is central in Catechesis of the Good Shepherd and the entire curriculum, directly or indirectly, is geared to leading children to an experience of prayer and preparing them for their participation in communal worship. This reflects Cavelletti's work in scripture and liturgy. Moreover, Catechesis of the Good Shepherd relies on the "rabbinical method"—a way of turning a question back onto the questioner as a means of calling forth deeper reflection in the listener without actually giving an answer. There are many instances of this in the gospels. When Jesus is confronted about his disciples' failure to observe the requirements of the Law on the Sabbath, Jesus replies, "Is it better to do good on the Sabbath or evil?" (Mk 3:4) Faced with grumblings from the scribes and Pharisees over his frequent association with sinners, Jesus asks, "What man among you having a hundred sheep and losing one of them would not leave the ninety-nine in the desert and go after the lost one until he finds it?" (Lk 15:4) This open-ended method of questioning is more apt to retain the sense of mystery that is necessarily a part of any genuine reflection on the truths of faith. Cavelletti expounds on this further:

It is not a matter of indifference which method we use, because the method is not a neutral thing, like an empty box into which we can put anything whatsoever. The method has a spirit, a spirit which interacts with the content, either aiding the exposition or actually distorting the content's nature.

In order for catechesis to have a truly living character it is necessary to present it to children not as a "ready made" product, already complete and fully elaborated, but rather to offer children sources or suggestions for their reflection and meditation. We can contrast two methods, the method of definitions and the parable method. Definition, and the word itself says what it does, attempts to define and hence to limit that which is by its very nature illimitable, because what we are trying to communicate to children is that Mystery is infinite. Therefore, there is, I would say, a counterposition, an incompatibility of nature between the definition and the message transmitted, namely, the knowledge of mystery. Father Alonso-Schoekel of the Biblical Institute states that we need not search for the best definition but that the definition itself is mistaken as it is defining, delimiting.

In place of definition we put parable, which may be compared to a window opening onto ever expanding horizons. The “story” of the parables guides us toward an endless research. The parables two elements, one from everyday life and the other transcendent, act as tracks or rails along which our reflection advances always farther and aid us to meditate always more deeply. This is not to say that with the parable we are meant to grab whatever thoughts pass through our minds; instead we need to follow this guide, provided by the two elements of the parable. In contrasting definition and parable, a different image comes to mind: in dealing with definitions we think of a large, somewhat intimidating adult who has written something of little importance in a small book, which is held in front of a very small child who must receive what the adult has written there. The child, then, is receiving a “second hand” experience, for though it is likely that it was an experience for the adult to write the book, it is still only his/her own experience. We need not transmit our own experience to children; we must help the child meet the mystery of God. (Sofia Cavalletti, “Spiritual Education: The Parable Method,” *NAMTA Quarterly*, Winter, 1978)

Thus, what Catechesis of the Good Shepherd proposes is to respond to the felt desire of children to draw closer to God in their own way: “Help me do it by myself.” (Sofia Cavalletti, *The Good Shepherd and the Child: A Joyful Journey*, p. 23) In other words, it acknowledges and respects the relationship the child already has with God and encourages others to avoid becoming an obstacle in that relationship.

Another hallmark of Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is the carefully prepared environment called the “atrium.” (In the plural, it is “atria.”) In the dictionary, an atrium is the hall or court in front of the entrance to ancient temples. It is also the place where catechumens were instructed in the faith before becoming full members of the community in early Christianity. In similar fashion, the atrium prepares for the child’s entrance into the Church. As such, the atrium is not referred to as a classroom but as a special place where prayer and learning can be experienced.



The atrium contains manipulative materials that correspond to objects from church (e.g. baptismal font, altar and paschal candle). However, these are made smaller than child size and closer to miniature for a specific reason: they are not for pretend or play. They are there to make the lessons the child experiences more concrete. Presentations on geography, scripture, or practical life skills are also accompanied by manipulative materials. For historical narratives (e.g. the visitation or the presentation in the temple, etc.) three-dimensional figures are used while the parables (e.g. mustard seed or pearl of great price) use two-dimensional figures. Through manipulation of the materials with their hands, the children are able to make the lessons part of their real, internal knowledge. All

scriptural lessons are accompanied by a booklet with related verses taken from the lectionary so the child hears the Word of God just as it is proclaimed at Mass. To foster the child’s connection with the wider community further, the presentation of materials follows a cycle based on the liturgical calendar of the Church year. After the lessons have been presented, the materials remain available on shelves for the children to work with on their own.

Unquestionably, one of the most distinctive and endearing features of Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is the joy the children experience as they gather with others around the prayer table or as they become absorbed in their work in the atrium. For instance, a catechist relates the story of what happened with Peter, age three, a few days after hearing the words from the Gospel about the Good Shepherd. He told his mother, "We will always walk with the Shepherd and he will lead us and we will follow and we will not follow a stranger because we know the Shepherd's voice and we will never walk alone." Then he paused and said with enthusiasm, "Aren't those great rules? Don't you just love them?!"

This same enthusiasm is expressed in another story of an older girl, age eleven, as she reflected on her role in the history of salvation, what we call "the blank page" in the story of the Kingdom of God. She wrote: "I know I, with millions of other people, create one loving, giving blank page. This page is for me to paint and to write on, on my own. Though other people see a blank page in front of them, I still must do my part. Maybe it is just helping the elderly, maybe there's more! I won't know until God tells me. But when he does I will fill my space in the big blank page. All little parts do big, big things!" Then she drew a heart and a star and wrote in large letters: "MY GOD LOVES ME!"

On being read a verse from the Bible, a four-year-old boy nodded towards the Scriptures and said, "That's good stuff. What else do you have in there?"

Catechesis of The Good Shepherd in The Diocese Of Columbus

Catechesis of the Good Shepherd has spread to 19 countries from its humble beginnings in Italy. Since being introduced to this country in 1984, Catechesis of the Good Shepherd has grown exponentially. There are literally hundreds of atria operating throughout the United States in Catholic and other Christian settings.

One of the best ways to become familiar with Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is to visit an atrium, a specially prepared environment where the catechesis takes place. The following parishes/schools are presently engaged in presenting Catechesis of the Good Shepherd: St. Ladislav, St. Andrew, St. Margaret of Cortona, St. Francis of Assisi and St. Thomas More Newman Center.

All three levels of Catechesis of the Good Shepherd have been correlated with the 2001 version of the *Religion Graded Course of Study K-12 (RGCS)* with the help of catechetical leaders and catechists from some of the above parishes. An updated correlation of the three levels will be undertaken with the current 2006 version of the *RGCS P-12* in the near future.



If you would like to schedule a visit to an atrium or learn more about Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, contact Sheila Murphy at the Office of Religious Education and Catechesis (smurphy@cducation.org or 614-221-1464). For more information, you can also visit the website of the National Association of Catechesis of the Good Shepherd at www.cgsusa.org.