

The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd



A Way of
Experiencing
God

Barbara Matera

THE CALL

When God called Abraham, asking him to go to “a land that I will show you,” the man of faith left everything he knew and followed. Like Abraham, the founders of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd—Sofia Cavalletti and Gianna Gobbi—left the comfort and familiarity of lives they had led in response to a call. Their call came not from heaven or a burning bush—it came from a group of children.

Sofia Cavalletti, born into a noble family, had grown up in Rome just across the river from St. Peter’s. An avid student at Rome’s La Sapienza University, she had earned a doctoral degree in Hebrew and Comparative Semitic Languages, mastering French, English, and New Testament Greek along the way. After extensive study of the Hebrew Scriptures with Eugenio Zolli, she had joined him as a colleague at La Sapienza University and was beginning to establish a reputation for her scholarship.

One day a friend asked Cavalletti to help prepare her son Paolo for first Communion. She initially protested that she was not the right person for this task: she had only worked with adults and would not know how to teach a child. When the friend persisted, she agreed to meet with the boy, with the understanding that this would be a temporary arrangement.

On a March afternoon in 1954, Paolo and a couple of his friends arrived at her apartment in *via degli Orsini*, the childhood home she still inhabited. Paolo announced that he would not be returning after this lesson, since this was his only free afternoon. Cavalletti, formed in the rabbinical method of reading Scripture, opened the Bible to chapter one of Genesis and began to ponder the words of the text with the children. To her surprise, two hours went by and they were still on the first page of the Bible. She noticed that when it was time for Paolo to leave, his eyes welled up with tears.

The following week Paolo returned with more friends. As the weeks passed, the sessions continued to focus on the Bible until one week the group received a visit from Gianna Gobbi, who recently had been introduced to Cavalletti. Gobbi had been trained to work with toddlers by Maria Montessori, the Italian physician-turned-educator. Later, Gobbi had assisted Montessori with training courses for new teachers and was now directress of a Montessori school in Rome.

Gobbi showed up at Cavalletti’s session with small models of an altar, the sacred objects used at Mass, and the priests’ vestments. The children were permitted to work with these materials as children in Montessori schools work with “sensorial materials” to help them develop skills in math or reading. The children responded with such great joy and enthusiasm—one child asking if he could come to Cavalletti’s apartment for a

lesson every day—that Cavalletti and Gobbi decided to open a catechetical center where they could observe children and respond to their religious needs. That fall, these two Catholic laywomen opened the Maria Montessori Center for Catechesis in Cavalletti’s apartment.

THE EXPERIMENT

Cavalletti, with her knowledge of Scripture, and Gobbi, with her knowledge of the child and Montessori educational methods, invited children to their Center for Catechesis and began to experiment with a curriculum, seeking to discover which themes of the Christian message met the vital needs of the child. Together they made simple but attractive materials that they hoped would assist the child’s personal meditation following a presentation on a scriptural or liturgical theme.

They called the prepared environment where they met with the children the “atrium,” after the part of the church building where catechumens in the early Church were prepared for full participation in the life of the Church. They borrowed the term from Montessori, who had used it to describe an experimental learning environment she had created in Barcelona in 1915 to nourish the liturgical life of Catholic children.

Cavalletti and Gobbi grouped the children by ages of developmental similarity, as is the practice in Montessori education. In choosing themes, they were mindful of the developmental stage of the children who would be hearing each presentation. After selecting themes, the next and most important step was to observe the children carefully.

If the children consistently responded to a presentation with serenity and joy—whether expressed in words, artwork, or reverent silence before the mystery, Cavalletti and Gobbi added the presentation to the work for that age group. If the children either did not pay attention or were distracted by non-essential details, the presentation was removed from the work for that age group.



Materials for the atrium were decided upon by observing the children’s interaction with them.

Photo © John Zich

Choice of materials was also determined by observing the children's interaction with them. Gobbi describes the essential role of the materials:

Our relationship with God is largely built through concrete, sensory experiences. This is a deep, vital need of the human being, and God honors this need by communicating with us through what is perceivable: through creation, through events in salvation history, through the Person of the Son, the Word, and God's continued presence in the sacraments. Thus, a concrete, perceivable "material" is always involved in God's self-communication to us.¹



The environment where the children meet is called the atrium, after the part of the church where catechumens were once prepared for full participation in the Church.

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For the same reason, Gobbi designed catechetical materials as "a concrete means of transmitting the Word of God and coming to know the Person who has spoken in the Bible and is present to us in the liturgy."² When Cavalletti and Gobbi observed that a material they had developed was not being used by the children, they removed that material and placed it in a closet with other failed experiments.

Cavalletti wrote in 1999:

At the beginning we reacted with some fatigue, because it was hard to see that themes that had been studied with great care, materials made with some effort, were of no use and had to be discarded. But later, we realized how beautiful was the path the children were showing us, preventing us from being lost in secondary things and intellectual complications. At that moment the fatigue was changed into a hymn of praise and gratitude.³

After many years, they concluded that "the themes to which the children have led us . . . are . . . the most essential points of the Christian message."⁴

Eventually, three levels emerged: Level I for children three to six years old, Level II for six to nine years old, and Level III for children nine to twelve years old. As the curriculum took shape and the universal appeal of the parable of the Good Shepherd became evident, the work of the Center—at times called the Parable Method or the Method of Signs—began to be known as the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd.

TRANSMISSION OF THE CATECHESIS TO ADULT CATECHISTS

By neither accident nor convention does the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd rely on oral transmission of its method and

content. Since the Catechesis is not a program but rather a way of experiencing God with children, it can only be transmitted from heart to heart and from spirit to spirit.

A person who attends a Catechesis of the Good Shepherd formation course hoping to learn how to give the presentations to children soon finds that he or she is being invited into a deeper relationship with God by means of these same presentations. As each successive presentation lifts up yet another scriptural or liturgical truth, the course participant is drawn into an ever expanding realization of the gifts that God has poured out on humanity from the beginning and the gifts that God has given us since our birth. Following each presentation, the formation leader meditates with the participants on the mystery just proclaimed, praying with the participants while also modeling the way the catechist will one day pray with the children in the atrium. It is crucial that those being formed as catechists experience for themselves God's invitation to covenant love through the presentations, so when they share the presentations with children, they are aware that God is extending that same invitation to the children.

The catechist's formation does not end when the last presentation has been given at a course. The catechist needs to spend time observing in an atrium to begin to see how children respond to the Word presented. Importantly, they witness the catechist's role of proclaimer of the Word who steps aside when the children are absorbed in working with the materials and allows them to listen to the voice of Christ the Teacher.

Part of the catechist's meditative preparation is to make the materials (small wooden figures, maps, booklets, laminated cards, and so on) to be used in the atrium. Catechists with different gifts can collaborate on this work, assisted by members of the extended faith community who have the desired skills and tools.

Finally, for each of the presentations, a catechist writes an “album page”—a summary that includes sources (e.g., Bible, Roman Missal, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*), a doctrinal point, direct and indirect aims, an outline of the presentation and possible points of reflection, and a description of the materials for the children’s use. Those pages, which are sometimes written together as a group during formation courses, are then assembled into an album. Each page in a catechist’s album is a living document that is a record of both the catechist’s continuing meditation and the children’s experience of that mystery in the atrium.

All this work can seem daunting in the face of busy schedules that often prevent catechists from devoting even a few hours of time for a workshop or certification course. The strange phenomenon is that participants in a 90-hour Level I course that certifies one to work only with three- to six-year-olds often express their disappointment when the course is over; some even sit through the entire course a second time. After the first weekend of a Level I course in which I was assisting, one participant wrote, “Thank you so much!!! Was a beautiful experience of God.” Another wrote, “This course is fulfilling such a spiritual need in myself, as well as, I think, in the Church. It is really a prayer answered.”

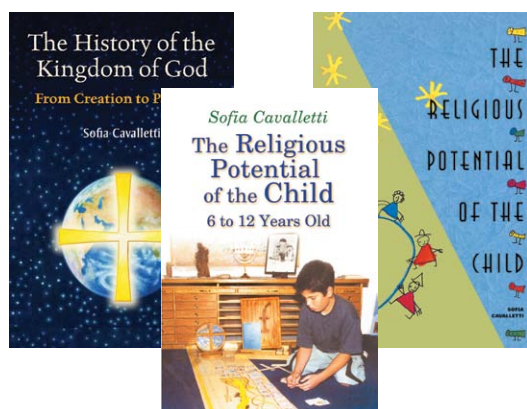
THE SPREAD OF THE CATECHESIS TO NORTH AMERICA

Cavalletti and Gobbi initially offered courses for local catechists who were interested in their work at the Center. A course would include not only an introduction to the presentations and materials, but also study of scriptural and liturgical themes; principles of child development; and Montessori pedagogy. From 1967 to 1972, they offered courses through the Diocese of Rome, attended mostly by nuns who took the Catechesis to other neighborhoods in Rome.

In 1975, Cavalletti accepted an invitation to give a course in the United States. The five-week course, covering the full range of three to twelve-year-old children, was offered at a Montessori training center in St. Paul, Minnesota. Of the 25 participants, five went on to study with Cavalletti and Gobbi in Rome.

One of those was Patricia Coulter, the first Canadian to be trained in the Catechesis. After completion of a two-year course with Cavalletti and Gobbi, she introduced the Catechesis at the parish level in Toronto. In 1978, Cavalletti made the first of several visits to Canada that helped to lay the groundwork for its acceptance in that country. On that visit she gave a two-week overview of the Catechesis at the University of St. Michael’s College in Toronto. In 1984 she met with Bishops Marcel Gervais and Aloysius Ambrozic, and in 1986, returned with Gianna Gobbi to give a Level I course in Toronto.

In the meantime, Cavalletti had returned to the United States in 1978 to speak at a Montessori Conference in Houston, Texas. A young Montessori teacher named Rebekah Rojcewicz, after attending her workshop on the spirituality of children, wrote in her pocket diary: “Today my life is changed. This is for me. I will go to Rome and study it, and it will become mine.”



Biblical scholar Sofia Cavalletti’s books offer a glimpse into the religious life of the atrium and an understanding of the story of salvation.

She began to correspond with Cavalletti and the following year, after fulfilling a teaching obligation, Rojcewicz headed to Rome, where she completed a two-year course covering all three levels of the Catechesis (ages three to twelve).

The course, conducted in Italian, comprised a weekly cycle of lecture, observation of children in the atrium level, and independent time for making materials and writing album pages.

Upon her return to the United States in 1981, Rojcewicz began to work at The Christian Family Montessori School, a new school in Mount Rainier, Maryland, that would offer the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd.

For the next two summers, Rojcewicz and Cavalletti teamed up for a Level I course in Washington, D.C. The participants, who came from across the country, committed to forming themselves into a National Association. After Cavalletti returned to give a Level II course in St. Paul during the summers of 1984 and 1985, seeds began to take root as catechists took the Catechesis back to their hometowns.

The remaining piece of the North American puzzle is Mexico, where the Catechesis has met with an overwhelmingly positive reception. When Cavalletti traveled to Mexico City in 1976 to give a course, she invited experienced and novice catechists alike “to go deeper, to discover an authentically biblical image of the God who loves us, and to live in a new way a real encounter, through the eyes and hearts of children.”⁵ Cavalletti returned to Mexico to give intensive training courses for four consecutive summers between 1979 and 1982, sometimes bringing with her Gobbi or other collaborators from the Rome atrium.

Maria Christlieb, one of the first Mexicans to study with Cavalletti and Gobbi in Rome, was there at the same time as Rojcewicz, spending an additional year studying Montessori education in Perugia before returning to Mexico. She and the other catechists who had studied in Rome began to offer formation courses in Mexico in an attempt to satisfy the growing demand for new courses. At times they could not keep up with the demand and prospective catechists had to wait. A formation leader explains that “the spread of this work was driven by the joy of the children and the joy of the catechists.”⁶ The work spread from its base in Mexico City and Chihuahua City to nearly 40 states throughout the country.

ECUMENICAL SPREAD OF THE CATECHESIS

In 1985, a great surge of interest in the Catechesis began among members of the Episcopal Church. Today, nearly half of the 1,000 atria in the United States are in an Episcopal environment, with a small number also found among Presbyterian, Methodist, Lutheran, Orthodox, and other Christian faith traditions. The ecumenical appeal and spread of the Catechesis pleased Cavalletti, who had a commitment to ecumenism and served as a member of the Ecumenical Commission for the Diocese of Rome. In 1997, she gathered catechists from around the world for an ecumenical retreat in Assisi, Italy. The retreat, attended by Roman Catholic and Episcopal catechists alike, surfaced a deep longing for unity, and a shared hope that the Catechesis might hasten its realization.

I felt that same hope at a recent National Association gathering of catechists and formation leaders in Atlanta. A monsignor from the Archdiocese of Atlanta celebrated Mass for us, and during his homily he sang the praises of the Catechesis, calling it the answer to Pope John Paul II's call for a "new evangelization" in the Church. In describing a Level I formation course he was taking, he referred to his Episcopal formation leader as his "mentor." Although it was painful to see his mentor remain in her pew when the Roman Catholics in the group came forward to receive Eucharist, still the monsignor's words struck a hopeful note.

BOOKS THAT RELATE THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF THE CATECHESIS

Early catechists who studied at the Center for Catechesis in Rome had access to the book *Il Potenziale Religioso del Bambino* that Cavalletti had written about the spiritual life of three- to six-year-old children and their interaction with God in the atrium setting. This book and several others by Cavalletti and Gobbi did not appear in English until many years later. As the Catechesis began to spread in English-speaking countries, Cavalletti and Gobbi called upon their new colleagues—Coulter and Rojcewicz—to translate their books.

The founders, both of whom placed great importance on the oral transmission of the Catechesis through formation courses, never wrote instruction manuals that described presentations and materials in such detail that the course could be bypassed. Rather, they wrote about what they had observed and the theological and pedagogical underpinnings of their work.

In 1983, Cavalletti's *The Religious Potential of the Child* made its appearance in English and quickly became an indispensable resource for catechists and those in formation. Its reprinting in 1992⁷ helped it to reach a larger audience.

Gobbi wrote about the Montessori principles at work in the atrium in *Listening to God with Children*, hurriedly translated and circulated in 1992, but finally published in 1998.⁸ The book is a necessary guide for the adult who hopes to interact and pray with children in an atrium setting.

A collaborative effort among Cavalletti, Coulter, Gobbi, and Dr. Silvana Q. Montanaro, *The Good Shepherd & The Child: A Joyful Journey* was published in 1994, and then reprinted in

1996.⁹ Another fundamental resource for the catechist, this book discusses in detail several of the key presentations of Level I, including the parable of the Good Shepherd, and the Kingdom, Baptism, and Eucharist.

Catechists working with six- to twelve-year-old children were overjoyed when three additional Cavalletti books were released in English. *The Religious Potential of the Child: 6 to 12 Years Old*,¹⁰ published in 2002, is a sequel that describes and explains the expanded themes presented to children who now have the capacity to think about time and synthesize what they have learned.

In *History's Golden Thread*,¹¹ which appeared in 1998, Cavalletti the Scripture scholar is in her element, explaining typology and other methods of biblical exegesis. She then applies those methods to Old and New Testament themes alike, underlining the common thread that runs through all of salvation history—the plan of God to bring all creation into cosmic communion.

*Living Liturgy*¹² is Cavalletti's reflection on the Mass and sacraments, including their ritual and theological roots in the Jewish tradition. It is a necessary volume for catechists who are working with children in the Level II or III atrium.

The revised edition of *History's Golden Thread*, now titled *The History of the Kingdom of God, Part I: From Creation to Parousia* came out this spring, and the revised *Living Liturgy*, titled *The History of the Kingdom of God, Part II: Liturgy in the Building of the Kingdom*, will be out in Spring 2013. These new titles express the dynamic relationship Cavalletti so clearly saw between Scripture and liturgy.

Part I includes new content in the chapter on miracles, the fruit of a long meditation by Cavalletti in the last years of her life that is manifested in powerful new materials recently added to the Level III atrium work. Part II adds Cavalletti's personal reflection on the Lord's Prayer to the section on prayer; it also makes some changes to the section on the Eucharist. The volume begins with a rich new Preface on liturgical history in the Church.

A lovely book that can serve as an introduction to the Catechesis is *Catechesis of the Good Shepherd: Essential Realities*,¹³ a collection of essays by the founders, catechists, and former students as they look back on 50 years of the Rome atrium.

THE JOURNEY ENDS; THE BLESSING CONTINUES

Cavalletti lost her friend and collaborator, Gianna Gobbi, in January 2002. Continuing her work after Gobbi's death, Cavalletti revised books, wrote articles for catechist journals, and even initiated a new means for a budding international council (*Consiglio Internazionale*) of catechists to communicate with her and each other. These newsletters, called *foglietti*, would feature contributions from Cavalletti, stories about the spread of the Catechesis to new countries, accounts of interactions with children in the atrium, and instructions on materials revisions. Cavalletti was aware that the Catechesis was "a living thing [which] like all living things, continues to develop,"¹⁴ and she continued to play a vital role in its growth with her guidance, encouragement, and prayer.

In 2007, the religious order that Mother Teresa founded, the Missionaries of Charity, requested a formation course in Panama. Within a year, the sisters had opened an atrium in 14 locations around that country, one of them serving 263 indigenous children between the ages of three and thirteen. A 2008 *foglio* reported the good news with this observation:

The Missionaries of Charity work with the least of the least in the evangelical sense. And their collaboration opens, for our Catechesis, the gates to the most fertile soil for the Word of the Gospel.¹⁵

The best news was yet to come. One spring day in 2009, Cavalletti received visitors to her home, three Missionaries of Charity. They had come to tell her that the previous summer at their general chapter, the religious order had decided to adopt the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd both for their catechetical work with children and in the formation of their sisters. When Cavalletti asked, “What have you found in CGS that is different from other catechesis?” their answer was “contemplation.” Cavalletti could only respond with the words of the Magnificat, and in a special *foglio*, she invited catechists around the world to join in her song of praise.

In late 2009, as Cavalletti’s health declined and she could no longer participate in either the atrium sessions or adult formation courses, the site of the atrium was moved to a convent in Rome in *Via Alessandria*, the home of Francesca Cocchini, a former child of the Rome atrium who had become a close collaborator with Cavalletti.

Cavalletti died peacefully in her home in August 2011, just days after her 94th birthday. She had reflected near the end of her life that her work with Gobbi “was not born in our own heads, nor did it come from our own hands; rather, it has all been a GIFT.” It is a gift that Cavalletti received with great joy and deep gratitude. She would have remained, in her words, “a mouse in a library” but for the call she received in 1954.

It is no coincidence that Cavalletti had a deep connection to the biblical patriarch Abraham, once devoting an entire catechetical year to exploring his story with her Level III children. Abraham had left his homeland and traveled far, with a promise from God that he would not only be blessed but that he would also be a blessing to many. Although Cavalletti never had to leave her home—dying in the same apartment where she was born and where she had hosted countless children and adults—God called her to leave the world of academia and enter the world of children. In this place she found endless delight and the opportunity to hear God’s voice with and through the children.

The willingness of Cavalletti and Gobbi to answer God’s call, without knowing where they were being led, has released a great blessing that outlives them. The Catechesis can now be found in 37 countries on five continents. It has touched the lives of children with special needs, children on American Indian reservations, and children in migrant worker camps. The addition of the Missionaries of Charity means that 5,000 sisters serving in 142 countries will now introduce the Catechesis to the “poorest of the poor.” Already, U.S. catechists have assisted with formation courses for the Missionaries of Charity in the Philippines,

the Caribbean, the Russian region, and Eastern Europe; and the sisters have established many atria.

The blessing does not end with the children. It extends to adult catechists who through this Catechesis have experienced the love of God through the eyes, the voice, and the work of the child; to the Church that has been given a new way of looking at the Bible and liturgy; and to Christians everywhere as it has stirred up hope that one day, as Christ prayed, we all “may be one” (John 17:11). ♦

Notes

1. Gianna Gobbi, “The Meaning, Importance and Limitations of our Catechetical Materials,” *The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd* 10 (2001).
2. Gobbi, “Catechetical Materials,” p. 4.
3. Sofia Cavalletti, “Discovering the Real Spiritual Child (Part 1),” *The NAMTA Journal*, 12 (Spring 1999).
4. Sofia Cavalletti, “Searching Among Memories,” *Consiglio Internazionale Foglio*, no. 18, p. 3 (2009).
5. Lupita Palifox, “A History of Growth in Joy,” in *Catechesis of the Good Shepherd: Essential Realities*, ed. Tina Lillig (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2004), p. 73.
6. Palifox, “Growth in Joy,” p. 74.
7. Sofia Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child*, trans. Patricia M. Coulter and Julie M. Coulter (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1992).
8. Gianna Gobbi, *Listening to God with Children*, trans. Rebekah Rojcewicz (Loveland, OH: Treehaus Communications, 1998).
9. Sofia Cavalletti et al., *The Good Shepherd & The Child: A Joyful Journey* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1996).
10. Sofia Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child: 6 to 12 Years Old*, trans. Rebekah Rojcewicz and Alan R. Perry (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2002).
11. Sofia Cavalletti, *History’s Golden Thread*, trans. Rebekah Rojcewicz (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1998).
12. Sofia Cavalletti, *Living Liturgy*, trans. Patricia A. Coulter and Julie Coulter-English (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1998).
13. Tina Lillig, ed., *Catechesis of the Good Shepherd: Essential Realities* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2004).
14. Sofia Cavalletti, “From Sofia,” *The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd*, p. 4 (2009).
15. Sofia Cavalletti, “An Important Date,” *Consiglio Internazionale Foglio* No. 9, 3(2008).

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A Glimpse into an Atrium

Barbara Matera

It is late September in our weekly session of Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. Fifteen “Level II” (ages six to nine) children have gathered in the prayer corner of our “atrium,” the specially prepared environment where we meet. Since the presentation for the day is “The Synthesis of the Kingdom of God Parables,” we are looking closely at Jesus’s parables of the mustard seed, precious pearl, growing seed, leaven and hidden treasure.

When it is time to reflect on the hidden treasure, a child reads from the Bible: “The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure buried in a field, which a person finds and hides again and out of joy goes out and sells all that he has and buys that field” (Matthew 13:44). I hold up a small red treasure box and say, “Would you like to see what is inside?” I open it and they observe, “The box is empty!” “Yes,” I agree. “Jesus didn’t tell us what the hidden treasure was. What do you think it might be?”

Ryan, a first grader, says, “I think it is the Spirit of God.” Bridget, a second grader, says, “Jesus risked his life—he gave up everything for us. We are the treasure.” Katie, a second grader, looks at me with wide eyes and says, “When the man opened it, God’s light came pouring out, and he knew he would sell everything for this treasure.”

After fourteen years in the atrium with the children, I am no longer surprised to hear such profound comments when listening to Scripture with the children. I am convinced that children respond as they do because the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd goes directly to the source, the living Word of God, and lets the children drink deeply from it.

Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is offered to children starting at age three. Since the children are grouped by ages of developmental similarity, the “Level I” atrium is for children between three and six years old. Each week they take off their shoes and put on slippers before entering the atrium: this is holy ground, a place of prayer. Into this space the Holy Spirit is invited to be the true Teacher of all present. Whether the children are listening to God’s Word, working with materials we have placed in the room to aid meditation, or singing together, all is prayer in the atrium.

The most essential truths of the Christian message are proclaimed to Level I children. Those truths are drawn not just from Scripture, but also from the other great treasure of the Church—the liturgy. One of the first presentations introduces the liturgical seasons of the Church, including a discussion of the vestments “Father” wears at different times of the year. As we proceed through the school year, we observe those seasons in the atrium.

During Advent, we ponder the words of the prophets who described a coming Messiah, and hear the words of the “Hail Mary” proclaimed by the angel Gabriel and Mary’s cousin Elizabeth. The children also study a simple globe with one red

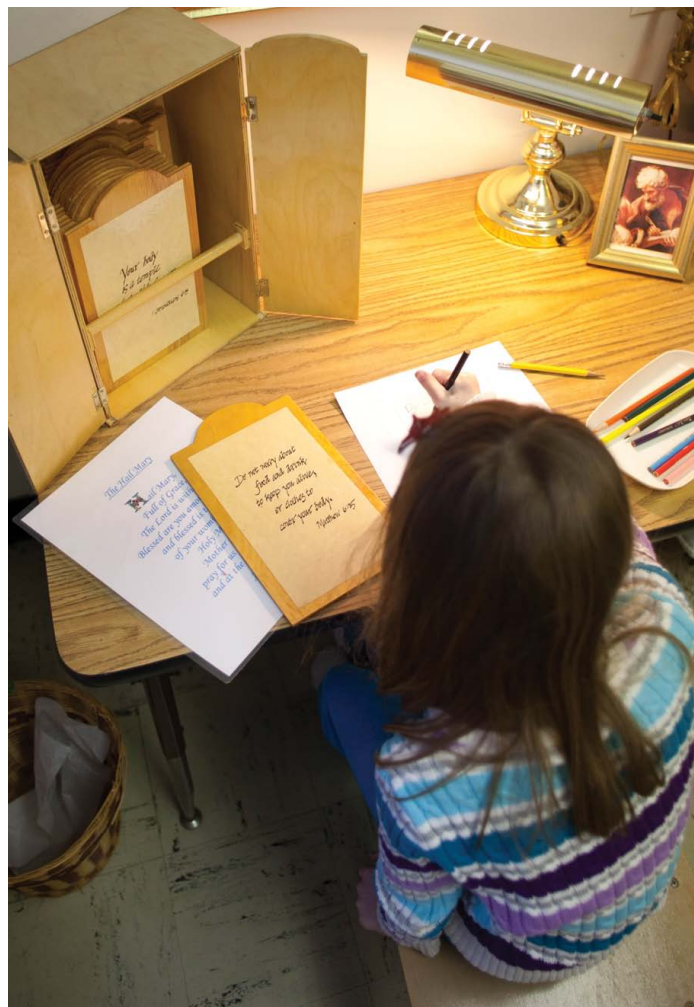


Photo © John Zichi

A child in the atrium with six- to nine-year-olds might spend time copying The Maxims, which highlight moral directives of Jesus and help the children examine their conscience.

dot marking the land of Israel, and wonder why God chose such a small place to send his Son. When we return to the atrium after Christmas, the children celebrate that the feast finally has arrived by changing the color of our prayer table cloth to white and processing around the atrium while singing Christmas carols.

In Lent, we listen to the Gospel account of the Last Supper. The children then work with clay figures of Jesus and his apostles gathered around a small wooden table as they remember the words Jesus spoke that never before had been spoken at a Passover supper: “This is my body.” “This is my blood.” The children also reflect on Jesus’s Passion and Death while working with a model of the City of Jerusalem as it looked at the time of Jesus. To celebrate Easter, we process again—this time with a model of the paschal candle, singing “Christ our Light/Thanks be to God!” At our final meeting each year we commemorate Pentecost by lighting seven red candles—one for each gift of the

Holy Spirit. After we meditate on these gifts that we received at Baptism, each child chooses one and asks to be strengthened in that gift during the summer.

In addition to becoming aware of liturgical seasons, the children gain greater understanding of what they will see and hear at Mass. They learn the correct names of the objects of the altar, and never tire of setting the model altar themselves and naming the articles. They know that we have a crucifix to remind us that Jesus died for us; and that we light candles to remember that Jesus rose from the dead, never to die again! We also meditate with the children on the gestures of the priest during Mass, including preparation of the chalice, lavabo, epiclesis, and offering. Our parish priests have admitted that they will never celebrate Mass the same after seeing some of these presentations and remembering the answer of a child when asked, “Why do you think the priest adds a few drops of water to the wine?” “It means we’re all mixed up with God.”

After each presentation, the catechist—who also has been “listening to God” along with the children—asks for a prayer response. Children may sit in silent awe. When the youngest children pray aloud, it is almost exclusively a prayer of thanks and praise. Sometimes spoken words are not enough; they just want to sing. After our group meditation, the children are free to work in silence with beautiful, usually handmade, age-appropriate materials. There is much evidence that during this work time, the Holy Spirit speaks to the heart of the child.

A BELIEF THAT CHILDREN ALREADY ARE IN RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd was founded in Rome in 1954 by two women: Sofia Cavalletti, a Hebrew Scripture scholar, and Gianna Gobbi, a disciple of Maria Montessori. The catechesis is built on the foundational belief that the youngest children already are in a rich relationship with God. The opportunity to learn a language of prayer through Scripture and liturgy meets a vital need of the child and leads to profound peace. The founders discovered that children from all cultures, socioeconomic backgrounds, and family situations feel a strong connection to Jesus after hearing the Parable of the Good Shepherd. They are particularly delighted that the Good Shepherd knows them by name. They learn to recognize the Shepherd’s voice, and truly fall in love with Jesus. This close relationship, together with the Level I presentations centered on the Mass and Eucharist, can lead children to begin longing for the Eucharist even before they move to the Level II atrium around first grade.

For children between ages six and nine, the new parabolic image of God is the True Vine, a Trinitarian representation of God, where the disciple’s role is not just to stay close and follow (as with the Good Shepherd), but actually to participate in the life of the Vine. A timeline of the history of the kingdom of God highlights the three great moments in salvation history: creation, redemption and parousia, while inviting the children to ponder what they are being called to write on the “blank page” of history that is being lived now. We visualize the Bible as a library of books, using a box filled with small wooden models, color coded for Old and New Testament, to represent each book of the Bible. As preparation for first Reconciliation, the children

are first assured of the mercy of God through the parables of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and the Forgiving Father. Only then are they introduced to the Great Commandment and a work called “The Maxims,” which highlights specific moral directives of Jesus and helps the children to examine their conscience. Mass-centered presentations continue to foster not only an understanding of, but also a great hunger for, the Eucharist.

Level III, for children nine to twelve years of age, builds on the foundations of personal and social morality introduced in Level II. The children know their Baptism calls them to follow Jesus and spread his light in the world. After having meditated on the Great Commandment, the Maxims, and parables such as the Good Samaritan in Level II, the children are introduced to the Ten Commandments and the virtues. They continue to ponder salvation history with a timeline called the Plan of God that traces the rise and fall of ancient civilizations, God’s self-revelation to the Hebrew people, the Incarnation of Jesus from among that people, and God’s continued presence with us in history and through the sacraments and the Word. Since these children are grounded in a relationship with Christ and a knowledge of liturgy, we turn our attention to the Old Testament. We examine the history of the Jewish people and do typology studies of creation, sin, Abraham, Noah, and Moses. A detailed exploration of sacramental rites and the prayers of the Mass rounds out the Level III experience.

Our children, parents, catechists, priests, and parish have been transformed since we introduced Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. Catechists who have had the training and parents who help as aides often say they now understand for the first time what happens at Mass. More foundationally, they grasp how much they are loved by God. Even parents who have never come into the atrium comment on their children’s interest in Mass, their awareness of liturgical seasons, their request to set up a prayer space at home, and—when they are older—their desire to keep a Bible at their bedside and read it before they go to sleep.

The Second Vatican Council document *Catechesi Tradendae* expresses the Church’s belief that the “aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ.” My years of working with children in the atrium have convinced me that Catechesis of the Good Shepherd achieves this aim. Perhaps the children of your parish are waiting for you to introduce them to the Good Shepherd through this catechesis. ♦

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