

The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd

The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is an approach to the religious formation of children. It is rooted in the Bible, the liturgy of the church, and the educational principles of Maria Montessori. Children gather in an "atrium," a room prepared for them, which contains simple yet beautiful materials that they use.



Work with Materials: If an adult hears a beautiful passage from the Bible, the adult might take a Bible, find the passage, and read it slowly again and again. He or she may think deeply about the words and perhaps speak to God in a thankful or hopeful prayer. But a little child, too young to read, needs another way. In an atrium the child can ponder a biblical passage or a prayer from the liturgy by taking the material for that text and working with it - placing wood figures of sheep in a sheepfold of the Good Shepherd, setting sculpted apostles around a Last Supper table, or preparing a small altar with the furnishings used for the Eucharist.¹



Catechists: The role of the catechist is to prepare the environment, the atrium, and present passages of Scripture which call forth the child's innate desire to draw near to God. Rather than pour in information, the adult serves as a guide and co-worker with the child. Together they ask questions and wonder: "God who are you? How do you love us? What is the kingdom of God like? What is our place in it?" *Adults who train as catechists often consider the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd to be the most exciting form of spiritual growth they've encountered!*



What Do They Learn? Children in the Level I (ages 3-6) program spend time enjoying and nurturing a relationship with the Good Shepherd. The children are deeply affected by the boundless love of the shepherd for His sheep as described in the Scriptures. They learn that He knows His sheep, calls them by name, searches for a lost sheep, and celebrates the found sheep. Materials and presentations on the life of Christ and His teachings help to make the great mystery of who God is more understandable for the child. Through geography, the words of the prophets, and infancy narratives, Jesus is established as a real person. The Paschal narratives are treated similarly, using model cities of Jerusalem, empty tombs, and cenacles for the Last Supper. Selected parables further the child's wonder and curiosity about the great mystery of the Kingdom of God. Children become familiar with the articles of the Eucharist and Baptism by arranging them in their own atrium on miniature altars and fonts. The children also become acquainted with the gestures of our liturgy and their meaning of the Paschal Mystery: Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again. A prayer corner located in each atrium reflects the liturgical time of year by means of appropriate colors, prayer, songs, artwork, and readings.

Children in the Level II (ages 6-9) atrium come to know that God is working from Creation, through redemption, toward Parousia when God's love will be all in all. God calls us to participate in this plan. Jesus shows us the way to live together in peace and joy as we abide in him through the Eucharist and Baptism.

The Level III (ages 9-12) atrium gives children the opportunity to explore more deeply the covenants with God revealed in Hebrew Scripture. Looking at more detailed history of humankind, they discover how God draws all of creation toward the Parousia. They see in a more challenging way how God calls us to use our gifts to write the blank page toward the Parousia, and to be held in covenant with God and each other through the Eucharist and Baptism.

¹ Taken from the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd National Association's website, www.cgsusa.org.

The Child in the Atrium

A young child enters the atrium and, after looking around for a few moments, unrolls a mat on the floor. He goes to a shelf and picks up a large wooden circle covered in green fabric and supporting a small wooden fence. He carries this circle to his mat. Next, he returns to the shelf and retrieves a box that contains sheep and a shepherd. Kneeling at his mat, the child arranges the sheep and shepherd within the sheepfold. After pausing for a moment to appreciate the scene, the child begins to move one sheep, and then another, from within the safety of the fence. Next, he moves the shepherd to recover the sheep. Sitting back to contemplate these actions, the boy pauses once again. After a moment, satisfied, the child returns the sheep and shepherd to the shelf. This young boy will repeat this “work” many times over the next few years, constantly growing in his understanding of, and relationship with, Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd.

A few minutes later an older child chooses this same work and diligently lays out her materials on a mat. She also brings a small table, several wooden people, and a tiny chalice, paten, and host. After the sheep and shepherd have been arranged within the sheepfold, the young girl brings a second green wooden circle to her mat. On this second platform she centers the small table and gradually moves the sheep to stand around it. The shepherd stands on the table watching over his sheep. One by one the sheep are replaced with wooden people and where the shepherd had stood there remains the chalice, paten, and host. This child sits back in a manner very similar to her younger companion, pausing to contemplate the exchange that has just occurred before her. Each use of the Good Shepherd materials over the past few years has prepared her to better understand the relationship between the Good Shepherd’s care for His sheep and Jesus’ care for His people at Mass, in the celebration of the Eucharist. This child knows Christ the Good Shepherd intimately, having met Him through her Baptism, through her family, and here in the atrium. This relationship has crossed the bridge between His presence in Scripture and His presence at the Eucharistic table.

The motto of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is: “Help me fall in love with God by myself.” In this program the image of Christ as the Good Shepherd who loves his sheep and gives everything He is for them forms the center of the young child’s relationship with God. The Good Shepherd knows His sheep and calls them by their name. The child comes to discover who the Shepherd is and who they are – His children. In the midst of this blossoming relationship these same children are exposed to small, isolated items and “moments” of the Mass. They hold a small chalice, learn to name each of the vestments that the priest wears, and wonder at what occurs at specific moments of the liturgy. Their relationship with the Good Shepherd is nurtured in such a way that they are preparing to live the fullness of the life of the Catholic Church through the liturgy and the sacraments. They begin to realize the depth of Christ’s love for us, as it is revealed to us through these sacraments, particularly the Eucharist.

The Good Shepherd program has borne much fruit in the past few years in this Archdiocese. It is exciting to be able watch this method of catechesis continue to grow. We have great trust in the grace that our children have received at their Baptism and are excited to show them that this Catholic faith we share is truly one not just for adults but for *all*. As our Lord Jesus said, “Let the children come to me.”