

**Catechesis of the Good Shepherd:  
An Approach to Religious Formation for Children,  
Integrating the Heart, Mind, and Hand**

by

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The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd (CGS) has been used effectively for over 50 years in over 30 different countries all around the world (from Chad in Africa, to Brazil, to Italy, and all over the US and Canada), in many varied cultures and with children from many different backgrounds. It has been officially blessed by Metropolitan Joseph (and Metr. Philip before him) of the Antiochian Archdiocese, and Bishop David of Alaska of the Orthodox Church in America (OCA), who gives it his “highest recommendation and endorsement.” It is required (since last year going forward) of all students at St. Herman's Orthodox Seminary in Alaska, and it has been taught for years at Holy Cross Orthodox Seminary in Brookline, MA (Greek Orthodox Archdiocese), in the summers.

This catechesis assumes that “to initiate the child into the Christian mystery is to initiate the child into the mystery of life,”<sup>1</sup> for the Christian message “is rooted in the most profound depths of the human person and in the whole of reality. It nourishes the most irrepressible hunger of the human person [“to receive and return” the love of God<sup>2</sup>], and enlightens all that surrounds one.”<sup>3</sup> CGS seeks to help meet that hunger, those vital spiritual needs of the child at their particular ages. Since children around the world have responded very positively in similar ways to this program, it is reasonable to assume that it does provide what truly meets the child's vital needs and what resonates with that age.

CGS wants to completely avoid that kind of religious training that many of us may have received [which] was too intellectual and too moralistic, providing only information about God. CGS provides information, but in a way that warms the heart, in the sense of touching the whole person. It emphasizes a prayerful, loving encounter with Christ.

CGS is more about religious formation than religious instruction.<sup>4</sup> As one of the founders, Sophia Cavalletti, has said, “we want to hand on something that enriches their heart and their life as well as their mind.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Dr. Cavalletti describes the ultimate goal of the program as helping the children to “be in love with God in a manner that creates harmony and happiness within them, with others, and their world.” In the extensive experience of those developing the CGS, this is most easily done through beginning the child's catechesis – of the right sort! - before age 6. Gianna Gobbi writes, “The same achievements can happen at a later time in the child's life, but with a greater burden of the will.”<sup>6</sup>

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1 Sophia Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child: Experiencing Scripture and Liturgy with Young Children* (Chicago: Catechesis of the Good Shepherd Publications, 1992), p. 177.

2 Sophia Cavalletti, Patricia Coulter, Gianna Gobbi, Silvana Quattrocchi Montanaro, and Rebekah Rojcewicz, *The Good Shepherd and the Child: A Joyful Journey* (Chicago: Catechesis of the Good Shepherd Publications, 2014), p. 102.

3 Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child*, p. 27.

4 Gianna Gobbi. *Listening to God with Children: The Montessori Method Applied to the Catechesis of Children* (Loveland, Ohio: Treehaus Communications, 1998), p. 68.

5 Cavalletti, et al., *The Good Shepherd and the Child: A Joyful Journey*, p. 8.

6 Gobbi, *Listening to God with Children*, p. 79.

When the founders and leaders of the CGS speak of “following the child” during the program, this is what is meant: *carefully observing* what really works, what makes a deep positive impression, what leads to peace, prayer, serious reflection, great concentration, and focused attention; and observing what the children love – what leads them to experience a tranquil, “joyful satisfaction,” what helps them “fall in love with God.” Seeing these fruits, by carefully observing the children, is what reveals that what you are doing is working well.

The content of the program emphasizes the most essential, appropriate theology to meet the needs of the child: “the synthesis of the Christian *kerygma* is the revelation of the fundamental law of life: it is the initiation into the knowledge of the reality in which we live.”<sup>7</sup> It is very profound in its approach, and very respectful of the mystery of God and the child, and their encounter. It also respects the crucial role of being present at the Liturgy and participating in the Sacraments as well as the whole life of the Church, the support of one’s priests and bishop, the crucial role of the parents, and the fact that the tasks of parents and catechists in religious education are distinct and complementary.<sup>8</sup>

In CGS, a special space, called an *atrium*, is created (after the name of the place in front of the Church proper in many early Churches); and the program begins with “grace and courtesy lessons,” such as how to walk in Church, how to venerate an icon, etc. The whole approach helps encourage *reverence* – and the special space is necessary to help facilitate this reverent atmosphere. The children are introduced to the space by being told that it is “a place specially prepared for us to come to know God better.”<sup>9</sup>

The atrium is compared to a retreat center, “a place for celebrating the Word of God, for listening.”<sup>10</sup> CGS emphasizes really “listening in community”<sup>11</sup> and reflecting on what has been heard – being open to what God may reveal – as well as praying, and reflecting together, for further personal meditation, and for work. It is a place where the child is able to do everything at his own rhythm, which is slower than the adults’. This is how the children can prepare themselves to participate more consciously in the community life of the adults. The child this age needs “the vital nucleus of things”:<sup>12</sup> he needs and delights in what is “greatest and most essential.”<sup>13</sup>

As mentioned, one can tell by the child’s response if that need has been met: “The child himself will be our teacher of essentiality, if we know how to observe him.”<sup>14</sup> It has been found repeatedly, in all the different cultures, that young children respond powerfully if the greatest themes are presented in a way appropriate for them.

CGS gives a vocabulary and suitable Scriptural images, material that the child can grow into; and it creates a space for the child to encounter God. The CGS atrium “is a place where the child comes to know the great realities of his life as a Christian. But also, and above all, it is a place where the child begins to live these realities in meditation and prayer. . . . a place for religious *life*. . . . It facilitates recollection and silence.”<sup>15</sup> Some examples of what children wanted to call their atrium are revealing: “the room of joy,” “the pearl,” “our room is very beautiful”; “I think our room is the room of love and God”; “this room is like a mustard seed.”<sup>16</sup> In fact, at a 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of CGS, when adult alumni from their 20s to their 50s, spoke, in addition to their individual remembrances, they all spoke about how being in the atrium helped them to realize “that what was most important was their own relationship with God.”<sup>17</sup>

Concerning the program’s basic method: the main approach is based on “signs” in the Johannine sense – *semeia* – *wonders* that are theologically rich and important; and it emphasizes the parables, and the “signs” used in baptism and the eucharist. This all helps train the child to see beyond appearances; it deeply instills in the child not to limit his field of knowledge to visible reality, for “in the sign, the material world acquires a kind of transparency, and the transcendent world

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7 Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child*, p. 177.

8 Ibid., p. 129.

9 Gobbi, *Listening to God with Children*, p. 46.

10 Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child*, p. 23.

11 Ibid., p. 49.

12 Ibid., p. 48.

13 Ibid., p. 50.

14 Ibid., p. 48.

15 Ibid., p. 56.

16 Ibid., p. 59.

17 Cavalletti, et al., *The Good Shepherd and the Child: A Joyful Journey*, p. 104.

a kind of tangibility.”<sup>18</sup> The child then learns to understand the deeper levels in the Bible, in the Liturgy, and in the world.

The method helps the children, therefore, to realize what is so critical, especially in our own day: that the literal level, the surface of reality, is not all there is – that the secular idea that “things are just themselves” is not true. Rather, events and things have deeper meanings, are interconnected and point to, refer to, and reflect God, especially as the Good God Who loves mankind, Who for the younger children is presented as the figure of the Good Shepherd. In this way, it is a training for, or initiation into, an essential part of the Christian *phronema*. or world-view.

It is an approach based on humility, which along with love, is the most crucial Christian virtue. “The method of signs educates the child and the catechist in humility . . ., because this method never gives anyone the sense of knowing everything . . .; given their elusive nature, signs will never be exhausted of their meaning.”<sup>19</sup> It recognizes that “human language is always an approximation,”<sup>20</sup> that there is a force working within the entire universe that constantly exceeds its premises – from the very small comes the great; from death comes life. But unless one is initiated into this, “the book of the universe can be silent.”<sup>21</sup> Hence it is so very important for children to be initiated into this. In the face of the “inexhaustible richness” of the Christian Faith, “the person will feel small and great: small in front of the infinite Mystery; great, because it has been given to him to enter it in some way; and great with a greatness that is gift.”<sup>22</sup>

The CGS has repeatedly been seen to help meet the child's deepest need: an “opening to the transcendent,”<sup>23</sup> and an experience of God's unconditional love. There is also solid learning about key events in the life of Christ and why they are significant, and about some of the teachings of Christ through selected New Testament parables. This is done by proclaiming the Gospel passages solemnly and slowly, with time for reflection and a prayerful response – or silence. Then concrete hands-on materials are presented to enable the children to further reflect on each biblical passage by using these figures, etc., with their hands, to internalize the lessons in a very profound way.

The main areas covered are:

**Five simple prophecies** of Christ from the Old Testament; for example, Is. 9:1 -

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;  
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them a light shined.”

This is chosen because there is a lot of emphasis on Christ as the True Light in the New Testament.

**Events in the Life of Christ:** the Annunciation, the Visitation, the Nativity, the Adoration of the Shepherds and the Magi, the Presentation in the Temple, the Last Supper and the Empty Tomb/Resurrection. These are tied into the liturgical year, for “the life of the atrium follows the liturgical year.”<sup>24</sup>

**Parables:** It is assumed that the likeness made in each of the parables is not arbitrary, that there is a real likeness.<sup>25</sup> Parables share the nature of poetry; they can't be fully translated; and the images can't be changed – they are so rich, they can never be fully explained.<sup>26</sup>

The primary parable for this age is *The Good Shepherd*, Who images the Good God Who loves mankind, Who protects His sheep and knows each one by name. Reflecting on and rejoicing in this parable really helps the child feel the love of God in Christ. This is **learning by discovery**: they are given the basics from the Bible, and encouraged to reflect and pray. Then gradually they realize for themselves that the Good Shepherd is Christ and that they are the sheep, that they can give love in return, and that they are protected – for three of the basic needs for that age are to be loved with an infinite

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18 Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child*, p. 160.

19 Ibid., p. 166.

20 Ibid., p. 165.

21 Ibid., p. 163.

22 Ibid., p. 166.

23 Ibid., p. 178.

24 Cavalletti, et al., *The Good Shepherd and the Child*, p. 98.

25 Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child*, p. 161.

26 Ibid., p. 162.

and unconditional love, to be able to give love (which they have so much of), and to feel protected. For example, a five-year old boy put two children in his drawing of the sheep because “while he was working, he realized that 'we are the sheep.'”<sup>27</sup>

This focus on the Good Shepherd gives a “fundamental orientation” to the children's moral life based on love, rather than on the fear of doing something wrong. It is valuable to have this in place before they are six or seven, when children usually start being concerned about right and wrong, about moral behavior in general. For this three to six year age, the key is to “announce God's love and help the child to experience and enjoy it in reflection and prayer.”<sup>28</sup> CGS has seen over and over again the “profound inner enjoyment” in the children in contemplating the love of the Good Shepherd.<sup>29</sup> The Parable of *The Found Sheep* is also included with this.

**The Mustard Seed, The Leaven, and The Growing Grain (Mk. 4:26-29):** emphasizing how from something small comes something great; and how all this life, including our bodies, is a gift from God that grows with a life-force from God that is not our own – we don't control it, it is greater than we are. Also, the **education to wonder** or marvel, to be amazed at things like how such a tiny seed can grow into a tree! As Sophia Cavalletti has written:

Education to wonder is correlative with an education that helps us go more deeply into reality. . . . When wonder becomes a fundamental attitude of our spirit, it will confer a religious character to our whole life, because it makes us live with the consciousness of being plunged into an unfathomable and incommensurable reality. If we are disposed to reflect on reality in its complexity, then it will reveal itself to be full of the unexpected, of aspects we will never succeed in grasping or circumscribing. Then we will be unable to close our eyes to the presence of something or someone within it that surpasses us. . . . the religious person will break out in a hymn of praise and admiration.<sup>30</sup>

To encourage wonder, you need to have objects worthy of wonder, and not too many stimuli<sup>31</sup> – the Gospels offer this in the parables, etc. The parables provide “ever expanding spaces of reality, objects of meditation that will not disappoint, food worthy of the child's wonder.”<sup>32</sup>

**The Pearl of Great Price and The Treasure in the Field:** the wonder of finding something hidden, and difficult to find, that's so valuable that one would sell everything to get it.

The children not only discover and wonder, they also **synthesize** what they learn and make connections. For example, when a catechist was beginning a discussion about Pascha, saying “Pascha is coming, what can we do to prepare ourselves?”, the children connected right away to the parables: Pascha is “when the leaven has grown and made all the dough grow”; “the Holy Spirit makes you understand the secrets of God and says them to you one by one. But you hear them with your heart, where the pearl is.” They also synthesize in their drawings: a boy drew a cross and put a pearl in the center.<sup>33</sup>

**Biblical geography:** this is taught to emphasize the reality of the real, historical people – that these were real people and events. The figures are 3-D for the actual historical people, and 2-D for the parables, in order to emphasize the difference: those in the first set are real people with a deeper meaning; and the others are fictional characters, also with a deeper meaning.

Other main areas covered are sacramental and liturgical:

**The Paschal mystery** is presented through the symbols of light and darkness (focusing on the Resurrection), connected to **Baptism and Chrismation** as the means by which this light is transmitted to mankind.

**The Eucharist** is linked to the Good Shepherd parable and presented as the “sacrament of the gift” of His presence in our

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27 Ibid., p. 179.

28 Ibid., p. 153.

29 Ibid., p. 154.

30 Ibid., p. 139.

31 Ibid., p. 140.

32 Ibid., p. 146.

33 Ibid., p. 149.

life.<sup>34</sup>

[With the older children, from ages six to nine: confession is presented as getting our baptismal garment white again, and in terms of Christ as the True Vine (the main parable for ages six to nine): we need confession *when our sap is blocked*.]

What you will see in the atrium are shelves with materials that enable the children to reflect further, to meditate, in ways appropriate for them, upon these biblical passages and the sacraments by working with the figures and models on their own – and it is made very clear that these are just models. It is emphasized that the primary purpose of the materials is not the formation of concepts, but to help facilitate “a vital encounter with a real Person.”<sup>35</sup>

Also, they draw pictures about these things; and if they can write, they may copy the passages and decorate them, as well as sing songs about them. There are group lessons and activities, but much of the time the children are allowed to choose the work that appeals most to them at the time, and to work on it individually or in small groups. This freedom is far from being a license to do anything. Rather, “the real value of freedom lies in the fact that it is a conquest . . . involving response to and claiming of what is good and right.”<sup>36</sup> As Maria Montessori said, “every manifestation which offends or harms others, or all that signifies unseemly or discourteous behavior, is to be prevented.”<sup>37</sup>

In fact, it has been seen over and over again with a Montessori-style approach that “the act of choosing and becoming absorbed in work makes way for a spontaneous kind of discipline.”<sup>38</sup> And it has also been observed that “the concentration which springs from discipline and work leads to meditation and prayer. This is the goal toward which the child strives in order to encounter God. It is very important that we assist the child in meeting this goal.”<sup>39</sup>

The presentation of Scripture is always linked with prayer – our natural response.<sup>40</sup> Another crucial aspect throughout the CGS program is the “**education to prayer**” – that “interior agility by which the heart turns to God.”<sup>41</sup> It is understood that “the life of the atrium springs from its being a place of prayer: a place of listening and responding to God, a place where work and study spontaneously become meditation, contemplation, and prayer.”<sup>42</sup>

This approach, then, encourages real **listening with the heart, and love of silence** (probably the hardest thing to do at home in all this). As the co-founder of the approach has said, “we want to help the children become aware of the value of silence as a necessary means of listening and responding to God.”<sup>43</sup> In her extensive work with children, Maria Montessori observed that “It is in silence and when movements are ordered that the inner sensitivity that is called 'religious sense' or 'spiritual sense' can be developed.”<sup>44</sup> Done properly, CGS provides a real “education to silence, so that the child searches for it and loves it.”<sup>45</sup> As one little girl said, “I like everything at catechesis . . . , but silence is the thing I like best.”<sup>46</sup>

CGS recognizes that you can't really teach someone to pray, but you can prepare an environment that encourages prayer to arise.<sup>47</sup> In the young children both control of movement and concentration are fostered as foundational for prayer. Prayer is partly encouraged also by giving an appropriate vocabulary (they are given one-word prayer cards, like “alleluia,” “hosanna,” “amen”; single verses from Psalms like “the Lord is my Shepherd, I have everything I need,” etc.); content from Scripture – appropriate exposure to the “Good News” revealed by Jesus Christ; activities promoting silence; and an opportunity to pray in the group.

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34 Ibid., p. 171.

35 Gobbi, *Listening to God with Children*, p. 20.

36 Ibid., p. 94.

37 Ibid., p. 95.

38 Ibid., p. 100.

39 Ibid., p. 102.

40 Ibid., pp. 118 and 120.

41 Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child*, p. 128.

42 Gobbi, p. 130.

43 Ibid., p. 122.

44 Ibid., p. 124.

45 Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child*, p. 136.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid., p. 128.

When praying on their own, three to six year olds mainly pray prayers of thanksgiving and praise, not petition. The CGS approach is to gently guide without forcing, to show them that they can pray in their hearts any time on their own – that prayer isn't just something for Church, or adults, or a few times here and there. It encourages a real encounter with God, in which the catechist must respect the mystery of God and the mystery of the child.<sup>48</sup> Here is an example of a prayer that children of three to six years old made after they had received their first presentation on Baptism: “Thank You, Jesus, for sending us this light from heaven right into our hearts. . . . Thank You for giving us everything. . . . Thank You for making plants and wheat. Thank You for making soup, too. . . . Thank You for leading us into our beautiful sheepfold. Thank You because we are Your sheep. Thank You for coming into our hearts. My body is happy.”<sup>49</sup> The goal is to “help them find a balance between spontaneous and formal prayer which can support and nourish them throughout their lives.”<sup>50</sup>

Many people who do the training and work with the children report that they find it very spiritually beneficial for themselves. It is interesting that Mother Teresa's world-wide order of nuns, who usually work with the poorest of the poor, decided in 2009 they would only ever use CGS for religious education. But they also wanted it for their own spiritual formation. When asked why they wanted to do the training so much, they replied, “Here we find the true spirit of poverty; here we learn true contemplation.”<sup>51</sup>

To summarize, the key positives are: education to prayer, silence, and reverence; initiation into a Christian *phronema* of “signs” - looking deeper than just the surface level of reality to realizing that everything points to God; an emphasis on humility and love; deep knowledge of key Scriptures, and a vivid sense of the reality of historical biblical persons and places through materials such as 3-D figures and geography materials; a keen understanding of Baptism and the Eucharist; warm heart knowledge of Christ as the Good Shepherd, revealing the Good God Who loves mankind; and discovery-learning, in which the child comes to synthesize for himself connections between parables, Sacraments, the work of Christ, etc., and thus acquires an ability to enter more fully into the Liturgy. It is an excellent preparation, based on knowing the love of God, for all the later spiritual and moral development of the children.

While it is true that CGS demands quite a bit of time and effort in terms of initially setting up the environment (though it need not all be done at once!) and doing the training to learn how best to implement the approach, this also means that on a weekly basis there is very little preparation to do.

There is a cost for the training, but with this method of Christian Education the money or cost is invested in people instead of curriculum (books and papers). Consequently, once the initial cost is paid, the parish does not have to continue paying yearly to replenish supplies, books and papers. So that initial cost...educating and forming the catechist and any material costs....is a one time fee that lasts a life time. If a parish sponsors a training session and opens it to those outside (as is typical), it is also possible to cover the cost for the training from tuition paid by people outside the parish.

In any case, many can attest to the great rewards of this profound method of helping our children to learn about Scripture and the Church – and even more importantly, to help them deepen their relationship with the living God, while enriching the spiritual life of the catechist as well.

For more information, please see the resources listed in the footnotes. To contact someone about how to go about doing the training, please contact Shelley Finkler at [shelleyfinkler@gmail.com](mailto:shelleyfinkler@gmail.com) or Anne Marie Mccollum at [ammccollum@comcast.net](mailto:ammccollum@comcast.net)

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48 Ibid.

49 Ibid., p. 122.

50 Gobbi, p. 119.

51 Cavalletti, et al., p. vi.