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At St. John the Baptist, Catechesis Program Shepherds Children in Drawing Closer to Jesus

By Jen Reed
The Catholic Witness

A kindergarten student kneels in front of a model altar in one of two rooms called atriums at St. John the Baptist School in New Freedom.

Reverently, she prepares the altar, arranging the linen, the candles, the crucifix, and the chalice and paten.

When the Eucharistic table is readied, she nods to a catechist nearby, who kneels next to the child and lights the candles as they sing “Lord Jesus, Come,” a song that links the image of the Good Shepherd with the bread and wine.

The model altar is one of numerous detailed and scaled-down versions of items in the atriums at St. John’s, where students as young as three years old are coming to know and love Jesus through the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd.

A hands-on Montessori-based approach to Catholic religious education, the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd fosters children’s growth in their relationship to God via Scripture and liturgy.

Designed for children ages 3-12, it was developed in Rome in 1954 by Catholic educators Dr. Sofia Cavaletti and Gianna Gobbi, who discovered the profound religious intuition of younger children and their ability to receive and enjoy the most essential elements of the faith.

The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd occurs within an atrium, a specially-designed room or portion of a classroom with attractive, colorful and mostly-handmade materials that children utilize as they reflect on lessons that catechists present in each session.

“Ultimately, it is designed for young students to let them fall in love with Jesus,” said Patty Howell, formation catechist for the parish and school. She is also a Level I For-



JEN REED, THE CATHOLIC WITNESS
A kindergarten student prepares a model altar in one of the atriums at St. John the Baptist School in New Freedom, where young children are developing relationships with Jesus through a program called the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd.

mation Leader in the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd.

St. John the Baptist has been utilizing the program in its religious education classes for a decade, and in its Catholic school for the past few years. There are two atriums there; the facility was designed with a dedicated space for one of them, noted Susan Mareck, school principal.

“As time went on, we realized that one atrium wasn’t enough, so we dedicated an additional room. The atriums are such blessings to all of our kids and their families,” she said.

The atriums are filled with miniature versions of ambos, Paschal candles and vestments, and engaging pieces children can use to fashion a liturgical calendar, the Creation Story, the City of Jerusalem and the Last Supper.

Yet the atriums are sacred spaces, and the children treat them as such. In the atriums, the children aren’t playing with toys; they are engaging in meaningful work as they converse with God.

The sessions begin with a lesson offered by the catechist – such as a Parable or a teaching about a part of the liturgy.

After the lesson, children are asked, “What work does God want you to do in the atrium today?” said Barbara Fletcher. This question reminds them that they’re not playing with toys, but rather speaking to Jesus, she said.

In the atrium, children also learn reverence, responsibility and fine motor skills, noted Susan White.

“We spend a lot of time developing routines so that they learn how to unroll and fold fabrics, pour water, handle glassware and put items in their proper places,” she noted. “The children take wonderful care of the atriums.”

Each session in the atrium concludes with prayer that brings together the entire class.

“The program teaches the children in the

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Permanent Diaconate Candidates Installed into Ministry of Lector

By Jen Reed
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In a significant step toward their ordination to the Sacred Order of the Diaconate in 2020, 44 men in the diocese’s Permanent Diaconate Formation Program were instituted into the Ministry of Lector during a Solemn Mass at the Shrine of the Miraculous Medal at St. Catherine Labouré Parish in Harrisburg on Nov. 18.

As family members, clergy and their formators looked on, each candidate was called forward to present himself to Bishop Ronald Gainer during the Rite of Institution of Lec-

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Bishop Ronald Gainer presents the Holy Scriptures to diaconate candidate Thomas Owsinski during the Rite of Institution of Lectors.

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way that Jesus taught – through Parables,” noted formation catechist Pam Freidhoff. She, too, is a Level I Formation Leader in the program.

“We tell the students that when they’re working in the atrium, they should think about Jesus. The idea of their work time is to carry through on the lesson they’ve just heard.”

One of the prominent lessons in the Level I Atrium, for children ages three to six, is the Parable of the Good Shepherd. The story is reaffirmed visually with wooden replicas of a pasture, sheep and a shepherd. As the children replace the sheep with figurines of people, and the shepherd with an image of Jesus, they come to discover their relationship with the Good Shepherd.

“Even the youngest students are open to hearing the Parables from the Bible, and it draws their faith out so that they can express themselves through prayer and through their love for Jesus,” Mrs. Howell remarked.

The catechists have seen the fruits of the program.

Diane Losasso, who taught sixth grade for a number of years, observed that “the students who had been in the Good Shepherd program in their early childhood had more of a foundation of love for Jesus, and it deepened in them through the years.”

As part of the program, students undergoing sacramental preparation at St. John the Baptist School and through the parish religious education program gather with their families for contemplative prayer in the church. This allows entire families to enjoy formation together.

“The Good Shepherd Catechesis has

helped create unity between the religious education students and the school students,” noted St. Joseph Sister Jane Keller, Director of Religious Education at St. John’s Parish. “It has drawn us all together.”

Bonnie Campbell is a mother of five, all but four of whom have gone through the Good Shepherd Catechesis at St. John’s. This past summer, she took part in the adult formation course that the

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During an adult formation course in the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd held at St. John the Baptist in New Freedom this past summer, participants work with materials connected to the Parable of the Good Shepherd.



JEN REED, THE CATHOLIC WITNESS
Patty Howell offers guidance in the atrium during an adult formation course on the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd this past summer.



Above: Images and materials assist children in learning about the Liturgy of the Eucharist.



Right: Containers display the liturgical colors, with which students can work in the atrium.



Students in Mrs. Miller’s first-grade class display the trace-and-color artwork they created in one of the atriums at St. John the Baptist School in New Freedom.



After working with materials associated with the Parable of the Good Shepherd, a student in Mrs. Gringow’s kindergarten class places the sheep in their wooden storage box.

Bishop Blesses Icon of Patron Saint of the Deaf at Mass for People with Disabilities

By Jen Reed
The Catholic Witness

During the annual Mass celebrating the gifts of people with disabilities, held at St. Joseph Church in Mechanicsburg on Nov. 18, Bishop Ronald Gainer blessed an icon of St. Francis de Sales, the patron saint of persons who are deaf.

The icon, written by iconographer Jody Cole, shows the saint teaching sign language to a young deaf and mute man named Martin, whom St. Francis de Sales took under his wing for 16 years. As a result of the saint's education of the young man in the faith, Martin made his first Confession and first Communion.

The striking icon is a gift for the deaf Catholic community, which worships at St. Joseph Church, where Father Thomas Rozman, pastor, celebrates the Mass in sign language.

In his homily during the Mass, Bishop Gainer remarked that one of the undeniable aspects of Christ's love was his inclusiveness of others. "No one was excluded from the love of Christ. His heart and his arms were open to all," the bishop said.

"If our job as disciples of Christ is to grow to be more and more Christ-like, then our love too must be inclusive," he said.

During the Mass, people with disabilities shared their gifts and talents as greeters, altar servers and lectors as the people of St. Joseph Parish welcomed them for the celebration.

To learn about the ministry and activities of the Diocesan Office of Ministry with People with Disabilities, contact Larry Kiley, Director, at lkiley@hbgdiocese.org or 717-657-4804, ext. 322, or visit the Disabilities Ministry link under the Outreach tab at www.hbgdiocese.org.



CHRIS HEISEY, THE CATHOLIC WITNESS

Above: Members of the deaf Catholic community join Bishop Ronald Gainer, Father Thomas Rozman, pastor, and iconographer Jody Cole, front center, at the icon of St. Francis de Sales.

Right: Bishop Ronald Gainer blesses an icon of St. Francis de Sales, patron saint of persons who are deaf.

Bottom, right: Altar servers look on during the diocesan Mass celebrating the gifts of persons with disabilities.

Bottom, left: Altar server Haley Devlin looks on as Ginny Duncan and Father Thomas Rozman communicate the Mass through sign language.

Haley, who serves at St. Joseph Parish in Mechanicsburg, is thought to be the first deaf altar server in the diocese.



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parish offered to train catechists in the program.

"At daily Mass, my children will apply what they've learned. My son points to the priest and says, 'He is wearing green, so it is Ordinary Time.' My daughter was sobbing one day at Mass because she missed the epiclesis during the consecration. My five-year-old will move to a pew toward the front of the church to see the priest at the altar," Mrs. Campbell shared.

"If I can give that catechesis and love for the Lord to my kids, it's the best gift I can offer," she said.

The weeklong Level I formation course drew a dozen participants from several parishes in the Diocese of Harrisburg and the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

The participants underwent additional faith formation and were instructed in the praxis of the program. They sat in the

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~ Formation Catechist Patty Howell,
St. John the Baptist, New Freedom

atrium and worked slowly and intentionally with the materials, just as a child would.

"When we were going through our formation, a three-year-old girl came in, and even she dropped everything to watch and listen to what was being presented in the course," said Mrs. Fletcher. "She was enthralled. You can clearly see that children, even this young, have a relationship with Jesus."

Mrs. Freidhoff agreed.

"Just as children are able to pick up a language at a young age, so too can they fall in love with God," she said. "It's not that we can't fall more deeply in love with him later in life, but if we really get children to connect at an early age, those roots will be more deeply planted."

(St. John the Baptist Parish invites parents and catechists who want to learn more about the Good Shepherd Catechesis or to observe children working in the atrium, to make a visit. Contact Sister Jane Keller, Director of Religious Education, at srjkeller@sjbnf.org or 717-235-2156.)