

The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd: Method Serving Content

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Abstract

In the past sixty to seventy years, as Montessori education has begun to influence our country's understanding of new educational possibilities, a Montessori-based method of religious education, the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd has been traveling a similar path. This paper examines the development of this method of religious education alongside the changes in educational philosophy within the Catholic Church resulting, primarily, from the Second Vatican Council. In many ways, the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd provides an educational methodology which aligns with the catechetical ideals set out by the documents produced by the Catholic Church in recent years, particularly as found in *Catechesi Tradendae* and the *General Directory for Catechesis*, which call for the use of methodology which is at service to the content of the deposit of faith. As awareness of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd continues to spread throughout the world, its development and demand are expanding as well. In addition, its impact on religious education in general is beginning to broaden beyond the young children it was originally developed to serve.

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One of the most significant challenges and joys of any belief system involves discerning the best process for handing on its basic values and principles to people in the contemporary world as well as the next and future generations. Often, the best place to look for an authentic method of transmission of the faith is to the founders of the movement. Within the Christian faith, that involves examining the evangelistic and catechetical pedagogy of Jesus Christ, himself, as well as that of the early Church. Since the early 1960s and the opening of the twenty-first Ecumenical Council of the Catholic Church, the Second Vatican Council or Vatican II, this question of how best to hand on the truths promulgated by Jesus Christ has been one of foremost interest and emphasis for Christians throughout the world (*General Directory for Catechesis*, 1997). In looking both at modern culture and at the inherent nature of the human person, how can the Gospel message, those events experienced by the earliest members of Christianity and recorded through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, be proclaimed and received not just in the intellect but truly in the heart? This is a question that has confronted the Church in every age and the response has shifted throughout the 2000 plus years since the birth of Jesus. Before examining the pedagogical methods of catechesis employed in the Church today, it is important to examine the historical evolution that the process of handing on the faith has taken over the years since its beginning.

Jesus Christ taught those around him through a variety of ways. He taught by example, through his way of life, by taking time for prayer, by listening to those around him, caring for their needs, and even healing them with powerful miracles which attested to his divinity. He lived the Gospel message that He also taught through sermons, maxims, and, notably, through parables. Jesus communicated the most essential truths regarding himself, his relationship with

individuals, the mystery of the Kingdom of God, the actions of God, and even moral conduct, through parables. Sofia Cavalletti, one of the founders of a particular method of catechesis, the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, contends, in fact, that “[Jesus] did not preach except in parables” (Cavalletti, 1984, p. 90), an assertion which came from her deep study and knowledge of Scripture.

St. Paul and St. Luke, in their Scriptural writings, use the word “catechesis” as something closely aligned with the apostolic handing on of the faith after the ascension of Jesus. This word has become synonymous with the passing on of the faith or instruction in the faith. The origin of this Greek word is from *kata* or ‘down’ and *echein* or ‘to sound.’ The earliest Christian understanding of ‘catechesis,’ then, is the passing down of a message, a message that should and must echo within the daily life of the hearer (Willey, de Cointet, & Morgan, 2008).

One of the earliest examples of catechetical pedagogy after the apostolic age comes from St. Augustine of Hippo’s work from about the year 400, *De Catechizandis Rudibus* or *The First Catechetical Instruction*. Here Augustine writes about the need to acknowledge and modify the method of catechesis based on the audience to whom it is directed. He bases the content of his catechetical instruction primarily on the Bible and specifically on texts like the *Our Father* that his audience (the worshiping community) would have been familiar with. Taking these well-known texts, Augustine expounds upon the words and teachings of Christ and draws from them the content he desires to elucidate for his hearers (Augustine, 1946).

This process of orally handing on and echoing the faith primarily through sermons which develop and explain the Word of God continued for hundreds of years as the primary form of catechetical instruction. The first written manuals on the content of the faith did not appear until the eighth and ninth centuries when the ‘question-and-answer’ format became a very popular

tool. Such textbooks were actually developed to instruct the clergy and to help unify and clarify their own understanding and ability to teach the faith. The *Elucidarium*, written in the eleventh century, is one of the earliest examples of this type of text. Its influence helped to solidify the direction of catechesis away from echoing the Word of God from the Holy Bible to the memorization of short, succinct phrases, sentences, and paragraphs which synthesized the most essential truths of the Christian faith. The direction set by this question-and-answer style of teaching was greatly advocated by Martin Luther in the 1500's and by the 1800's such printed texts were at the core of essentially all Christian (Catholic and Protestant) catechetical instruction.

The "Kerygmatic Movement," which came into being in the early years of the 1900's, focused on the History of Salvation and was principally supported by the Austrian Jesuit Joseph Jungmann. His emphasis on finding a pedagogical method other than the catechism when working with young children resonated with many. As he began to move away from the rote-memorization of the question-and-answer format toward a methodology that would increase sacramental and liturgical focus, Jungmann also stressed an "education *to* and *in* the faith, not just instruction *about* the faith" (Kelly, 2000, p. 29). This movement towards personal growth in faith influenced another approach to catechetical methodology called the Anthropological/Experimental Approach. This focus on the recipient and his or her life experiences as the starting point in religious instruction eventually led to personal experience being regarded as more relevant than the Divine Revelation contained in Scripture and Tradition. To quote Kelly (2009) again, "The field of catechetics has always been struggling with the tension of the content-method dualism, a catechesis led by doctrinal propositions or a catechesis with a person-centered approach" (p. 86).

As the twentieth century approached, an innovative thinker with a Catholic background began to influence the field of education. To Dr. Maria Montessori, a medical doctor turned scientific researcher in educational practices, it seemed, at first, that her experimental research, observations, and methodological conclusions had little relevance to the Christian faith. Pierre Caillon, in his article “The First Seven Years Are the Ones that Count,” attests that Dr. Montessori, while pursuing her medical degree, walked almost completely away from the practice of her faith. However, as she observed and supervised others in their experimental observations of small children, those same children who were the basis of her pedagogical insights influenced her to regain her faith. She came to realize that her work had not just an educational relevance but a spiritual one as well. The following example illustrates the depth of her conversion. When approached by parents who desired to raise their children without any form of religious upbringing so that these same children could make their own free choice in terms of religion upon reaching adulthood, Dr. Montessori likened such reasoning to not teaching their children a language so that they could choose which language they would like to adopt as their native tongue upon entry into their adult life. Caillon attests, in summarizing Montessori’s developing thoughts, then, that “learning to converse with God ought to take place at the same time as learning to converse with men” (1968).

While Maria Montessori never completely developed a religious component to her method of education, she did authorize and oversee significant experimentation in this area. One of her compatriots, Anna Maccheroni, even presented a paper entitled “Liturgy and its Pedagogical Teaching” at a Liturgical Congress in Montserrat, Spain in 1915, describing and highlighting the pedagogical teaching method used in the liturgy and comparing it to the way in which Montessori was attempting to explain Christian doctrine to children through a similar

methodology (Montenaro, 1990). It would be interesting to study what impact this and similar papers and talks had on the clergy in the years leading up to Vatican II. It is clear that some church leaders were very aware of the Montessori teaching method and its implications on religious education. Pope John XXIII, the pontiff who called the Second Vatican Council, spoke about the Montessori Method in words recorded on the opening page of *The Child in the Church*. He speaks of a “clear analogy between the mission of the Shepherd in the church and that of the prudent and generous educator in the Montessori method who...knows how to discover and bring to light the most hidden virtues and capacities of the child” (Montessori, 1965, p. v).

One experiment that Dr. Montessori conducted into the religious education of children began in Barcelona in 1916 and is recounted in *The Child in the Church* as a successful way to help pass on the language of Christianity, primarily through a material based approach which incarnates the system of symbol and sign which is the pedagogical method used by the liturgy of the Catholic Church (Montessori, 1965). In her own words, as stated in *The Discovery of the Child*, Montessori said, “These notes on our experiments in religious education represent only an attempt, but they show how religion can be brought practically into the life of a little child as a rich source of joy and inspiration” (Montessori, 1967, p. 300). Dr. Montessori did not continue to pursue this experiment into the teaching of religion because she found that her method was uniquely applicable to the Catholic faith with its movements, objects, symbols and signs, and the method of education she was developing was intended to be universally relevant. However, her attempts to create a religious curriculum formed the basis for continued experiments taken on by other scholars and educators, principally Sofia Cavalletti and Gianna Gobbi, the founders of the method of Catholic religious education known as the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd (Berryman, 1980).

Sofia Cavalletti was a Hebrew Scripture scholar and Gianna Gobbi was a Montessorian who assisted Dr. Montessori in the teacher training work Maria continued up to the last years of her life. Cavalletti and Gobbi became partners in carrying on and further developing the Montessori-based catechesis known as the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. Cavalletti's ability to read Scripture in Hebrew and understand the cultural implications of the Gospel passages to their original intended audience added a second dimension to the liturgy-based pedagogy of Montessori. There was now a lifting up of the two related and strikingly similar aspects of handing on the faith: the Parable Method of the Scriptures and the Method of Sign employed by the Catholic liturgy. In addition, Gobbi's deep understanding of the Montessori Method of education allowed for a more integrated approach to catechesis that grew out of an understanding of the best methods of pedagogy for the human person, particularly the young child.

One of the four pastoral constitutions which was composed as a result of the Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* or *The Church in the Modern World* spent a significant number of paragraphs elucidating the role of the Church in today's world, specifically by looking at the dignity of the human person. One of the most famous lines from this document, "Christ...fully reveals man to man himself" (Paul IV, 2013, §22) instituted a movement towards a better understanding of Jesus Christ, his manner of teaching, and the way in which he partners with the Holy Spirit to speak to each individual person. Acknowledging the developments that have been made regarding the human personality and a growing awareness of human dignity, *Gaudium et Spes* goes on to emphasize the child's need for and right to education, especially religious education. This fundamental right to religious instruction and the accompanying need of the child to understand what is being taught necessitated the reevaluation of the process for handing on the faith being employed in the years leading up to the Second Vatican Council,

namely, the widely used Baltimore Catechism with its time-tested question-and-answer style or rote-memorization method.

In the years just preceding Vatican II, as Sofia Cavalletti and Gianna Gobbi were expanding their work with young children at Via Degli Orsini in Rome, observations based on the Montessori Method were leading these two women to the same conclusion that the Church would proclaim in later years: in order to truly evangelize and catechize the people of the world, the Gospel message must be proclaimed to the individual standing in front of you. The Person of Jesus Christ must be met and a relationship entered into through an acknowledgment of the unique way each person encounters and experiences His presence. At the same time, an awareness of “exigencies” or “vital needs” common across specific ages seemed to be emerging through continued observation of the children participating in the catechetical work of Cavalletti and Gobbi (Cavalletti, 1992). Although they had attempted to develop a Montessori approach to memorizing sections of the catechism, they were unhappy with the results. In 1958, several years before the Second Vatican Council began, they decided to set aside the catechism and its approach to religious instruction and embrace the method of parables that Christ had employed with its emphasis on experiencing the wonder and awe, mystery and richness which speak of the inexhaustible nature of God (Cavalletti, 2000).

This Parable Method developed by Cavalletti (or perhaps better designated as “rediscovered” considering its origins in the preaching of Jesus Christ) fits well with several of the ideas expressed in Council documents which Pope John Paul II highlighted when writing to the faithful several years after the Second Vatican Council. In *Catechesi Tradendae* or *Catechesis in Our Time*, John Paul emphasized the need to keep Christ at the center of all catechesis, saying, “In the first place, it is intended to stress that at the heart of catechesis we

find, in essence, a Person, the Person of Jesus of Nazareth” (1979, §6). Placing Christ at the heart of catechesis meant looking at how he taught throughout his life, and, perhaps even more importantly, allowing Christ himself to teach. What an impossible task that appears to be! And yet the catechetical method Cavalletti and Gobbi had established seemed to advance the faith lives of their own small population of children attending the Atrium (the specially furnished room in which the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd session takes place) at Via Degli Orsini in Rome. They were also noting the same religious growth in the children who came to the multiple atria which were beginning to open around the world, indicating that their catechetical method was just as effective when used by other well-prepared adults. The methodology of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd seemed to demonstrate the very way in which the impossible task of allowing Christ himself to teach the children could be fulfilled.

Alongside the Parable Method, which Cavalletti traced back to Jesus Christ’s method of teaching, the Method of Sign, a similar pedagogical practice applied to handing on the doctrine that can be learned from liturgical gestures, signs, and symbols, aligned well with another document coming from the Second Vatican Council. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* or the *Pastoral Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* laid heavy emphasis on the participation of the faithful in the liturgy: “Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to take that fully conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy” (Paul VI, 1964, §14). E. M. Standing claimed that this emphasis of Vatican II on the liturgy and the participation of the faithful pointed directly to the need for an expansion of the Montessori Method within the whole Church (Montessori, 1965). A later document, the *Directory for Masses with Children*, addressed specifically the participation of children within the liturgy and noted that liturgical celebrations are not necessarily effective in the lives of

children. “The Mass may be in their own language, but the words and symbols used are not those which they can understand... It must surely be spiritually harmful to them to have the experience of going to church for years without ever understanding properly what is going on”

(Congregation for Divine Worship, 1973, §2).

Examining the signs and gestures of the liturgical rites in isolation with the children helped Cavalletti to see that just as the Parable Method opened up awe, wonder, and insight in the children, so too, did this Method of Sign. Through it, children experienced a deeper sense of wonder and awe while pondering the individual moments of the liturgy through the symbols, movements, and words examined in isolation in the Atrium and when participating in these liturgical moments together with others while during the liturgy of the Church itself. As observed by Cavalletti, the Parable Method and the Method of Sign were parallel methods for authentically communicating the two pillars of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, Scripture and Liturgy, in a way that beautifully and faithfully handed on the content of the faith and, even more to lay a foundation for “the definitive aim of catechesis [which] is to put people not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ” (John Paul II, 1979, §5).

Before *Catechesi Tradendae* was published in 1979, and perhaps influencing its writing, research into the methods that had been used in handing on the faith since the Second Vatican Council were done through surveys. One evaluation done by 50 Catholic dioceses in the United States pointed to the qualities of successful programs which included: involvement of parents, teacher training, pre-school programs (thought to be a major priority in the coming years), integration of liturgical and prayer opportunities, and service opportunities. Amongst the top nine reasons for the failure of certain programs were: untrained or inadequately trained teachers, limited understanding of child development, focus on child-centered vs. content-centered

education or too content-centered without emphasis on experience, as well as programs not well suited to the developmental needs of the children, devoid of creativity and without variety in the techniques used (Paradis, 1977). These sometimes contrasting traits of successful and unsuccessful programs center on the methodological and pedagogical aspects of the programs. Twenty years later, in 1997, Archbishop Daniel Buechlein reported the following content deficiencies of texts being used for catechesis to the General Assembly of Bishops: lack of attention to the Trinity, divinity of Christ and his centrality in salvation history, ecclesiology, Christian anthropology, focusing on human action in isolation instead of as corresponding to God's initiative, inadequate focus and understanding of grace, insufficient treatment of the sacraments, a lack of clarity and focus on sin (original sin in particular), not enough attention on the formation of conscience and the moral life, and negligent treatment of eschatology.

While it is unlikely that Sofia Cavalletti closely studied these surveys and reports regarding methodological challenges and content deficiencies, and impossible that she could know of their content at the onset of her work as they had not yet been published, much less even occurred, the method Cavalletti and Gobbi developed can be shown to be a complete and effective response to these reports. The ten deficiencies listed are, each and every one, a highlighted area of content within the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. The aforementioned qualities of successful programs are present within the training for the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd as well as a focus on training catechists in content, method, and child development and an emphasis on personal knowledge of individuals so that the children can be given presentations of content that suits their needs, resonates in their hearts, and allows them to follow the path toward developing and growing in a personal relationship with Jesus, the Person at the heart of catechesis ("The characteristics," n.d.).

From one Atrium at Via Degli Orsini, the home of Sofia Cavalletti in Rome in 1954, the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd has spread to children ages three to twelve around the world. Thirty-seven countries across all six inhabited continents have atria (the room in which the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is implemented). In the United States the membership of the National Association of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd has grown from 54 members in 1986 to over 1600 and this same association offers about 90 courses a year staffed by over 150 formation leaders. Over 1250 atria exist in the United States and are present in Catholic (including Latin and Byzantine Rite), Episcopal, Orthodox, Lutheran, Presbyterian, United Methodist, and Baptist settings. There are many seeking to use the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd as a way to hand on the teachings of Christ to those with special needs and disabilities and often children with these special needs are able to be incorporated directly into the Atrium setting with minimal, or even no, adaptations needed (“History of the Catechesis,” n.d.). The allure of this methodological approach has impacted even religious congregations, particularly the Dominican Sisters of St. Cecilia located in Nashville, TN and the Missionaries of Charity, Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta’s community. In 2009 Sofia Cavalletti wrote to the members of the Association of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd about the decision of this community (the Missionaries of Charity) to adopt the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd in their work with children and in the process of forming their own sisters. When asked by Cavalletti about this decision and what they found in this method that set it apart from other methods of catechesis they said, “Contemplation” (Cavalletti, 2009). As these communities of sisters lend their aid in the growth and continued formation of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd the clergy, at least within the Catholic Church, are also beginning to take note of its impact and effectiveness.

One aspect of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd which poses a challenge to its implementation is the extensive, 90 to 120 hour training for each of the three levels (3 to 6 year olds, 6 to 9 year olds, and 9 to 12 year olds) of catechesis. While acknowledging the burden this lengthy training places on perspective catechists (teachers in the Atrium), it is one of very few current methodological approaches that takes to heart the catechetical training requested of all catechists in both *Catechesi Tradendae* and the *General Directory for Catechesis*. In order to fulfill the weighty task of handing on the faith, 90 hours, a burdensome commitment, to be sure, may at times seem to be quite insufficient and inadequate preparation.

A second challenge in the implementation of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd has to do with its absence from the “approved list” of catechetical texts. This absence stems from the fact that the Office for the Catechism, according to their own guidelines, is simply not able to approve a pedagogical approach to catechesis so long as it does not have an accompanying student text. Within the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd the texts employed are the Bible and the rites of the sacraments, including the Order of the Mass. Clearly such texts ARE approved and this fact, at least for now, must suffice. In support of this idea there are numerous bishops who have received and even supported the use of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd within their diocese including: “Toronto; New York; Cleveland, Ohio; Minneapolis-St. Paul; Las Cruces, New Mexico; Saginaw, Michigan; Phoenix; Mexico City; Guadalajara; Merida; Chihuahua; and many, many others, and above all the Diocese of Rome” (Mirrione, n.d.).

While the lack of a specific textbook has been a challenge in many dioceses here in the United States, it has not stopped the spread of this work in other countries. One unique way this challenge has been handled in the Diocese of Melbourne, Australia, is to actually write a textbook based on the themes and methodology proposed by the Catechesis of the Good

Shepherd. The religious education textbook series which covers Levels K-8 in the Melbourne diocese is entitled *To Know, Worship and Love*. In the description of the materials for Levels K-2, the work and research of Cavalletti and Gobbi are acknowledged as well as the influence of Maria Montessori. In speaking about the main genres used in the curriculum, narrative stories, parables, and liturgical signs, symbols and actions are mentioned. Silence as a way to listen and respond to God is also highlighted. In addition, one passage speaks of the Atrium as the original setting where such catechesis took place and lays out the process of “wondering” with children, an essential component to the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. In addition, an emphasis on concrete materials is given as a way to help children learn through their senses (“Coming to know, worship and love,” n.d.). These aspects which form the core of Levels K-2 of the diocesan curriculum of Melbourne, then, are clearly derived from the work of Cavalletti and Gobbi. One final note regarding this textbook series is that Bishop Denis J. Hart, the Archbishop of Melbourne, requested a “recognition” for all of the volumes of *To Know, Worship and Love*. It was thus examined by the Vatican offices of the Congregation of the Clergy and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to ensure its conformity with the *Code of Canon Law*, the *General Directory for Catechesis*, and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. The recognition was granted “so that it may freely be used as an approved catechetical instrument in transmitting the faith” (Hummes, 2008). The impact of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, clearly, is growing and transforming the practice of religious education, a fact to which this Vatican approval attests.

In conclusion, the *General Directory for Catechesis* makes clear that while there are multiple possibilities in terms of methodology when handing on the faith, the method chosen must align with and serve the content. “It requires a process of transmission which is adequate to

the nature of the message, to its sources and language” (1997, §149). Cavalletti in *The Religious Potential of the Child* (1992) acknowledged the need for a “profound accord” between method and content without which there is a chance that the content would be distorted (p. 158). She saw that employing a methodological tool like question-and-answer memorization tended to result in intellectualism and definitions which mistakenly gave the impression that the Mystery of God was succinct, resolved, and able to be grasped and explained in a sentence or two. Instead, the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd employs the Parable Method and the Method of Sign, the methodology of Christ himself in the Scriptures and in liturgy (Wood, 2005). When these methodological processes are authentically carried out the weighty task of the catechist becomes simply to step back into the position of unworthy servant and allow Christ himself to teach and be taught (John Paul II, 1979).

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