

Foglietto of Summer 2020

Dearest Ones,

This time I am sending the Foglietto in advance of the anniversary of Sofia's birth (August 21) and "passover" (August 23). I am writing now in light of the very recent publication of an important document for the Catholic Church by the Holy See: a *Directory for Catechesis*. The preceding *General Catechetical Directory* was promulgated by Paul IV and then, on October 16, 1979, the Catholic Church received from John Paul II, the "Apostolic Exhortation: *Catechesi Tradendae* (CT). I well remember the interest with which Sofia and Gianna studied that document. In 1979 the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd had been unfolding for twenty-five years (having begun—as you know—in 1954); it had already become ecumenical; it had already spread to different countries and cultures and had been welcomed in a wide variety of social settings. Therefore, it was a source of great joy for them to find such confirmation in that official document of the Church, intended for all Catholics in the world, including many institutions and many convictions therein that were now consolidated in this document. One has only to look at the cross references to CT in the second, expanded edition of *The Religious Potential of the Child* [of 3-6]. (The first edition was published in 1979, before CT had been published.) Here I will only cite three of these references:

+Remembering the centrality of Christ in the Catechesis [of the Good Shepherd], Sofia cites CT nos. 5-6.

+Regarding the necessity that the catechesis have a certain structure and order also when younger children (before six years of age) are involved (See the Introduction to RPC I), Sofia cites CT no. 21, which declares that catechesis:

"must be systematic, not improvised but programmed to reach a precise goal; It must deal with essentials... It must nevertheless be sufficiently complete, not stopping short at the initial proclamation of the Christian mystery such as we have in the kerygma; It must be an integral Christian initiation, open to all the other factors of Christian life.

+But it is, above all, in regard to the catechist that Sofia finds affirmed in CT no. 6 what is truly precious: the catechist as "unprofitable servant." (See Chapter 2 in RPC I: The Child and the Adult and the Conclusion in RPC II.) She speaks explicitly about this affirmation at the beginning of Foglietto no. 2, shared in 2005¹, where she says:

¹ This article was published as "The Objectivity of Catechesis in the 2006 CGSUSA Annual Journal and can also be found on pages 100-102 in the 2003-2008 Compilation of the Journals of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd.

The text cited establishes a principle of the utmost importance in catechesis: the need for the catechist to be rigorously objective in the transmission of the message.

In every educational process, the educator must put the one to be educated in relationship with reality so that he or she becomes capable of establishing his or her own personal relationship with it. The task of the catechist is to initiate into religious reality, that is to say, (1) to point to the reality that we are surrounded by the presence of a Person, of a Love, because from this knowledge is born (2) a personal relationship with God.

The catechist should work in a direct manner during the first moment, transmitting this “treasure” that was given to her, and helping only in an indirect fashion during the second moment.

In remembering Sofia’s and Gianna’s study of *CT*, I, too, have wanted to consider our catechesis in light of the new *Directory* and to share with you at least a few of my first impressions of the document. I am especially pleased to report what is written in the Preface to the *Directory*. It includes a long citation from the Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Francis: *Evangelii Gaudium*, which serves as a fundamental reference point for the entire *Directory* and will be recalled in nos. 57 and 58. It reflects our catechesis so well that I want to copy it here:

A Kerygmatic and Mystagogical Catechesis. 164. We have rediscovered the fundamental role of the first announcement or kerygma, which needs to be the center of all evangelizing activity and all efforts at Church renewal... This first proclamation is called “first” not because it exists at the beginning and can then be forgotten or replaced by other more important things. It is first in a qualitative sense because it is the principal proclamation, the one which we must hear again and again in different ways, the one which we must announce one way or another throughout the process of catechesis, at every level and moment.

165. We must not think that in catechesis the kerygma gives way to a supposedly more “solid” formation. Nothing is more solid, profound, secure, meaningful, and wisdom-filled than that initial proclamation. All Christian formation consists of entering more deeply into the kerygma, which is reflected in and constantly illumines, the work of catechesis, thereby enabling us to understand more fully the significance of every subject which the latter treats. It is the message capable of responding to the desire for the infinite which abides in every human heart.

And now for the results of my initial work of comparing our “Characteristics” and other sources in our catechesis with what is written in the new *Directory*.

- 1) I am thinking of the importance of the “place”, the “environment” in which our catechesis takes place. We call the place dedicated to religious life “the atrium” as did Maria Montessori in recalling the space in the ancient Christian basilica which served as an anteroom to the church, both in a literal and metaphorical sense and which is nothing like a

classroom. It is not a place of religious instruction but of religious life. (See RPC I, Chapter 2 on The Environment.)

Characteristics nos. 2-4, 24 regarding the atrium: “The catechist prepares an environment called the atrium. ...The atrium is a community in which children, starting with the youngest ages, and adults live together a religious experience which facilitates participation in the wider community of the family, the Church, and in society... The atrium is a place of prayer, in which work, and study spontaneously become meditation, contemplation, prayer and a joyful experience... The transmission of the Christian message in the atrium has a celebrative character...(It is the task of the catechist) to prepare the atrium and maintain order so that might be a place that fosters concentration, silence, and the contemplation of the children and adults.”

Directory, nos. 221-222: Similarly, the Church has given special significance to her own spaces...for example, in the early Christian complexes the narthex was a space generally situated between the nave and the main façade of the church, intended to accommodate penitents and catechumens. Often decorated with biblical scenes or representations of the mysteries of faith, the narthex, through these images, also became a space of catechesis...The spaces for catechesis are settings in which the community expresses its own way of evangelizing...it is appropriate to reflect on the specificity of the places of catechesis as instruments of proclamation and of education in human relationships. It is therefore necessary that such environments be welcoming and well-kept, that they convey a climate of familiarity that fosters serene involvement in community activities. The very widespread environments that are patterned after school buildings do not constitute the best practices for the unfolding of catechetical activities. It would be therefore good to proceed with an adaptation of these spaces to the actual meaning of catechesis.

2) The difference between school and catechesis, which is well evidenced in no. 222 that I have just cited, is further affirmed in the *Directory*. This is a highly innovative element, and, for this reason, it was underscored in the presentation of the document to the press. We know it is fundamental for the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. How many times Sofia reiterated the necessity of avoiding any attitude or language or anything else that could cause our work to resemble a “scholastic” type of work the announcement of the [Christian] message, the communal reflection, and the personal work that follows it must all have a “celebrative character” because what is involved is the person of God and his relationship with his creatures

Characteristic no. 4: “The catechist renounces every form of control (such as quizzes, tests, exams, etc.) in the spirit of poverty before an experience whose fruits are not his or her own.”

Directory, no. 313: Its relationship between the teaching of catholic religion in schools with catechesis is one of distinction in complementarity. Where the distinction is not clear, there is danger that both may lose their identity. Catechesis “promotes personal adherence to Christ and maturing of the Christian life, [whilst] school teaching gives the students knowledge about Christianity’s identity and Christian life.

3) The *Directory* recognizes that even young children, pre-school children, must be given the opportunity to receive a catechesis that can assist them in their relationship with God. For us in the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, this recognition reflects a “discovery” that forms the base of all our work. It is what, in a manner of speaking, most characterizes our work; thus, we cannot help but enjoy seeing in recognized [in the *Directory*].

Regarding *RPC I*, we must never forget how important the early pages of this book are for our work in which Sofia refers to particular “intuitions” that the young and youngest children have in their relationship with God, manifesting this capacity of theirs with “joy”: this is why we can speak of a “religious potential” of the child!

Directory no. 236: It is from the tenderest age that the children must be helped to perceive and to develop the sense of God and the natural intuition of his existence (cf. GE 3). Anthropology and pedagogy confirm, in fact, that the child is capable of relating to God and that his questions about the meaning of life arise even where the parents are hardly attentive to religious education. Children...are capable of rejoicing before the mystery of life and love.

4) Regarding the contents of catechesis, there are many considerations presented in the *Directory* which we can recognize as being in tune with what we present in our catechesis, through a on-going process of deepening [and expansion] which we refer to as “the spiral” [the “spiral method”]. Again, I am just going to point to a few reference points in our catechesis.

Characteristic, no. 5: The themes presented in the atrium are those to which the children have responded with depth and joy. These themes are taken from the Bible and the liturgy (prayers and sacraments) as the fundamental sources for creating and sustaining Christian life at every developmental stage and, in particular, for illuminating and nourishing the child in his/her most vital religious needs.

*Directory, no. 145: In the presentation of the message, it is in any case necessary to be attentive to how this is done so that it may be welcomed and received actively. It is therefore necessary to combine: a) the concise and kerygmatic character, in such a way that the various elements of the faith may be presented in a unified and organic vision capable of appealing to human experience; b) the narrative quality of the biblical account, which “always entails” approaching Scripture in faith and in the Church’s Tradition, so that its words can be perceived as living [...] and so enable every member of the faithful to realize that this history is also a part of his or her own life”; (Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini* 74). **No. 170:** Catechesis and the liturgy are never limited to reading the books of the Old and New Testament separately, but in reading them together have shown how a typological interpretation of Sacred Scripture allows one fully to grasp the meaning of the events and texts that recount the one story of salvation. Such interpretation offers to catechesis a lasting means, still highly relevant today, for those growing in the faith to grasp the fact that nothing in the old covenant is lost with Christ, but all finds fulfillment in him. **No. 175:** Catechesis...is not primarily a presentation of morality, but the proclamation of the beauty of God, which can be experienced, and which touches the heart and the mind, transforming life.*

5) Finally, regarding the ecumenical dimension of our catechesis and its relationship with Judaism—elements of absolute relevance for us (one has only to remember the material on “The History of the Jewish People” - I would like to point to at least a few expressions in two numbers within the

Directory: no. 345: ...catechesis is to take care of...to affirm division is a grave wound that contradicts the Lord's will; no. 348: For Christians, Judaism cannot be considered as simply another religion, because Christianity has Jewish roots and the relationship between the two traditions are unique...the Old Testament is an integral part of the one Christian Bible, and the Church bears witness to her faith in the one God who is author of both Testaments, thus rejecting any presumed opposition between the two.

I am going to end here. As you can see, I have only considered a few aspects of our catechesis in relation to the new *Directory*. Sofia always considered our catechesis as a “gift to the Church,” so at this time when the Catholic Church has published a new directory, it seemed to me a good and right thing for us to compare the two and enjoy once again the “always new gift” that we have received and that we must faithfully guard.

With an embrace,

Francesca

Translated by Rebekah Rojcewicz, July 22, 2020