



Like Leaven: Accompanying Children on their Spiritual Journey By Patricia Coulter

Mary Heinrich had an opportunity to visit with Patricia Coulter, the author of Like Leaven to learn more about the spiritual journey of catechists.

What led you to this project of documenting the formation journey of seven catechists?

We were in the process of establishing a systematic adult formation program to be co-sponsored by the University of St. Michael's and the Toronto archdiocese. As it was to be included in the St. Michael's group of Certificate Programs, it had to meet certain criteria, part of which meant further study for me. So, I enrolled in the Doctor of Ministry program since it included a pastoral component.

Concretely, that led me to ask if some of the catechists who were already in our (Level II) course if they would be willing to participate in the pastoral project. Happily, seven generously volunteered.

Originally I had hoped to focus the project both on children and adults. Instead, I was directed to concentrate only on one. As there were already a growing number of wonderful works by Sofia and Gianna on children in our catechesis, I chose to center on the adults' journey since that aspect seemed under-represented in our research literature.

What commonalities did you find in these catechists and their stories?

All seven participants were living very full lives and their generosity to embark on a rather long and demanding process was impressive. It was symbolic of their deep commitment to the catechesis, which was also a common thread.

Another characteristic they all shared was the certain sense of responding to a *call* to this ministry, regardless of how long or in what way(s) they were serving in it.

As well, they had the courage to tell "the whole story," so to speak. Whether in their solitary written reflections or in their communal sharing, there was honesty, even vulnerability, in their way of expressing the cost and the struggles involved in their commitment.

Was there anything that surprised you in your research?

The first relates to the point above, about the need to focus this study on adults rather than children. It was surprising, then, to discover that even when the catechists were communicating about *their* experience as adults, the voices of children are heard. After reading this work in its original form, Sofia identified precisely this element; she named it "the formative presence of children."

Another aspect was pointed out by two of the readers of this work in its very first form. Both were, so to speak, "outsiders" to the catechesis, so it was surprising that they had the same response.

One was my beloved sister. She was very gifted with the computer and generously typed the text, along with the many graphics, charts, etc. When she had finished, she remarked that she liked the last part the most, because there was "so much joy" in the adults' accounts. Similarly, during the time I

was defending the thesis, one of the professors commented that in her reading of the whole text, she discerned that one theme recurred most frequently in the catechists' words: joy.

What were your greatest challenges in bringing this book to life?

Of course one was the academic discipline. There was also the element of “quantitative” research, which was new to me and difficult to do.

Another area was the pastoral project itself. While it really suited the experiential nature of the catechesis, it was a significant challenge to base it on the stories of real life people. That is, the major research was not about “books” but what could be called the living documents these women offered.

This challenge—besides the daunting amount of material represented by their accounts—was connected to the catechists' transparency in opening their inner lives. It was such a privilege to read what they wrote on their own and hear what they shared during our reflection days. But the question was how to attend respectfully to their accounts and represent them faithfully, in that they witnessed to, as Sofia refers to in the *Way of Holy Joy* (39),

a hidden treasure in the “most secret core” of the soul, that “sanctuary” within the human person where “one is alone with God whose voice echoes in [one's] depth.” (*The Church in the Modern World*, no. 16).

This is the reason why it became important to let the catechists speak for themselves as far as possible. It is hoped that this helps the reader to enter into their stories as well.

Tell me about the name, Like Leaven, and how you decided upon that description for the title?

The title has two main references. The primary one is the Gospel parable:

“The kingdom of heaven is like the leaven that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.” (Matthew 13: 33).

It seemed an apt descriptor on a few levels. First, because the course experience the catechists are speaking about has to do with their relationship with God, specifically in the encounter with Scripture and liturgy. It was moving to see the leavening effect of those sources within them.

It fits on another level, in relation to how these seven persons speak about their experience with children in the atrium. Above all, the “leaven”—the hidden presence and action of God in us—is about God, not us. Yes, we try to help children in *their* relationship with God by offering them direct access to these life-giving sources. But, as Sofia often repeated, it is the “interior Teacher” who does it all, meaning that the “leaven” is not ours nor does it belong to us. It is God's gift to us.

Yet, on another level, the parable indicates that the “leaven” needs to be given, which reveals how important our contribution is in helping to build God's kingdom. This level relates to other references to “like leaven.” For instance, it is an image that emerged within the time of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) to emphasize the value and significance of the contribution of each of us as the People of God. Here are two brief examples:

“By reason of their special vocation it belongs to the laity to seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and directing them according to God's will.... They are called by God that, being led by the spirit to the Gospel, they may contribute to the sanctification of the world, as from within like leaven....” (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 31.)

On life's pilgrimage they are hidden with God in God....Generously, they exert all their energies in extending God's kingdom, in making the Christian spirit a vital energizing force in the temporal sphere. (*The Apostolate of Lay People, no.4.*)

This image is found in other ecclesial documents from that time, such as *Christian Education*, and since then, such as Saint John Paul II's *Vocation and Mission of the Lay Faithful*.

What the catechists relate about their atrium experience with children gives a glimpse of their own unique way of being "like heaven."

What about your own journey as a catechist? Can you share a favourite moment from your own Level I Formation?

Sofia's 1975 course in St. Paul (MN) was my initiation. A few months later I went to Rome for two years. What an incredible gift.

A favorite aspect, in the overall sense, would be the dynamic integration between the personal context and the learning content of the experience as a whole.

Sofia and Gianna gave such warmth of hospitality to all who came to their Center, adults and children alike. This was also true for those who were closely associated with it, such as Tilde Cocchini, Fr. Mongillo, the catechists, and others who regularly contributed to the course.

There was a depth of friendship among them all. It felt like being welcomed into a community of persons unified in purpose and vision. Tina Lillig captured this essential quality in her marvellous essay, "The Necessity of Friendship in the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd," recently reissued in Sofia's *Facets of Joy: Bonds of Unity and Friendship in the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd* (LTP, 2014, p. 97-101).

There was a climate of encounter, at the heart of which was the primacy of personal relationship—with God, first of all, and everyone there—adults and children together. This was nuanced in a special way in the weekly encounters with children in the atrium—a vital and integral part of the adult formation process— which took place in Sofia's home, too.

If I were to put it in a single word, it would be *love*; the life that unfolded in their Center was lived in an atmosphere of love.

Patricia Coulter, D. Min., received her AMI Montessori training in Dublin, Ireland; her formation in the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd under the guidance of Sofia Cavalletti, Gianna Gobbi, and their colleagues at the Good Shepherd Catechesis Center in Rome; and her undergraduate and graduate degrees at the University of St. Michael's College, University of Toronto.

Through their long friendship, Patricia has collaborated with Sofia and Gianna in various course initiatives, translations, and books (*The Good Shepherd and The Child: A Joyful Journey, Ways to Nurture the Relationship with God; Way of Holy Joy: Selected Writings of Sofia Cavalletti*). She has over 30 years' experience with adults and children in the Good Shepherd catechesis, and presently serves as Senior Consultant for Spiritual Formation, Office of Formation for Discipleship, Archdiocese of Toronto.

In 2004, Dr. Coulter was the recipient of the *Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice* cross for her ministry with children and adults.