



Sofia Receives the Catherine of Siena Award from Aquinas Institute of Theology

On May 7th, during the commencement ceremony for Aquinas Institute of Theology in St. Louis, Missouri, Sofia Cavalletti was honored with the Catherine of Siena Award. This is Aquinas' highest award given to someone who has demonstrated excellence in ministry. Sofia was recognized for her lifelong service to the Church through the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. Rebekah Rojcewicz accepted the award on Sofia's behalf and read Sofia's acceptance speech. A copy of her speech follows below. This award had a special meaning for the 16 graduates receiving the MAPS-CGS degree that evening. Fr. Richard Peddicord, President of Aquinas Institute, gave the following introduction about the award and Sofia:

Near the entrance to Vatican City can be found a famous statue of Catherine of Siena, the 14th century Dominican preacher and mystic. Catherine's figure emerges from a large, unfinished stone block, as if leaning forward into life while still in the process of creation. The statue captures well Catherine's dynamism, her zeal and her energy, her sense of adventure, her passionate love of God and desire to follow wherever God might lead. This evening's recipient of the Catherine of Siena award lives but a ten minute walk from this statue, just across the Tiber River. But the spirit of Catherine set afire so beautifully in the statue, resides even closer than that.

Sofia Cavalletti holds her doctorate in Hebrew and Comparative Semitic Languages from La Sapienza University in Rome. A natural academic with a life-long passion for scripture scholarship and Jewish-Christian dialogue, Cavalletti has written well over 150 articles and books and served on numerous ecumenical and interreligious committees. And yet, Cavalletti has devoted her greatest energies to the littlest ones in our midst - to children, especially children between the ages of three to twelve years of age. As the co-founder of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd movement, Cavalletti's observations have impacted the faith formation of literally tens of thousands of children in over twenty-five countries around the world. Perhaps equally as important, through her tireless teaching and publications in the area of children's theology, she has helped ecclesial and academic communities to recognize the tremendous religious insight of the children in our midst.

*In her writing, Cavalletti has often noted that the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is not something that she created for children. Rather it is a gift of the children to her and to the church at large. **In her acceptance of this award, Dr. Cavalletti asked us to make careful note of that fact: Children possess an essentiality that can help to take us to the very heart of the Gospel where we might encounter Jesus anew.** She receives this award as a way of honoring their contribution to the faith, and also as a way of honoring the catechists who have devoted their lives and their energies to listening alongside the little ones. We have sixteen catechists of the Good Shepherd in our graduating class tonight.*

Yet, as we remember the children and catechists who are at the heart of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd movement, we do want to be explicit in our gratitude for the witness that Dr. Cavalletti has offered in her own life - her willingness to receive the gift with open hands and to nurture it. We give thanks for her embrace of adventure and her ability to lean into life in a way that models for us the spirit of Catherine of Siena today.

Sofia's Acceptance Speech for the Catherine of Siena Award
Aquinas Institute of Theology
Commencement – May 7, 2010
St. Louis, Missouri

First, I wish to thank all those present who are involved with Aquinas, including its president, the Reverend Father Richard Peddicord, for having decided to honor me with the Catherine of Siena Award, even if it has meant overestimating my level of accomplishment.

I would like to begin by speaking of a marvelous adventure that began in 1954 and that bears the name: "the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd." Why do I say "adventure?" An adventure is something that begins and then unfolds in an unexpected way, without our knowing where it will take us, without our having made a program, without equipping ourselves beforehand. In other words, an adventure is a journey we undertake without packing our bags or even having a specific destination.

To give you a sense of the magnitude of the adventure, I would like to offer a statistic. We began with three to five children. Now, almost every day we receive news of groups beginning the catechesis with children here, there, and everywhere. Plus, [there is] an ever growing number of formation courses for catechists. Rather than go on and on, I will simply say that we are now present on five continents.

The adventure began with one child—Paolo---whose eyes, after the reading and meditation on the first account of creation in Genesis, filled with tears because he didn't want the session to end. We catechists can say that Paolo showed us the direction of our lives.

Later we began to hear stories of similar responses of the children at the end of the two-hour atrium session when it was time to go home, and these responses were coming from atria in an ever increasing variety of socio-economic settings. Thus, we began to wonder, "Who are the children?" What kind of relationship does God have with the human creature in the earliest stage of life?"

In fact, the children involved were younger than six, the conventional age for beginning religious education and eventually included children even younger than three years of age. We found ourselves on a very uncharted path, a path we had not "asked for or ever imagined," because we had not even known it existed. Slowly, slowly, as we inched along, we came to realize that beneath the "dust" on that pathway, a treasure was hidden. **The treasure is the desire of the children to prolong the time of the atrium sessions, the silence they create in the rooms where they do their work, and their manifestations of joy** – a joy that is so different from the "excitement" we usually associate with young children, a joy that renders them deeply satisfied and at peace. It is a joy that seems to be rooted in the deepest part of the person and seems to satisfy the child's deepest, most vital needs, so much so that a child with Down's

Syndrome, after a particular atrium presentation and meditation sighed and said, “My body is happy.”

With that first group of children in 1954, we had decided to read together the first account of creation in Genesis, a reading that took almost two hours, so that it was then time to go home. But – and this is the beginning of the adventure for us adults – Paolo was there in the group. Paolo was six or seven years old. He had resisted coming that day because it meant giving up the one afternoon he had free during the week. Yet, when the moment came to end the session and go home and not come back for a whole week, his big, black eyes filled with tears. That small group of five children has multiplied to now “populate” five continents where we have witnessed almost the same responses of deep interest in the “good news” that has been chosen and presented to them, and we have observed the same longing in the children to “keep going,” because even two whole hours feel “too short.”

For all the past 56 years we have been carried along by a question, a question that is deeply imbedded in our hearts: “Who are you, child, and how do you live your relationship with God?” It is the question that over these many years has come to be formulated as: “What is the nature of the relationship God has with the human creature in their childhood, especially in the earliest stage of life?”

Gradually over these many years as we have observed the children at work, it has become apparent to us that there are certain “constants” in their interests and responses. In other words, we observed that there were particular materials – handmade, as always, by the catechists and atrium community – which the children regularly chose and with which they seemed to never tire of working, while other catechetical materials languished on the shelves. For the most part, those materials they continuously used focused their attention on themes that were present in the most ancient tradition of the Church and that constitute the essential points of the Judeo-Christian message, arousing the responses of interest and joy that we have tried here to describe.

It has not been difficult to realize that the essential themes on which the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd has come to be based all converge at a central point: the covenant. And thus, these themes represent the very heart of the biblical/ liturgical tradition.

This convergence has become apparent beginning with the response of the youngest children to the Parable of the Good Shepherd who calls his sheep by name (God initiating the covenant) and the sheep listening to His voice and following him (the creature’s response to the covenant). An announcement of this sort creates a bond of love which is so satisfying and enjoyable that three-year old John (of the USA), when his mother was putting him to bed and had reminded him that the Good Shepherd knew his name, replied to her, “He doesn’t call me John; he calls me Joy.”

I don’t want to detain you too long, but I cannot close without recalling a very beautiful moment in our “adventure”: it was the moment when we realized what a marvelous tool the

catechesis is in ecumenical relationships (with the Episcopalians, Orthodox Christians, Lutherans and others). Our formation courses for catechists, regardless of church affiliation, give the same presentations (with only minor adaptations for the differing liturgical prayers) as would be given to an exclusively Catholic group. And this has never created a problem.

Who knows, perhaps the children have a special future in ecumenism.

Sofia Cavalletti
Rome; February 2010

Translated and delivered by Rebekah Rojcewicz