

Christianity? To Enjoy a Person

SOFIA CAVALLETTI

I first met Father Mongillo in the home of mutual friends, during which time he said very little, and then I saw him home in my car. Just as he was stepping out of the car, he said: "What have we done to Christianity? We have made it into a lot of rules; but Christianity is *to enjoy a Person.*" An insight of this quality was enough for me to understand that Father Mongillo was a person worth knowing and, even more, worth listening to. He could not but have treasures in him.

From the time of that first encounter my expectations were certainly not disappointed. Father Mongillo had an

for countless hours in the library, constantly updated in a continual conversation with the greatest sources in the Christian tradition.

I have no hesitation in saying that it was through Father Mongillo that I came to understand certain aspects of our catechesis. When he wrote the Introduction to the Italian edition of *The Religious Potential of the Child*,¹ he helped me to understand that celebration is an important aspect of catechesis, that catechesis is "to be celebration." With this single word he had explained to me the reason for that very particular atmosphere that children create in the atrium, and in which they seem to be so at ease. We had been speaking of the "deschooling of catechesis"; however, with that one word he had added a more important dimension. When the revelation of God is being proclaimed, it is not sufficient only to know that we are not dealing with a learning material of the kind that is offered in school. When one is seeking to transmit that Word, of which Jesus himself said, "is not mine but his who sent me" (John 7:16), we must, together with the children, stretch ourselves to hear in the way that the book of Deuteronomy teaches us (6:5): "with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." It is only in this way that our listening involves not only hearing with our ears, but it becomes, in the solemnity of a celebration, a listening that reaches down into the heart and permeates the whole of our being.

What is beautiful is that at times Father Mongillo knew how to express the most profound things with the simplest words and examples. For instance, many of you who are reading this know about the difference between the moral orientation of the True Vine and the Christmas tree. Could there be a clearer or more striking way to distinguish a moral orientation that is vitally alive from one that is totally exterior? That is to say, an image of the moral life whose fruits come forth from the interior richness of the sap flowing in the branch of the Vine, and the image of the Christmas tree, which may even look impressive, but has no life. This is an image that is "signature Mongillo."



Father Mongillo and Judy Schmidt
Photo from the collection of Sofia Cavalletti

especially warm way with people, which expressed the richness of the culture of southern Italy, where he was born. Whenever he would come to a meeting, he would never arrive without a flower, even if it were a little wild daisy. But those little daisies were the sign of an inner wealth he wished to communicate.

Residing in the deepest regions of these expressions was wisdom of a constant and rare quality. It was a wisdom that had matured through personal experiences and profound study

I had the privilege of attending his courses in moral theology at the Angelicum University for various semesters. His courses were weekly, two hours in length; however, the content he gave was nourishment that lasted the entire week. That content is found in the orientation of our catechesis. While I certainly cannot summarize here the wealth of those courses, from the first time I attended his lectures, Father Mongillo clarified for me what, I believe, can be called a Copernican revolution in moral theology. In moral formation the first place does not belong to rules or norms of behavior. An orientation of this kind has led to a misunderstanding, which is not yet overcome in our day, that states that moral formation begins with the age of reason, and therefore after the age of six.

Norms certainly have an important place in moral formation; it is enough to see how they are received by the children, but after six years of age. Nevertheless, norms come in a second moment, and must be based on a solid foundation, which has already been prepared: the foundation of relationship. Before knowing *what to do*, it is necessary to know for *whom* I do it. In relation to this, our Father Mongillo told us what he had said to an elderly man who could no longer find a reason for living. Father Mongillo addressed him affectionately, and responded in the man's dialect: "Uncle friar, it is possible to live without knowing *for what*; it is not possible to live without know *for whom*."

The wisdom Father Mongillo offered that disconsolate elderly man can serve us as a guide in living our own moral life, and it explains to us the fundamental importance that the parable of the Good Shepherd has in our catechesis. That voice that calls us each "by name" assures us that there is Someone—in whatever circumstance we find ourselves—who is searching for us, who wants to build a personal relationship with me. Becoming conscious that I have a Partner, who knows me personally and because of whom I am given this name and none other, and to whom I can respond, is the source of that particular quality of joy that we see constantly in the children. It was because of that joy (excuse me if I repeat myself, but I cannot do otherwise) that Maria, not yet three years old, in the hospital with leukemia, and at the age when she was still learning to speak, was able to make

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up her own song, that said, "He knows my name," and that she sang to herself during the long nights of her suffering.

This voice can be responded to in full enjoyment before the age of six, because in the first stage of the human being's life there is not yet that preoccupation on the level of "what to do and not to do," which becomes prevalent after the age of six. If, when these preoccupations surface, the relationship with God has not been established—and established in enjoyment—then rules and norms come to occupy the first place, and God's face can become that of a judge, thereby seriously distorting



Father Mongillo and Sofia Cavalletti
Photo from the collection of Sofia Cavalletti

the relationship with God. For this reason, therefore, it is important to help children to encounter the Good Shepherd from the earliest period in their lives, as indicated by the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on Christian Education (2,3).

This relationship, born in the joy of the encounter with God, will enlighten every "lamb" with its light, and become the foundation and the best spring of our moral life on the level of doing. Saint Paul teaches us this, when he begins his letters with the *kerygma*—the announcement—and then follows it with the *parenesis*—an exhortation on the level of doing.

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We see this already in the giving of the Decalogue: first the Lord tells us who he is—"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Exodus 20:2)—and afterward the rules follow. But we must not separate the norms from the encounter with the one who "taught us to walk" by means of them (Hosea 11:3).

Then we came to realize that the Good Shepherd parable, as well as satisfying the fundamental psychological need for relationship—that vital need which, if not satisfied, prevents us from becoming whole human beings—is the hinge upon which the entire Catechesis of the Good Shepherd turns. It is exciting and illuminating to see its reflection in every theme we offer, because if we wish to translate the word *relationship* into biblical language, we need to say "covenant." The biblical God is the God of the covenant. God is, according to the title of Abraham Heschel's important book, "in search of man." And in the central act of the Christian life, we celebrate "the new and everlasting covenant."

These are only some of the riches that the long association with Father Mongillo has brought into our personal life and our work as catechists of the Good Shepherd. Certainly the inheritance he leaves us cannot console us for the distance that his passage to the Father's House has left between us. Nonetheless, his legacy is so rich that not even this distance can prevent us from continuing to enjoy it.

Two photographs accompany this article. In one, Father Mongillo is offering a rose to Judy Schmidt during one of our meetings of the International Council. I wished to include this because it illustrates what I said earlier about Father Mongillo's ever-present desire to be able to offer something. In this occasion, however, his offering acquired a special significance, which is very dear to us: an ecumenical significance, because the Dominican friar in his white habit is offering the rose to Judy, a deacon in the Episcopal Church.

The second photograph was taken during a meeting of the council, when we had asked Father Mongillo to speak to us about the cosmic dimension of the moral life. He guided us through the lofty thought of Saint Thomas Aquinas, without it being effortful for us, since what he was saying was so fascinating and expressed with such coherence and simplicity—his words about great matters always retained that simplicity. His manner of presenting this theme was so fluid that we thought that it could be and must be given to our

children. In fact, it has taken form in a booklet that accompanies the collection of maxims we offer older children (after the age of nine). The children read it, meditate on it, and copy it with great enthusiasm.

In this way Father Mongillo's presence in our work has been put into concrete form by means of an actual material in our catechesis for children.

Father Dalmazio Mongillo was born on September 1, 1928, in Cusano Mutri (Benevento). He was ordained a Dominican priest in 1952, after completing his studies in Classics and receiving his degree in Jurisprudence. Later he received his Doctorate in Theology and a Diploma in Social Sciences from the Pontifical University of Saint Thomas (Angelicum) in Rome. From 1954 until 1963, he taught Fundamental Moral Theology in Naples; immediately after, he took up his teaching position at the Angelicum as a professor of Moral Theology. He held this position until 2001, at which time he continued his teaching as Professor Emeritus. His final official position was as president of the Ecumenical-Patristic, Greek-Byzantine "San Nicola" Institute of Theology in Bari.

He frequently gave courses in many prestigious Italian and foreign universities. He took part in countless conferences and workshops, and he preached a great number of spiritual retreats, both nationally and internationally. He was the promoter of the First Congress of Italian Moral Theologians and of the constitution of the first "Italian Association of Moral Theologians." In recognition of his academic achievements, the Dominican order conferred on him the highest honor, awarding him the title "Master in Sacred Theology."

Father Mongillo died during the night between July 12 and 13, 2005.

Translated by Patricia Coulter

¹ This is translated in part in his essay titled "Catechesis as Celebration," in the book *Catechesis of the Good Shepherd: Essential Realities* (ed. Tina Lillig, Chicago, Liturgy Training Publications, 2004).