

# Characteristic of the Good Shepherd

## Catechesis Number 27

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“The Characteristics of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd: 32 Points for Reflection” is a list of the elements that characterize our catechesis. The first draft was drawn up by Sofia Cavalletti and Gianna Gobbi, together with a group of catechists in the atrium of Via degli Orsini in 1963. In 1993, these characteristics were revisited and expanded at an international meeting in Rome, and in subsequent years they were further reflected on and refined by the then newly formed International Consiglio in 1996.

The formulation of these characteristics is simple and very sober; although they are offered as a sort of list, they are much more than that. We can say that they contain a great inheritance. They are the fruit of Sofia’s and Gianna’s careful and loving observation of children, enriched by the experience that many catechists shared with them. They are a legacy that have been

passed on to us and that we must in turn pass on with gratitude and fidelity.

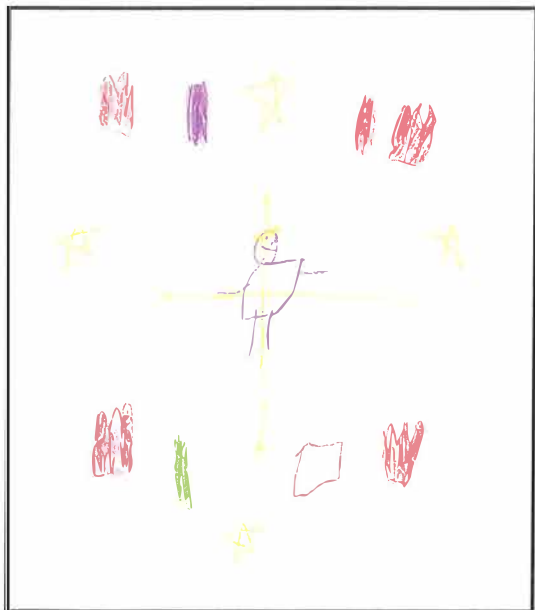
I have been asked to explore the very rich message contained in Characteristic #27:

The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is also concerned with helping adults open their eyes to the hidden riches of the child, especially to the child’s spiritual wealth, so that adults will be drawn to learn from the child and to serve him or her. The guiding principles in this endeavor are:

- The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd **does not seek success.**
- It does **not try to be important or to impress others** (Isaiah 10:33–11:10).
- It is **faithful to the spirit of the mustard seed** (Matthew 13:31–32).
- It **stands in solidarity with the least in the Church.**

Though the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is obviously addressed to children and young people, the first thing that strikes me about it is that it also has among its main purposes that of “helping adults.” In fact, because of this particular catechetical method, the adult has been able to discover the religious potential of the child, which Sofia has documented in her fundamental books, *The Religious Potential of the Child* [for ages three to six] and *The Religious Potential of the Child 6 to 12 Years Old*. Indeed, this catechetical method allows God and the child to meet and to enter into a relationship with each other alone. Thus, it responds both to the exhortation of the Lord Jesus: “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them” (Mark 10:14, NRSV) and to the “silent request” of the child: “Help me to draw closer to God by myself.”

The help that the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd offers the adult does not stop there. Discovering the religious richness of the child arouses in the catechist great amazement, along with



*Giovanna, age five,  
St. Robert Bellarmine,  
Flushing, MI  
Giovanna drew a picture of the liturgical  
colors with Jesus, “the Light,”  
on the cross in the center.*

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*Lauren, age six,  
St. John the Apostle Catholic Church,  
Norwalk, IA  
Jesus with a halo smiling as he walks with a boy and a  
girl who are also smiling. On each side, the child has  
drawn "Christ has died, Christ is risen." She also drew an  
empty tomb (yellow) below the cross.*

a real, reverential fear. The catechist feels prompted to assist the child and, in so doing, he or she is helped to rediscover his or her own childhood, or, more often than not, to rebuild one's own childhood—that "golden age" in which one lives one's relationship with God in a totally gratuitous way. How many times in formation courses we have perceived with joy that the participants were experiencing the good news of the catechesis for themselves! I would like to remember and share again what I wrote in a *Foglietto* in 2015:

Today I would like to say something about adult education. How true it is that it is no different than our meetings with the children! Here is a message that I received on my mobile phone from a future catechist as she was leaving a course session with fellow participants: "You should have seen us coming down the stairs slowly and silently with a dreamy look. Thank you!" Don't you find that her comment expresses the same "quality of joy" that Sofia was talking about concerning the children? And this is because formation course meetings are celebratory, like those we have with the children in the atrium. Both take place in the atrium and, therefore, both breathe the same atmosphere.

This is precisely how it is. The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd helps the adult to recover the child within himself

or herself, without straining to do so, without necessarily even intending to do so, but spontaneously, learning by osmosis.

Let's consider Characteristic #27, that the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd "**does not seek success.**" We should ask ourselves what sort of "success" are we talking about here. In reality, we know well that when we are speaking about our work with others—whether we are giving an adult formation course or just sharing a child's artwork or a child's comment—the interest and the desire to know more is stirred in those around us. We could say that, in those moments, we are "successful." Yet, it is a success we have not sought—it has instead come as a gift and we have received it as such.

Why is this so? When we are speaking of the child and the method, when we are demonstrating how the children work with a material, or sharing some specific aspect of the methodology, we are first communicating our own joy, wonder, and gratitude. We do not set out to make others delight in or marvel over our work; rather, we simply give testimony to the work that gives us joy. Furthermore, what joy it also gives us to be able to communicate that to others! This reminds me of the words of St. Paul in Romans 15:1–3: "We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor. For Christ did not please himself" (NRSV). We feel "strong," convinced of the goodness of our work, and when we do not succeed at convincing others, we do not feel offended or humiliated as if we have failed at communicating that which, in fact, is not ours to begin with. The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd does not belong to us; rather, it is "a gift to the Church."<sup>1</sup> Even if others do not perceive the goodness of it, we are still happy.

Christ himself only sought the goodness of the Kingdom of the Father, not his own kingdom, and he enjoyed it whenever he could witness its "success." Accordingly, we remember what he said when his disciples had returned "full of joy" after having proclaimed to everyone that the Kingdom of God was close at hand: "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants" (Luke 10:21, NRSV).

Characteristic #27 also states that the catechesis "**does not try to be important or to impress others**" (Isaiah 10:33—11:10).<sup>2</sup> The first thing that comes to mind for me is the silence we live in the atrium. It is a silence that is so profound and sustained, and

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impresses those who are not accustomed to it. It impresses them because they realize that it is not a silence that has been imposed on the children; rather, it is a spontaneous silence, born from their work, from their movement. It arises from the children themselves—paying attention to what they are doing. The children are listening to their own work! And there is another aspect to this directive, which we discover in the cited passage from Isaiah and that further enriches its meaning: it is the little realities that do not “make noise.” They are the shoots, not the forests. It is the Lord Jesus and the mystery that he proclaims to not “make noise,” because “He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street” (Isaiah 42:2, NRSV); therefore, our announcement of the Gospel must not be other than an echo of this silent voice. We cannot help but remember one of the passages of Scripture that Sofia particularly loved, in which we are told that the presence of the Lord is recognized by Elijah not in the fire or the earthquake but in “voce di un silenzio leggero,” a voice of a light silence (1 Kings 19:12). Thus, in order for the Catechesis to not “make noise” (or “sound a trumpet when giving alms”), those of us who are privileged to be catechists must be truly capable of limiting ourselves to only being an echo of the voice of the one Teacher, as we read in the following Characteristics:

#6: The Word is proclaimed in the most objective manner possible, so that the words of the adult do not impede the communication between God who speaks and God’s creature who listens. The only aim of the words of the adult is to discreetly serve the listening to God’s Word, in accordance with Jesus’ own statement in the Gospel: “My teaching is not mine but his who sent me” (John 7:16, NRSV).

#7: The catechist of the Good Shepherd does not incorporate into the catechesis themes other than those which emerge from the essentiality and specificity of the vital needs of the children and our work with them.

Another fundamental aspect of our catechesis is being “**faithful to the spirit of the mustard seed.**” It pleases me to read in the Characteristics of our catechesis this explicit reference to the parable, which is often the very first parable we proclaim to the children. It is truly a fundamental and an exemplary one: the only material other than the Word is the mustard seed itself, and

it calls us to contemplation and wonder over this seed that is the smallest but becomes the greatest! And this is so because of the strength within it! The Kingdom of God is like this, and, thus all the various proclamations we present in our atria and to which we listen with the children must be like this. The reflections grow like a spiral, from one developmental stage to the next. And we are surprised and amazed in realizing that those proclamations we have offered in such a simple way and that take up such a small part of the two-hour atrium time have such strength to sink into the depths of our lives. By listening and through the work, the proclamation grows always richer with new meaning. This is why it is absolutely necessary that our catechesis continue through all three levels of the atrium, corresponding to the child’s developmental stages. It is only in this way that our catechesis can be “faithful to the spirit of the mustard seed.”

Finally, Characteristic #27 reminds us of the inescapable duty we have in our catechesis “**to stand in solidarity with the least in the Church.**” Certainly, we know this also applies to the youngest children, and we are always searching for ways to offer the catechesis and live it with those “little ones” Jesus named in Luke 10:21; in other words, even those who don’t yet speak (see Psalm 8:2). However, “the little ones” in the Gospel also refers to the poor, to those who are alone and most in need, all people the Father loves with a preferential love: everyone! The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd cannot but be in solidarity with all those with whom the Lord is in solidarity. Precisely because we must be in solidarity with the “least” and the “last,” our catechesis must itself be “poor” and must be able to thrive in any socio-economic setting. It would be a great shame, a true scandal in fact, if the catechesis could not reach everyone because of economic constraints.

Thank you, Sofia; thank you, Gianna; thank you to all the children and all the catechists who make it possible for us to continue discovering the beauty of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, gift to the Church, to the world, and to each of us.

<sup>1</sup> See Sofia Cavalletti’s article, “The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd as Gift,” *Journals of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd 2003–2008*, 68–77, first proclaimed at the 50th Anniversary of The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd in 2004. This celebration took place at the Pontifical Roman Major Seminary at St. John Lateran in Rome.

<sup>2</sup> It is important for the reader to consider the Italian phrase for this point: *non fa rumore*, which literally means “doesn’t make noise,” and to remember the maxim of Jesus: “Whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you” (Matthew 6:2, NRSV).—Trans.