

## PERSPECTIVES

### Catechesis of the Good Shepherd *I just went to see*

► Written by **Autumn Domingue**, for Today's Catholic

*This is the first in a series of four articles devoted to helping our readers understand Catechesis of the Good Shepherd.*

**M**y entrance to the work of Catechesis of the Good Shepherd (CGS) wasn't something I planned. I was simply visiting a nearby atrium (the children's prayer space) out of obligation to a dear friend, who also happened to be our parish liturgist. The atrium was located at an Episcopal Church in a neighboring town, and I saw it as an opportunity to explore my long-standing curiosity about other faith traditions. I can't quite recall if I had any specific expectations of what I was about to experience, except that I would encounter hands-on materials. As an early childhood educator, I had always been drawn to hands-on learning. My liturgist friend had told me, "You just have to see to understand," so I went, simply to see...

We open doors all the time – automatically, almost mechanically – without ever considering what lies beyond them. I certainly didn't expect that going in the door to the atrium at St. Barnabas Episcopal Church would dramatically alter the course of my life. There were no signs, no hints, just an ordinary door in an ordinary church building. At the time, I was a young mom, just beginning to appreciate the beauty of my Catholic faith and searching for a way to orient my own little domestic church around the beauty I was discovering. I worked as a case manager and child development specialist in a community teen-parenting program. Life was good – great, even. I wasn't seeking a change in direction, and I certainly wasn't looking for a job in ministry. My own catechetical upbringing in the Catholic Church had been "lacking," so the idea of volunteering as a catechist seemed almost absurd. But I had agreed to make the visit, so I went... just to see.

As I opened the door and stepped into the atrium, my breath caught, and time seemed to pause. I was instantly overwhelmed with awe – mesmerized by the beauty of the space, the serenity, the gentle presence of the children, the soft whispers, the carefully chosen materials, and the warm, inviting lighting. Looking back now, I can honestly say it felt like I had come "home." Home in the same way I felt when I met my husband or held my babies for the first time. It was

a profound, joyful sense of belonging, a feeling that called for a response, a response filled with joy and the deep desire to learn more about this sacred space and the way it embraced the child with respect and dignity. It felt like a miraculous, unexpected gift from God – a perfect fit, found when I wasn't even looking for it. How silly it seems now that I thought I was just going to "see..."

You might wonder what captivated me – what was it about the space and these children that resonated so deeply? The simple answer is that I witnessed a sacred encounter between God and His children. It was a glimpse into the child's spiritual potential, and from that moment, many new insights began to unfold...

God and the child are already in a profound relationship of love. My role is not to "fill" the child with information, but to "call forth" the radical presence of the Holy Spirit – the true inner teacher.

My purpose in the atrium is to help the child grow in love with Jesus so that they choose to live out of this relationship throughout their lives.

I am called to create an environment that honors the child's spiritual potential, to present scripture and liturgical truths, and to step aside so the materials can guide the child's prayer and meditation.

The child's deepest longing during our atrium time is simple but profound: "Help me draw closer to God, all by myself."

Catechesis of the Good Shepherd offers children "rich food, and little of it," focusing on the core pillars of the Church – scripture and tradition. Its roots are deeply grounded in the Roman Catholic Church, beginning in the early 1900s with the work of Catholic educator and physician Maria Montessori, and later forwarded by Hebrew biblical scholar Sofia Cavalletti and her Montessori collaborator, Gianna Gobbi. You can learn more about the movement's history and ongoing development in the United States at [cg-susa.org](http://cg-susa.org).

You may wonder what happened after I opened that atrium door over 30 years ago. Within six months I had a new career in ministry, I was gathering volunteers to build atriums and begin my own formation as a CGS catechist. Much later I became a formation leader, eventually earning a master's degree in Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. But most importantly, I was graced by an endless stream of incredible children and families. Over the past three decades, these children and their families have been the source of my continued growth – as a catechist, as a Christian, as a mother, and as a human being. All because I simply went to see...

#### Get involved

Upcoming local CGS catechist formation courses for Levels I and II are beginning in June and October. Contact Beate Butcher at **(210) 889-9869**.

#### A Heart to Serve

*There are so many ways to serve, and there are many people volunteering in parishes, organizations and around their community. This column seeks to inspire a spirit of service and encourage readers to get involved.*

## Now is the time

**A**pril is National Volunteer Month, an ideal time to focus on what it means to serve others and consider how we can make a difference. This month is dedicated to recognizing and honoring volunteers while encouraging more people to get involved in their communities. After all, acts of charity and kindness not only strengthen communities and provide support for those in need – they also help us grow spiritually and spread hope and positive change.

To participate in National Volunteer Month consider serving in your parish or in a community organization.

You can team up with friends or family and participate in a group volunteering endeavor – you might make lasting memories while supporting a cause you care about. You can also research charitable organizations and find ways to support non-profits that align with your values. Or you can spread the word on social media, sharing volunteer experiences and encouraging others to join in.



**"Volunteers are the strength of the Church..."**

—POPE FRANCIS

#### Called to Serve



The Society of St. Vincent de Paul (SVdP) is a Catholic lay organization inspired by gospel values, growing in holiness, and building a more just world.

Through service and financial donations they support neighbors in need in the local community — keeping the lights on, feeding a family, perhaps avoiding eviction. If you would like to serve with SVdP, visit or call your parish office to find out more about the local SVdP chapter.

FIND MORE INFORMATION ABOUT SVdP AT [svdpusa.org](http://svdpusa.org)