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The *Directory for Catechesis* incorporates Pope Francis' teaching that catechesis should serve as a "mystagogic initiation" into a full and meaningful life in the Christian community.

# A Cause for Great Hope: The *Directory for Catechesis* and the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd

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The *Directory for Catechesis* (DC), which the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization released a year ago, offers a renewed vision of catechesis in the Catholic Church. It is a vision that correlates closely with the lived experience for more than sixty years of both children and catechists of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd.

## THE VISION OF THE DIRECTORY FOR CATECHESIS

This third in a series of directories since the Second Vatican Council builds on the prior ones while representing the ongoing renewal of catechesis imagined by the Council. A directory holds the *why* and *how* of catechesis while a catechism holds the *what*—the content—of catechesis.<sup>1</sup>

The earliest directory, the 1971 *General Catechetical Directory*, summarized the teaching on catechesis from the Second Vatican Council. Originally, the council had planned to write a new catechism, but instead decided on a directory as a way to "offer directives and guiding principles about the context for catechesis and a variety of catechetical issues aimed at serving a diversity of age groups."<sup>2</sup>

The 1997 *General Directory for Catechesis* highlighted the strong link between catechesis and evangelization described in St. Paul VI's *Evangelii nuntiandi* in 1975 and St. John Paul II's *Catechesi tradendae* in 1979.

Pope Francis continued to explore the role of evangelization in catechesis in his 2013 apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (*The Joy of The Gospel* [EG]). His insights, including on the role of the kerygma, were a major impetus for the publication of the *Directory for Catechesis*:

[W]e have rediscovered the fundamental role of the first announcement or *kerygma*, which needs to be the center of all evangelizing activity. . . . On the lips of the catechist the first proclamation must ring out over and over: “Jesus Christ loves you; he gave his life to save you; and now he is living at your side every day to enlighten, strengthen and free you.” This first proclamation is called “first” not because it exists at the beginning and can then be forgotten or replaced by other more important things. It is first . . . because it is the principal proclamation, the one which we must hear again and again in different ways . . . throughout the process of catechesis, at every level and moment. (EG, 164)

The *Directory for Catechesis* (DC) embraces and expands on this kerygmatic approach. It incorporates Pope Francis’ teaching that catechesis should serve as a “mystagogic initiation” (DC, 2) into a full and meaningful life in the Christian community. The goal of catechesis—to put the person being catechized in touch with Christ—is unchanged from existing Church teaching, but the directory now envisages a new path forward, inspired by the catechumenate.

Addressing a meeting of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization in 2015, Pope Francis said, “Catechesis, as a component of the process of evangelization, needs to go beyond simply the scholastic sphere to educate believers, from childhood, to meet Christ, living and working in his church.” The challenge, he continued, is “how to meet Christ, what is the most coherent place to find him and follow him.”<sup>23</sup> The directory that the pontifical council ultimately wrote answers those questions in a way that resonates with the discoveries of the founders of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd.

## THE WAY OF HOLY JOY

Sofia Cavalletti (1917–2011) and Gianna Gobbi (1919–2002) discovered that children as young as three years old already know God and have a strong desire to deepen their relationship with God. The efforts of these Catholic laywomen to discover the face of God that meets the religious needs of children at different moments of development led to what is today known as the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. In CGS, children come to a specially prepared environment called an “atrium,” where the adult and child listen together to the most essential truths of the Christian faith from Scripture and liturgy. The child is then given an opportunity to respond through free art or by working with hands-on materials that assist continued meditation on those truths. In the atrium, a child not only finds Christ but also falls in love with him and begins the lifelong journey of a Christian disciple.

In 1954, Cavalletti, a Scripture scholar, and Gobbi, a Montessori teacher, invited children from their neighborhood in Rome to meet with them in an atrium they had prepared in



After listening to Scripture, the child in the atrium responds with art or by working with hands-on material that assists meditation on the truths.

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Cavalletti’s apartment.<sup>4</sup> For more than a half century, they carefully observed children of different ages to discern which themes from Scripture and liturgy led them to an encounter with God. As time went on, they formed atrium groups designated as Level I, for three- to six-year-old children, Level II, for six- to nine-year-old children, and Level III, for nine- to twelve-year-old children.

In 2003, looking back on fifty years observing children, Cavalletti remarked that the children had shown her that a child’s path to God is different from an adult’s: it is a “way of holy joy.”<sup>25</sup> Cavalletti and Gobbi saw that children lived their relationship with God with “an intense and recollected joy, which seems to touch the deepest chord in the child’s spirit.”<sup>26</sup> It is a joy that catechists of the Good Shepherd have witnessed, one that overflows into the children’s prayers of praise and thanksgiving and their kindness.

## THE IDENTITY OF CATECHESIS

### The Catechumenate Model

The directory looks to the catechumenal model restored after the Second Vatican Council as an inspiration for catechesis. That model prescribes a sequence of meaningful stages for a person seeking baptism: precatechumenate (preevangelization and first proclamation of the kerygma), catechumenate (comprehensive catechesis), purification and enlightenment (intense preparation for the sacraments), celebration of the sacraments of initiation, and mystagogy (experiencing the mysteries of the faith in a deeper way and becoming part of the life of the community).

However, since many who are already baptized have never had an “explicit experience of faith” (DC, 56), the stages do not necessarily retain the same distinctive character as in the



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Simple but beautiful materials in the atrium resonate with the *Directory for Catechesis*' emphasis on beauty as a source for catechesis.

catechumenate. The directory recognizes that “the bare enunciation of the concepts of the faith would not permit an understanding of the faith itself, which is instead a new horizon of life that is opened wide, starting from the encounter with the Lord Jesus” (DC, 56). What is needed instead is a kerygmatic catechesis that “contributes to generating faith itself and allows the discovery of its greatness and credibility. The proclamation can therefore no longer be considered simply the first stage of faith, preliminary to catechesis, but rather the essential dimension of every moment of catechesis” (DC, 57).

The directory acknowledges a similar pattern for the very young child. “Rather than catechesis in the proper sense, at this age it is a matter of *first evangelization and proclamation of the faith*” (DC, 239). Cavalletti came to the same conclusion: “When dealing with children we would in fact have to speak more of a proclamation and evangelization than of catechesis; this is the time of the child’s first impact with God’s Word, and its presentation should have all of the characteristics proper to the *kerygma*.”<sup>7</sup> She also understood that this proclamation was not simply the starting point: “The proclamation should constantly vivify every discussion . . . to avoid the danger of falling into an arid and conceptualized transmission of religious truths.”<sup>8</sup>

### The Paschal Mystery

An essential facet of the catechumenate model is its orientation to the paschal mystery—Christ’s passion, death, and resurrection. The directory urges all catechesis to emphasize the paschal mystery, “with which salvation has been given to humanity and which is the foundation of all the sacraments and the source of every grace. The Church . . . has a constant “memory” of the saving events of the past and makes them known. In light of these, she interprets the present events of human history, where

the Spirit of God is continually renewing the face of the earth, and she waits with faith for the Lord’s coming” (DC, 171).

Upon return to the atrium after Easter, children in all levels of CGS celebrate the Liturgy of the Light that begins the Easter Vigil. Young children hear the announcement of Christ’s death and resurrection from their first days in the atrium. After they watch the catechist place a crucifix and light candles on the model altar, they hear her say that at this special meal, we remember that Jesus died and is risen. During Advent, in introducing a topographical map of the Land of Israel, the catechist points out Jerusalem as the city where Jesus died and rose again. In Lent, the children listen to a scriptural account of the Last Supper before a diorama of the Cenacle with figures of Jesus and his apostles. After they depart for the Mount of Olives, the catechist narrates that Jesus was arrested that night and died the next day. After placing a crucifix on the Last Supper table, the catechist lights the candles

on the table and proclaims that on the third day, Jesus rose from the dead. Through these presentations, the children—and their catechists—ponder the paschal mystery over and over again.

After the age of six, when children are old enough to imagine past and future time, the catechist introduces the history of the kingdom of God with beautiful timeline materials that underscore the unity and vastness of the kingdom and the many gifts of God since creation began. Each of the materials includes a “blank page” where those who have received the light of Christ in baptism are writing the history with their lives until his coming at the parousia, when “God will be all in all” (1 Corinthians 15:28). The children anticipate this time with great joy and begin to connect images in prophecies to this future time.

By nine years old, children work with a timeline of the plan of God, which zooms in on the part of salvation history since humans have arrived and had the privilege of cocreating with God. The children wonder at humankind’s many inventions and discoveries over time, which build “horizontal bridges” that even reach us today. They see that, with the dying and rising of Christ, we now have a “vertical bridge” to God in the sacred Scriptures and sacraments that make the risen Lord present to us through the power of the Holy Spirit. They ponder the blank page of history more deeply at this age: recalling Scriptures they have heard about the call of Mary, the prophets, and the patriarchs—and working with materials that help them to explore their place in the history. They continue to wait with joyful hope for the parousia.

A few years ago, a seasoned youth minister began work at our parish. She was surprised that the seventh graders in her program asked for their class time to be extended by a half hour because they did not have enough time to open the Scriptures. Even more astonishing to her was that these seventh

graders “were not cynical.” It was with good reason that Cavalletti and Gobbi called the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd “education to hope.”

### Initiation into Christian Life

The directory highlights a further element of the catechumenate—the “catechesis of initiation into Christian life” (DC, 65). That initiation entails “a pedagogical journey offered in the ecclesial community, which leads the believer to a personal encounter with Jesus Christ through the word of God, liturgical action, and charity, integrating all the dimensions of the person” (DC, 65).

A comparable journey takes place in the atrium, a place named for the space adjoining ancient Christian basilicas where the faithful prepared to enter the Church and participate in the liturgy. In the CGS atrium, “the child comes to know the great realities of his life as a Christian but also and above all . . . begins to live these realities in meditation and prayer.”<sup>9</sup>

### SOURCES OF CATECHESIS

#### The Word of God

Of all sources for catechesis, “Sacred Scripture clearly has pre-eminence because of its unique relationship with the Word of God” (DC, 90).

Scripture is central in the atrium from the children’s first week, when they process to the prayer table and enthrone the Bible. Week after week, they listen to God’s Word as the catechist proclaims—from the adult Bible in the words they will hear at Mass—messianic prophecies, infancy narratives, parables of the kingdom, and paschal narratives. During Advent, children and catechists together ponder the mystery of this tiny baby with so many important names: Son of the Most High, Prince of Peace, Emmanuel. Holding a tiny mustard seed on the tip of their finger, the children are filled with wonder as they contemplate the mystery of life. In hearing the words of Scripture, the children are also learning a language of prayer.

A poignant moment for the youngest children is when, after listening to the parable of the Good Shepherd and hearing that Jesus, the Good Shepherd, calls his sheep by name to follow him, they work with the model sheepfold, Good Shepherd, and sheep. The children fall in love with this Shepherd who loves and cares so much for his sheep; as the children come to realize (which may not happen for another year or more) that they are one of his sheep, their love grows, and they delight in this personal relationship with the Good Shepherd.

#### Liturgy

Liturgy is another vital source of catechesis because it is “oriented toward bringing to life the experience of God’s love” (DC, 95). As a baptized person, the child needs to participate in a “mystagogical journey” that includes an “introduction to the meaning of liturgical signs . . . [that] may reawaken and educate the sensibilities of the faithful in the language of the signs and actions that, together with the word, constitute the rite” (DC, 98).

By participating in celebrations and working with materials in the atrium, children become oriented to the liturgical life of the Church. In addition to the Liturgy of the Light, children of all levels celebrate new liturgical seasons and major feasts.



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The *Directory for Catechesis* notes that liturgy is oriented toward bringing to life the experience of God’s love. By participating in celebrations, the children in the atrium become oriented to the liturgical life of the Church.

The materials play an essential role, as Cavalletti explained:

Catechetical material . . . is a means of rendering the child independent of the adult, in that it enables the child to reflect, on his own, on what has been presented; it is a way of letting the child prolong, alone with the inner Teacher, the meditation begun together with the adult. . . . [It] is . . . designed to lead . . . to the vital knowledge of a concrete Person; it does not lead to the consideration of ideas but to prayer.<sup>10</sup>

Young children, in addition to working with a model altar, put small replicas of chasubles on a stand as they recall the colors of the liturgical year and assemble a puzzle of the liturgical calendar. They meditate on the meaning of gestures made by the priest (epiclesis and offering) and the people (sign of the cross and genuflection). The children and catechist gather in a special area of the atrium dedicated to baptism, where the catechist whispers, “On the day of your baptism, you received the Light of the Risen Christ,” and the children light small candles from a model of the paschal candle. They then meditate on the many



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The child in the atrium comes to know the realities of Christian life but also to live the realities in meditation and prayer.

gifts received at their baptism—the light, a white garment, water, the Word, holy oils, and gestures.

In Level II, the children meditate on the most important moments of the Mass and the sacraments of baptism and reconciliation.

Children in Level III make a missal in which they write all the prayers of the Mass. They also meditate on all moments of the rites of baptism, confirmation, and anointing of the sick. In their typological reading of Old Testament accounts, they make links not only to the New Testament but also to liturgical signs, such as crossing the Red Sea and passing through baptismal waters—a connection made in the blessing of baptismal water.

Cavalletti wrote of the method of signs: “It is a method conscious of its limits and as such it is filled with veneration for the mystery, which it knows to be unfathomable; it is a method that does not claim to explain, circumscribe, or define.”<sup>11</sup> Children begin to plumb the depths of meaning of liturgical signs through these many materials, leading to their greater participation in the liturgical life of the Church.

## Beauty

In the directory, there is strong emphasis on beauty as a source for catechesis: “Proclaiming Christ means showing that to believe in and to follow him is not only something right and true, but also something beautiful, capable of filling life with new splendor and profound joy, even in the midst of difficulties” (DC, 175).

The CGS catechist nurtures the child’s religious capacities for contemplation and enjoyment in God’s presence by preparing a well-ordered environment filled with simple but beautiful things. The children, in their meditations on parables and the gifts of creation, see beauty as an attribute of God and his kingdom.

The directory further asserts that catechesis is “not primarily a presentation of morality, but the proclamation of the beauty of God, which can be experienced, and which touches the heart and mind, transforming life” (DC, 175).

Cavalletti asked, “[W]hat is morality in the Christian view if not the response to God’s love, our reaction to our encounter with God?” As children move through the years in CGS, they bring with them their joyous, loving relationship with Jesus that was formed before the age of six. When their conscience begins to develop in Level II, they consider the Great Commandment and certain maxims from the Sermon on the Mount. While they know these directives are challenging, they want to follow them because their love for Jesus is so tender and their desire to live in his kingdom so strong.

## Ecumenism

The directory stresses that “catechesis has the task of eliciting a desire for [Christian] unity within those being catechized, helping them to live in contact with persons of other confessions while cultivating their Catholic identity in respect for the faith of others” (DC, 345).

One of CGS’s defining characteristics is that “[it] is open to all Christians of various denominations and of different commitments within the Church.”<sup>12</sup> The rapid growth of CGS in the United States after its introduction in 1975 owes much to its adoption by members of the Episcopal Church, who adapted it to reflect their liturgy. The ecumenical reach of CGS has grown to include multiple Christian traditions. In 2020, 82 percent of members of the United States Association of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd were Roman Catholic, while more than 10 percent were from Episcopal or Anglican churches. The remaining catechists were working in Orthodox, Methodist, Lutheran, or Baptist communities. Christians of various denominations pray and work side by side at formation courses and national gatherings, and they serve together on the board, committees, and staff of the United States Association. They share a friendship rooted in their common love of God and the child. This close collaboration never fails to stir a longing for unity.

## THE SPACE FOR CATECHESIS

The directory recognizes that even when the kerygma is being proclaimed, the setting for catechesis plays a vital role in how it is received.

It is appropriate to reflect on the specificity of the places of catechesis as instruments of proclamation and of education in human relationships. It is therefore necessary that such environments be welcoming and well-kept . . . . The very widespread environments that are patterned after school buildings do not constitute the best places for the unfolding of catechetical activities. It would therefore be good to proceed with an adaptation of these spaces to the actual meaning of catechesis. (DC, 222)

The relatively simple act of preparing the catechetical setting as a place of prayer can have an outsized effect on catechesis in that space. Gobbi compared the atrium to a retreat center, “a place where the child can listen to the proclamation of the Good News, meditate on it, and begin to live it according to the child’s own rhythm. . . . [I]t is not only a place for announcement and celebration. It is also a place for work. It is a particular environment in which work easily becomes meditation and prayer.”<sup>13</sup> An atrium has not only beauty and order, but also furnishings, materials, and wall hangings sized to a child of the age invited into it. There is room for children and adults to gather for prayer or presentations and for children to work at tables or on small rugs on the floor.

## A CAUSE FOR GREAT HOPE

This article only touches on the riches of the directory and its parallels in CGS.<sup>14</sup> Considering the joy with which children receive the Christian message in the CGS atrium and go on to spread the light of Christ in the world, the vision of the directory is a cause for great hope.

The annual *Journal* of the United States Association includes a column by former atrium children who reflect on the influence of CGS on their life. In the 2018 issue, Mike Cleary wrote about a time in his early twenties:

One Sunday at Mass, when I heard the words of consecration by the priest, something hit me. Jesus has been with me through everything in life. Through break-ups, changes of my college major and career path, or even through the deaths of loved ones, the one constant in my life was Jesus’ presence every Sunday at Mass. . . . As I heard the words of consecration and saw the epiclesis, I was brought back to the floor of the atrium where I first learned about the Mass. If it wasn’t for my time in the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, I might have missed Jesus right in front of me when I needed him the most.<sup>15</sup> ♦

### Notes

1. Michael P. Horan, “Introduction to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: On Catechesis, Catechism and Catechetical Directories,” in *The Catechetical Documents*, ed. Martin Connell (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1996), 633.

2. Michael P. Horan, “Overview of the *General Catechetical Directory*: Historical Context and Literary Genre,” in *The Catechetical Documents*, ed. Martin Connell (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1996), 3.

3. Joshua J. McElwee, “Francis calls for reorientation of catechesis away from ‘simply scholastic sphere,’” NCR Today, *National Catholic Reporter* (May 29, 2015) <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/francis-calls-reorientation-catechesis-away-simply-scholastic-sphere>.

4. For additional history of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, see Barbara Matera, “The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd: A Way of Experiencing God,” in *Pastoral Liturgy*, 43, no. 3 (2012): 4–9.

5. Sofia Cavalletti and Patricia Coulter, *Way of Holy Joy* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2012), 33.

6. Cavalletti, *Way of Holy Joy*, 31.

7. Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child: Experiencing Scripture and Liturgy with Young Children*, trans. Patricia M. Coulter and Julie M. Coulter (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2020), 20.

8. Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child*, 20.

9. Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child*, 27.

10. Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child*, 26.

11. Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child*, 132.

12. *The Characteristics of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd: 32 Points of Reflection*, 29.

13. Gianna Gobbi, *Listening to God with Children: The Montessori Method Applied to the Catechesis of Children* (Loveland, OH: Treehaus Communications, 1998), 5.

14. For a rich discussion of the *Directory for Catechesis*’ chapters on catechists and the formation of catechists as they relate to CGS, see Mary Mirrione, “Evangelizers with the Spirit: The Call and Formation of Catechists,” Leadership Institute and Catechetical Sunday, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, January 22, 2021, <https://www.usccb.org/committees/evangelization-catechesis/leadership-institute-catechetical-sunday-2020>.

15. Mike Cleary, “The One Constant in my Life,” *The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd Journal*, 34 (2019): 29.

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