

All About the Atrium

Paschal Mystery and the Child

On Easter morning, the women approach the tomb. They come bearing spices that they have prepared to anoint Jesus' body. Though he has died, though he has turned out to be human, and weak, and vulnerable to death as any other, they wish to be near him. When they arrive at the tomb, they find the stone rolled away and the body of Jesus nowhere to be seen. Two men in "dazzling clothes" stand before them and ask a question, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen" (Luke 24:5). And everything changed.

Sofia Cavalletti, a Hebrew Scripture Scholar who developed the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd with her collaborator, Gianna Gobbi, tells us, "The Resurrection is the bedrock of our Christian faith" (*Joyful Journey*, 80).

We are coming up on the time of Holy Week, where as a people we once again live with a particular intensity the Paschal Mystery—Christ's passion, death and resurrection. A question might be, how do we present this most important (but also at

times troubling and dark) event to the youngest in our community? Are children really able to penetrate the depth of the Paschal Mystery?

Yes, they are. And yet, their entry into this mystery and their presence at the Triduum celebrations of Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil requires for us (as parents, catechists, and ministers) to know *how* to invite them into this mystery in a way that will offer them the fullness of Easter joy.

First of all, Cavalletti instructs, "the proclamation of the death of Christ should never be disjoined from the announcement of His resurrection" (*RPC1*, 115). In the atrium, especially that of the youngest child (three to six years of age), the proclamation, "Christ has died" is always followed immediately with, "and Christ is risen." The children hear this every time a catechist lights the candles for them at the model altar, whenever the flag is placed on the city of Jerusalem on the raised surface map of the Land of Israel, and in the

presentations of the Cenacle (Last Supper) and the Empty Tomb.

Second, we must live the passion of Good Friday, within the context of Holy Thursday and Easter Sunday. In the events of the Last Supper, the Passion, Death and Resurrection, we are actually living *one* moment, and only when we recognize this unity can we interpret the Paschal Mystery. In the Last Supper, Jesus anticipates the events of the coming day for his disciples. He tells them, "This is my body which is given for you," and "this cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood" (Luke 22:19-20). In these words Jesus explains that "what will happen on Good Friday will be the gift of his whole self; Jesus will give himself completely as an offering to the Father and to all of us" and in this way Calvary is transformed. It is "not a brutal, violent act; above all else, it is a tremendous act of love. A tremendous act of violence becomes a tremendous act of love" (*Nurture*, 79).

In our atrium, a catechist recently heard this proclamation from a six year-old boy. This child, who has been in our atrium since he was three years old, has been struggling this past year with the brutality of the crucifixion. An over zealous adult in his life had shared too graphically the details of Jesus' passion. Here we saw lived out Cavalletti's caution about sharing the detailed accounts of the passion with very young children: "At times these passages go into details that arouse horror, such as we could not bear in relation to anyone dear to us; why then should we dwell on them with respect to Jesus? We risk inciting sentiments that should not be aroused" (RPC1, 114). As catechists, we accompanied this child as he wrestled with the darkness of the Passion, continuing to remind him of the light of the Resurrection. And then one day, working with the city of Jerusalem, this boy told his catechist, "Do you know why the stone was rolled away? It's because Jesus' love was so great, it blew the stone off." The child took hold of the stone and carefully held it over the city, "it covered everything, even Herod's house" at this point the child stood up and approached the globe sitting on a nearby shelf. Tracing the stone in an ark over it he announced, "it was so great, it

covered the whole world!"

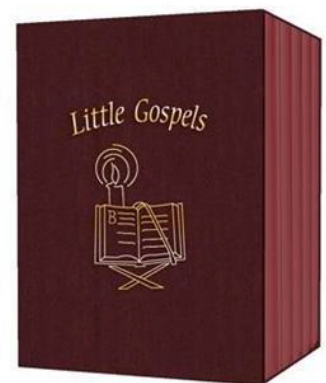
As Christians the mystery of our faith is three-fold: the death of Christ, the resurrection of Christ, and Christ's eventual return. This mystery, Cavalletti reminds us, "is a hymn to life that, in Christ, is stronger than death" (RPC2, 68). In fact,

Each time we participate in the Eucharist, our proclamation of 'the mystery of our faith' is a powerful reminder of the Christian vision of reality. It is a vision that, in the announcement of the death of the Lord, looks directly in the face of the evil that is in the world; however, it does not end there. The mystery of the Christian faith is the paschal mystery in which death and life have fought 'an astounding duel,' and life has emerged the victor" (RPC2, 113-114).

As catechists and parents, our greatest gift to our children can be to initiate them into this mystery, the mystery of life stronger than death, of light stronger than darkness. To affirm with the child that indeed, the love evidenced in Christ's passion and death, is the love that brought about the resurrection—the love that continues to cover the whole world.

The Little Gospels: PASCHAL NARRATIVES

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