



The United States Association of  
*The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd*

# Considerations for Opening CGS Atria

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IN LIGHT OF COVID-19 CONCERNS

An Association of Children and Adults

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As parishes and schools around the nation look to re-opening, many ask how we can preserve the basic principles of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd while at the same time following the guidelines for infection prevention. These two things may seem to be incompatible in many ways and so some are simply closing their atria and finding other ways to provide catechesis for their children. We believe that there are ways of opening the atria safely. We have prepared this document to aid the local atria community, parishes, and schools in discerning how best to do so.

We must remember something very important. Jesus promises us the Advocate, the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit brings seven wonderful gifts to live out the greatest news that Jesus is Risen, and he shares his life with us. He will give us the wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord we need to go out and continue to do the work with those he calls the greatest in the kingdom!

We also know that we, as a national community of catechists, have made a commitment to our work of catechesis according to the 32 Characteristics of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, our mission and purpose which is to assist the involvement of children and adults in a common religious experience in which the religious values of childhood, primarily those values of contemplation and enjoyment of God, are predominant. It is most important in these times that we advocate and articulate our mission to support catechists, parents, and others in the Church and beyond, as they grow in their understanding of the religious potential of children. Especially in this time, we need to be advocates for the child's religious life and the vital needs and capacities they have for relationship with God. We will continue to add resources for children, families, and catechists on the CGSUSA website's COVID-19 page.

It is impossible to advise how each parish or school with an atrium should solve the various challenges they are facing at the moment. Even so, every catechist in the Catechesis of CGS does have, as Psalm 23 reminds us, "everything we need."

## Planning by Considering Scenarios

Each community can prepare to offer children formation in the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd by first considering various scenarios that could occur this fall.

We offer several considerations for these scenarios.

1. **We return to the atrium with the children having made modifications** in the atrium environment and number of children allowed in the atrium at one time. This may mean a reduction in group size to either 10 children per room (or 10 people total, inclusive of adults) or 10 children per group with minimum distance between groups in the same room or the number of children based on square footage and distancing requirements (e.g. 6 feet apart.)
2. **We cannot return to the atrium.** We continue virtual participation which may include resources found on the CGSUSA website for parents and children (Parent Pages, for example), virtual sessions with a CGS catechist to ponder scripture and liturgy, pray with the children, and possibly the use of the *I am the Good Shepherd* catechist guides and children's workbooks. Atrium extension work could be offered to the children for their work time at home. For example, the altar or baptism pasting and tracing packets, or the infancy narrative and parable tracing packets.
3. **We follow a retreat model** that has smaller groups of children and would offer the children time in an atrium once or twice a month. The catechists would work with different smaller groups each week and perhaps reserve one week a month for Zoom meetings with the parents. These parent meetings could also be done with the Director of Religious Education if they are formed in the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. Atrium extension work would be offered to the children for their work time at home. For example, the altar or baptism pasting and tracing packets, or the infancy narrative and parable tracing packets.
4. **In anticipating that a second wave of the COVID-19** might cause another shelter-in-place order and subsequently, churches, schools and atria will need to close again (a disrupted calendar) consideration could be given to beginning the atrium sessions earlier but then have an extended break in November and December or December and January. All the resources mentioned above could still be offered and for Advent and Christmas, family materials could be offered, or online retreats prepared for families.

## Factors to Consider

No matter the scenario chosen, CGSUSA has been receiving and researching the information available and we know that we must take into consideration the following factors:

- Everyone's health and safety must come first. In order to ensure the safety of children, catechists, and parents, we have to carry out our work according to the guidelines we have been given by national, state, and local governments and church leadership.
- Parishes and schools with atria will need to discern what solutions fit their community best. What works in one location will not necessarily work somewhere else, due to the vast differences in what the children may be experiencing in school, what the atrium space is like, the abilities and concerns of catechists and parish staff, the local government and diocesan guidelines, and more. We at CGSUSA are committed to share with the larger community the wisdom and experience of our many members, curating resources that are within the spirit of this methodology.
- The basis of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd pedagogy is so much more than the children's use of the atrium materials. This catechesis holds a vision of children and their relationship with God and of the role of the adult in that relationship. It is this relationship that we need to focus on and sustain, which we can maintain, whether we have the materials or not.
- At times when it is not possible to be in the atrium, catechists can offer ways to remember with the children what they have already experienced in the atrium. Since CGS uses the spiral method, older children who are now at a different stage of development are often synthesizing and deepening their reflection on scriptural and liturgical presentations they heard when they were younger. We must remember that in the atrium the presentations offered to the children are an announcement of the Christian message. It is only the point of departure, lasting a brief moment, and then with the materials, children are invited to deepen the message internally through the work of their hands. The materials are not "didactic" so therefore, atrium presentations cannot be presented electronically to the children. We can reach out to children to recall with them a presentation that they have seen in the atrium and allow them to meditate on how we are united in the love of the Good Shepherd without giving the presentation as it would be given in the atrium.
- For the Level II and III children it might be possible to gather briefly with them through online communication and perhaps share a time of community prayer, but catechists must be careful not to direct such prayer. Instead, catechists can plan the moment of prayer together with the children.
- The Level II and III children have a practice of mystagogy and typology from their time in the atrium. These can be used to enrich the children's reflection on scripture and liturgy.

## Considerations for Children in the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd

The following may be helpful to consider:

- Children “create themselves” through the repetitive work of their hands. In CGS, we will allow children to learn primarily through the work of their hands, rather than via listening to a teacher. Works are designed so that the child can use them by him/herself, as many times as desired. Repetition is encouraged rather than discouraged.
- If our aim is to help children enjoy relationship with God we must ask, “What kind of environment can we create that will respect and cultivate the child’s needs and capacities at this level of their development, especially in terms of their spiritual development?” We have created a space where it is okay to be small. Where child can function independently, enjoy freedom of movement, freedom to repeat a work over and over. They have responded profoundly in this environment.
- The atrium and the materials honor child’s need for order, for further mastery of language, and for independence.
- The characteristics of children at different developmental stages enables those who serve them as catechists to understand and assess what the children need and why they respond in certain ways.

## Considerations for Catechists of the Good Shepherd

The following may be helpful to consider:

- Catechists have extensive formation in preparing an environment that serves the relationship between God and the child. They are familiar with thinking systematically through the physical space with an understanding of how best to organize the space and materials that will meet the needs of different children’s developmental needs. In the days to come, this will be one of our most important tools.
- Catechists are practiced at observing children and have the ability to think through situations, activities, and outcomes for what matches children’s reception of the scripture and liturgical proclamations with the materials needed to help guide absorb deeply the message. Their observations will also assist them to quickly assess if the adaptations made to the atrium environment are essential and not barriers to helping children’s faith formation.
- Catechists also know much about the characteristics of children at different developmental stages, which enables them to understand and assess what the children need and why they respond in certain ways.
- Many catechists may wonder how to ensure that the children are able to experience the freedom that we wish to give them in an atrium environment. These times do indeed

change the application of that freedom, as it does everyone else in the world. For example, we may need to restrict the freedom to choose where they would like to sit, with whom to work (how close they can work with another and whether they can work with another), or what to work on. The freedom to make individual choices can and must still be present, perhaps within more limited parameters than usual.

## **Considerations for Families in the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd**

- The CGS approach to religious formation communicates an approach to the child's relationship with God and core beliefs that can be used to any situation, providing an environment and a supporting adult that considers the needs of children as they grow and develop.
- Parents have the dignity of being the "original and irreplaceable" person in their child's religious journey. The family is the primary community in the faith journey of the child; it is the "domestic church," because it is within the life of the family, we find the first and privileged place of the Christian community lived.
- Parents are "the first heralds of the faith." In the home "faith works through love" and a relationship with God can be nurtured.
- Parents have shared the gift of human life with their child, and through Baptism, have enriched their child with a share in God's own life. Their faith, their attitude toward others, and their trust in a loving God strongly influences the development of their child's faith.

## Questions to Consider when adapting CGS atria in light of COVID-19 concerns

Here are some general questions that might help in the process of discerning the needs of children and adults in utilizing Catechesis of the Good Shepherd as faith formation:

- Identify needs (children, catechists, and families)
  - How will we identify needs?
  - How will we identify our capacity to support those needs?
  - How will we identify access to technology and internet for children and families?
  - How will we identify our atria capacity to support children and families utilizing technology?
  - What professional/technology development do we all need for catechists if technology is used this fall to pray with or sing with the children of the Atrium?
- Determine the calendar – there is a possibility that no more than 50 (or whatever number your parish provides) people may be able to gather at any one time and within appropriate physical distancing:
  - Will you need to stagger start times and limit the number of people coming through the entrances at any one time?
  - Will you need to have a different evening for Level 1, Level 2, and Level 3?
  - Will we blend some weeks to be in the Atrium and other weeks meet to pray and ponder scripture together virtually? Will you meet on weekdays, or could you incorporate a weekend morning?
  - How will you communicate these changes, and continue communication with families throughout the year?
- Determine catechist and assistant volunteer development needs throughout the year.
  - What is the frequency of check-in to see how volunteers are doing?
  - How can you help catechists modify atrium sessions?
- Determine the logistics for cleaning supply management.
  - If your atrium utilizes a shared space, what will the cleaning procedure be before the children arrive?
  - What is the cleaning procedure after an Atrium session, so the space is available later that evening? Or the next day?
  - Who will be responsible for cleaning the space?
  - How many supplies are required?
  - How will you store folders?
  - How will you distribute art supplies and manage other common areas?
  - What is the cleaning procedure for after each material used by a child (or presented by a catechist)?



## General Guidelines for the Atrium Environment in light of COVID-19 concerns

Here are some general guidelines that might help you think through your situation:

- Safety first! Infection prevention guidelines must be implemented as the experts have compiled them.
- Children can have set places for doing individual work rather than moving around the room using different spaces during a session.
- Use clipboards for the children's writing. They should each have their own.
- Instead of shared writing equipment, the children will each need to have their own set for a while. Remember to have extra ones for the children who lose their pencils!
- Have a plan for how sheets of paper that are written and drawn on throughout the atrium session are to be stored and at what time during the day they might be placed in binders or folders.
- Use observation to take notice of when children need to wash their hands, if surfaces need to be cleaned, if there is enough soap, paper towels, etc. It may be useful to create checklists in order to assist all adults to adjust to these new observational elements and routines.
- Try to prepare so that the children can be independent, even if they may need to be independent under supervision for as long as infection prevention requires, such as when washing their hands.
- Think through your timing, in order to ensure good flow in the working environment and at the various stations to avoid conflicts and unnecessary stress.
- Use Grace and Courtesy presentations to establish new routines and to explain to the older children why it is necessary to do these things. When possible, allow the children to take part in developing some of the routines and rules (make sure this is only in areas where different solutions are possible – do not present the opportunity to choose when there is none!)
- Remember, there are some places in the world where children work outside with atrium materials depending on where they are. If you have well-established routines for taking care of the materials, the children can work just as well with them outside .
- The infection prevention guidelines require us to clean materials and equipment regularly and between groups, but they do not say that cleaning needs to be done between each time a child uses the material. The most important thing is that the children have good hand hygiene. Of course, differences apply if we are referring to school-aged children or toddlers who are still putting things in their mouths.
- Include the children in the cleaning routines during or at the end of the atrium session. Find out what kind of cleaning they are able to safely do themselves and what the adult needs to take sole responsibility for.

- Make sure the children's hands are clean before a presentation, so that they touch the materials with clean hands. Set procedures to clean the materials frequently.
- Exercises of Practical Life and other practical work might need to be very limited and might simply connect all activities to the practical aspects of our work in the atrium.
- Before reopening, check your water system, HVAC, Gas, and other systems that have been shut down for a long period.
- Plan for more children and staff out sick or parents who do not want their children in the atrium.
- Consider whether there are some materials that could be made during the summer that might allow:
  - Children to take a material home to support remote learning
  - Children to have their own set to comply with regulations
  - One to be taken out of circulation for cleaning while another can be put on the shelf for use.

This list is far from comprehensive and it works best for catechists in connection with the core texts, catechist's formation course notes, and personal album. We should regard the current circumstances as an opportunity to better hone a sense of what is essential whether that be for how to best prepare a clean and sanitized environment that protects children and adults or in how the catechist presents the proclamations of the Christian message to children in the presentations and with materials.

We must have faith that human nature will allow us to adapt and that our human tendencies will help us look for solutions. It is important that we not only see limitations, but that we stay positive and open to finding new possibilities within the restrictions we have been given. In order to do this, we must encourage and affirm each other, be open to possibilities for ways of offering the children the retreat experience they so often desire and find during their atrium sessions. It is important to share ideas and be generous, praise each other, and share this recognition with parents, parish leadership and pastors.

Sofia Cavalletti reminded catechists what brings us together, which applies even in these days:

“We all have a common spring at which we drink: the mystery of God filtered through the child. The face of God has many aspects, and what is shown to us through the child, is different from what is familiar to us as adults. We enter into a spontaneous relationship with God because it is, He who first ‘called us by name.’”

We can do this together with our beloved Good Shepherd and those He calls the greatest in the Kingdom!