

For Freedom Christ Has Set Us Free

By Mary Mirrione

“For freedom Christ has set us free... For you were called to freedom... serve one another through love.” (Galatians 5:1, 13)

Diego is eleven years old. For years he has received religious formation through the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd (CGS) in a carefully prepared environment for the religious life of children called an atrium. He is working with a material known as the “Unity and Vastness of the Kingdom of God,” a timeline that takes a long and essential view of the history of salvation. Diego ponders the moment in this history when God says, “Let us make humankind in our image and likeness” (Gen 1:26). The catechist asks: “What do you think that means?” Diego never answers immediately. After a few minutes, he says, “It means we are able to live the Maxims.” Then, he brings over the box of “The Maxims of Jesus.”¹ This material consists of twelve wooden tablets, each holding a scripture verse of Jesus’ moral announcements. Under the words of Genesis, he places some of these Maxims:

- “... be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Mt 5:48)
- “I give you a new commandment: love one another as I have loved you” (Jn 13:34)

- “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Mt 22:39)

While Diego has not yet studied the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, he is living what it teaches: “Freedom is exercised in relationships between human beings. Every human person, created in the image of God, has the natural right to be recognized as a free and responsible being. All owe to each other this duty of respect. The right to the exercise of freedom, especially in moral and religious matters, is an inalienable requirement of the dignity of the human person” (CCC 1738).

In the atrium, Diego is “recognized as a free and responsible being” and is given the time and the space needed for him to exercise that freedom. It is his response to being called by name by his Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, who “loves you; he gave his life to save you; and he is now living at your side every day to enlighten, strengthen and free you.”²

Making Space for the Freedom to Respond

Often, when we relate the words “freedom” and “responsibility” to children, the words carry connotations that can seem to be

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in conflict. We may think that freedom for children is climbing trees or chasing butterflies. We associate responsibility for children with taking care of chores or doing homework. We can see these two sets of activities as mutually exclusive. The children may chase butterflies after they have taken out the garbage. Such contradictions disappear, however, when we recognize that freedom and responsibility in children go hand in hand. What is necessary is a prepared environment where children have the ability, which is to say the freedom, to respond to the world, to life, to their God and Father of all.

In CGS, catechists prepare an atrium environment furnished with materials that are simple, beautiful, and carefully handmade by them and the local community. These materials give the children the ability to respond to themes from Scripture and liturgy that have, over the course of seventy years, been shown to be the "face of God" that children of each age and stage are particularly drawn to.³ Every catechist respects the children's right to choose freely from this prepared environment since every choice the children make is good and can lead to contemplation and enjoyment in the presence of God.

Children are motivated by a desire for independence and by a strong need to live in a community—to be in relationships with others. For children under the age of six, this is seen in the freedom to choose from a selection of biblical and liturgical announcements available to them through wooden materials that help them "fall in love" with their Good Shepherd. For children between the ages of six and twelve, the developing sense of moral judgment is challenged by the needs and judgments of others. In order to fulfill these needs, children build their skills for communicating effectively and discerning what limits or exceptions to limits might be necessary for the community to function in a harmonious way. The independence the children long for can only be achieved when they have the necessary skills for employing their freedom in appropriate, productive, and satisfying ways.

Freedom in the atrium does have limitations. The children must not interfere with or harm other children or their work. Work materials must be returned to their proper places. A child can freely choose the materials to work with once the child has received a presentation. In Maria Montessori's own words: "to give a child liberty is not to abandon him to himself or neglect him. The help we give must not amount to a passive indifference to all the difficulties he will encounter; rather we must support his development with prudent and affectionate care."⁴

Finding the Balance between Freedom and Responsibility

Another benefit of providing a prepared atrium environment with a balance between freedom and responsibility resulting in the child's spontaneous activity is that children engage in their own real work and seldom have the inclination to test limits. They are interested and satisfied with their work.

Gemma came after school to the atrium. She was having a difficult day. She gathered with a group of seven-to-nine-year-old children. The catechist observed that Gemma was irritable and seemed confrontational. The catechist had prepared to work with the children on a synthesis of the Infancy Narratives to consider

how the Holy Spirit was revealed in each narrative. They all had years in the atrium and knew these Gospel passages well. As the work was introduced, Gemma, in a loud and angry voice, exclaimed: "How do we even know there is a God?!" The children looked at her, shocked that she could say such a thing! In docility to the Holy Spirit, the catechist asked the children to ponder how the people of the Gospel knew God and invited them all to look to the Infancy Narratives for an answer. The children formed small groups, and each group chose an Infancy Narrative with the corresponding diorama and began their work. Instead of joining a group, Gemma asked if she could go to the prayer table. She quietly sat down and opened the Bible. Within a few minutes, she made another loud noise, but this time it was a sigh of amazement. Her eyes had come to rest on the first chapter of Jeremiah: "I knew you before I formed you in your mother's womb" (Jer 1:5). She joyfully had her answer. It was she who led the closing prayer that day. There had been no lectures or punishments for "bad" behavior. She was simply given time and space and freedom to encounter the one who had knitted her in her mother's womb and knew her. In that space and time, she knew him. Her ability to respond in freedom brought holy joy to all gathered that day.

Nurturing Freedom, and Responsibility in Children

True freedom and responsibility when nurtured in children becomes the power to act on one's own ability to respond to all God has given us (CCC 1731). It is a power that can shape one's life to live a life worthy of the call we have received (cf. Eph 4:1-16). The children have shown this in their growth and maturity, in their care of each other, and especially in their prayer. Kelsie and Amanda are both nine years old. For seven years, they have worked in the atrium. Together, they prepare a prayer for their small atrium community: "Dear Lord, thank you for the things you have done for us. You have done a great job at making this world. You have served us with your gifts. Now it is our turn to serve you with our gifts." And now it is our turn to serve him and those he calls the greatest in the kingdom.

Mary Mirrione, MAPS CGS, is National Director of the United States Association of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd (CGSUSA). She serves as an adjunct faculty member of Kino Catechetical Institute in the Diocese of Phoenix and is a consultant for the USCCB Subcommittee on the Catechism. She has worked extensively as an advocate for the religious life of children as a catechist, a Director of Religious Education, and a formation leader for catechists in Catechesis of the Good Shepherd as well as diocesan catechetical leaders. For more information on this approach to religious formation, please visit www.cgsusa.org.

Notes

- ¹ The Maxims of Jesus are key announcements from Jesus found in the New Testament that provide guidance on living in relationship with God.
- ² Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 164.
- ³ The Catechesis began in Rome, Italy, in 1954 with the work of Dr. Sofia Cavalletti and Gianna Gobbi.
- ⁴ Maria Montessori, *The Child in the Family* (Amsterdam, the Netherlands: Montessori-Pierson Publishing Company, 2007), 36.

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