

Big Souls Discovered in Small Boys

by Fr. John Anthony Boughton, CFR

I think I have been witness to a miracle. The first time I saw this phenomenon I sat wide eyed with mouth agape at the sheer marvel of it. I have witnessed it several more times. Though I am able to keep my mouth shut, I am in no less of a state of wonder. My heart immediately knows the significance of what I see and my head tries to embrace all that is happening. What is this thing I am speaking of? Well... I will try to describe it, but I really think it must be witnessed to appreciate it fully.

Imagine, 30 boys between the ages of 6-10, all in the same room, being silently attentive for two hours to something other than a television. Now, imagine someone reading from the life of Jesus or the parables to them and them remaining silent, attentive, and fully engaged. I tell you, I have seen it happens each week here at our boys program. And these are the same boys who in every other setting act just like rambunctious boys should. What is captivating them so? I would suggest that they are personally discovering their capacity to encounter God directly through the Montessori Method of teaching applied to catechesis. It may in fact not be a miracle, but it is certainly God acting to engage these children.

Some years ago, I was excitedly told about a Montessori based catechesis program, by my sister-in-law. Having read Madame Montessori's accounts of the profound religious capacity children, I was more than intrigued by the idea. Madame Montessori, a woman of deep faith, did not originally think of using her teaching method for catechesis. But, when she saw the anointed response of children using her method with the life and parables of Jesus, she said it was as if the whole method became alive for the first time. She said it was as if it had been really intended for this all the time.

The form of the catechesis supposes that the Lord wants to be in unmediated contact with each child and that the children have an innate aptitude for an unhindered and serene enjoyment of God. The program also supposes that the purpose of adults in the religious education of children is to bring them into contact with the Lord, by providing them the environment where they can become used to enjoying the presence of God. This environment called the "Atrium" is full of materials that correspond to the needs of the children. It is a place set apart, that speaks to the child visually, tactilely, emotionally, audibly and spiritually. Every littlest detail is geared to engaging the child with the Word of God in the way he or she is able to learn given their age. 7 year olds process the world differently than 11 year olds, for instance. The teachers do not lecture, so much as present the Word of God whilst the children see figures that correspond to the particular parable or sacrament. They are then given the opportunity to work with the figures in order to individually process through the meaning of the parable or the sacrament that was presented. It is a profoundly personal encounter with the Lord.

I will give you an example of the class on the Eucharistic presence as told by Br. Paul Donnelly. Bear in mind that the boys had already worked some with the parable of the Good Shepherd, and with parts of the Mass. Also know that the teacher never gives the answers to questions, the children find them on their own. Thus, imagine this group being shown the figures of a shepherd, sheep, a sheepfold, a chalice, a paten with a host on it, and an altar with its cloth. The brother places the shepherd on the altar, with the sheep around. He asks, "*What do we know about the Good Shepherd?*" The children respond, "*He cares for the sheep, he loves them!*" Then he asks them, "*And if one gets lost, does he leave him lost?*" They answer "No," "*He searches for the lost one.*" Then he asks "*And then?*" They answer, "*He picks her up and puts her on his back.*" Again he asks, "*And then?*" They reply, "*He takes her back to the sheepfold.*" The brother's heart races a bit as he wonders if they really understand. Slowly, he asks, "*Who is the*

Good Shepherd?” They answer, first one, then many, *“Jesus.”* The brother asks, *“Who are the sheep?”* All but one says, *“We are the sheep.”*

The brother then takes the shepherd off the altar and puts him out of sight. He looks at them intently, heart pounding, and asks, *“Did the shepherd leave the sheep completely, or is he still with them in some way?”* They looked and slowly shook their heads. No he had not left them. *“How is he present?”* Trying to process the question they answered: *“In the Spirit.” “In the sheep.” “On the Altar.” “In the Sheepfold” “In the chalice.” “In the paten.” “In the host” “In the Eucharist.”* He asks, *“So, did he leave the sheep all alone?”* *“No!”* they said. So he asks, *“In what way is he present to them?”* They all concluded, *“In the Eucharist.”*

Maybe its not a miracle, but these boys now own the reality of the real presence of Jesus in a way they never could have if we had merely told them this truth a thousand times. They arrived at it without rote memory or via a lecture; rather they came to the truth Jesus proclaims in His parables and life, on their own by working with the concepts in a way they could grasp until they understood.

The amazing thing is really the transformative impact this catechesis has on these kids. One mother described how after a few weeks of being in the “Atrium, her son began to insist on leading the family in prayer before meals because he jus knew he needed to show God his gratitude at that time. Now they do it each night. The boys are very excited to be part of the program. They continually ask about it during the week. The parents ask how they behave in class and are often surprised when we tell them we have no troubles with them. Boys who were notoriously ill behaved become some of the most diligent and earnest of students. Why should we be surprised? When a child of God comes to really know Him it transforms the child more into the person he is called to be.

I am confident that Our Lord desired us to have this program. He arranged things such that we had need of a new person to head our younger boys program down here. Br. Paul Donnelly was sent down, who knew of the program and was more than willing to put in the time and effort to study and make all the necessary materials for the program. Together with Br. Dismas Kline, who also was inspired by the method, they constructed the ambiance of the “Atrium.” On the Feast of the Sacred Heart, just as the brothers finished building all the pieces to the “Atrium” they were invited to the witness the inauguration of the very same program by the Missionaries of Charity just a mile down the road! Evidently the Lord wants this catechesis in Comayagua. Sadly, because of the intensive background preparation required for the program, the vast majority of the places that have it are wealthy parishes. So, we are excited to be able to offer it to the kids from our barrio.

I tell you about this program because the need for good catechesis is essential to good human formation. Catechesis is meant to form children. This catechesis allows the Words and life of Jesus to form them. In fact, it does not shape them as a mold shapes a lump of clay into something it was not. Rather by encountering the truth Jesus came to proclaim via prayer and reflection, these children uncover their deepest identity as children of God who have an eternal destiny. We can educate kids, but if they don’t meet God personally, they will never know that He has had a plan for each one of them from before time. Then we would have failed them in the most profound way. Conversely, children who begin to appreciate the capacity of their souls and meet Jesus directly will be prepared to give themselves selflessly in marriage when the time comes, or to say yes to a religious vocation. We ask for your prayers for this program. We hope that through the generosity of benefactors we will be able to bring in instructors who can officially train more brothers, Missionaries of Charity, the Missioners of Christ and any interested parishes in the method.