

Catechesis of the Good Shepherd

The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is an approach to the religious formation of children. It is rooted in the Bible, the liturgy of the church, and the educational principles of Maria Montessori. Children gather in an "atrium," a room prepared for them, which contains simple yet beautiful materials that they use.

If an adult hears a beautiful passage from the Bible, the adult might take a Bible, find the passage, and read it slowly again and again. He or she may think deeply about the words and perhaps speak to God in a thankful or hopeful prayer. But a little child, too young to read, needs another way. In an atrium the child can ponder a biblical passage or a prayer from the liturgy by taking the material for that text and working with it - placing wood figures of sheep in a sheepfold of the Good Shepherd, setting sculpted apostles around a Last Supper table, or preparing a small altar with the furnishings used for the Eucharist. Older children who do read often copy parables from the Bible, lay in order written prayers from the rite of baptism, or label a long time line showing the history of the kingdom of God.

CGS around the World

The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd has grown and spread amazingly since its origin in Rome in 1964. At last count it is in 19 countries: Australia, Austria, Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Croatia, Germany, Haiti, Ireland, Japan, Mexico, New Zealand, Panama, South Africa, Tanzania, Italy, and the United States. In the United States there are hundreds of atria in Catholic and Episcopal settings, as well as in several other Christian churches.

CGS is divided into three levels. Level 1 is age 3-6, Level 2 is age 6-9, and Level 3 is age 9-12.

The Early Learning Center...

In Level 1 the controlling image is Christ the Good Shepherd who loves his sheep and gives everything he is for them. The Good Shepherd knows his sheep and calls them by their name. The child comes to discover who the Shepherd is and who the sheep are. What stands behind all this is the first moment of the covenant, the moment of gift. Level 1 stays focused on the enjoyment of the gift of God's own self to the child. This gift of eternal love is the foundation of further religious insight and moral development.

1st-4th grade...

Level 2 continues the reflection on the moment of gift and begins to awaken in the child the question of their personal response. The controlling image is Christ the True Vine, and the History of the Kingdom of God. The child begins to discover the vast cosmic history of God's plan of salvation and that they have something to contribute to it. Moral sensitivity/awareness begins here and grows with the presentations of Jesus' Maxims, Moral Parables, and Reconciliation. The child's desire to carry out the requests of the Good Shepherd naturally flow from the relationship of loving trust that was established in the previous level.

5th grade...

Level 3 carries the human response further. The controlling image is the Plan of God as worked out in the Bible and human history. The child begins to deal with the advance of the Kingdom and people's opposition to it. The paradigm of Creation-Redemption-Parousia guides a more thorough exploration of Scripture, particularly the Old Testament.

Throughout all three levels, the child encounters the essentials of the Faith. All three levels include presentations on the Sacraments, the Bible, Geography, Infancy and Passion Narratives, Prophecies, Parables, Maxims in a manner developmentally appropriate. The presentations increase in detail and sophistication as the child matures.

The Atrium

In the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd the classroom, called the Atrium, is a spiritual environment - more like a place of worship than a traditional classroom. It is perceived as "holy ground" where Christ may be encountered in Word and Action. It is a place that, in Gianna Gobbi's words, "creates the conditions for silence and reverence and helps the children focus on and listen to God."

The Catechist

In the Atrium, teachers are not called teachers, but "catechists." This is because of the premise of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd program that the Holy Spirit is the teacher --the catechist simply provides tools and assists the child.

Currently St. Dennis has several primary catechists. Many other individuals support the atrium with their time and talents also. Parents are invited in to assist children in the atrium and experience the child's spiritual life in this special environment.