Preparing the environment of the Domestic Church*

* The term “Domestic Church” refers to the family, the smallest body of gathered believers in Christ. Though recovered only recently, the term dates back to the first century AD. The Greek word ecclesiola referred to “little church.” The early Church understood that the home was fertile ground for discipleship, sanctification, and holiness.

Be Not Afraid

Children love to sing. It is important for our children to learn about music expression, to experience the enjoyment of music, to be able to sing and carry a tune. The songs of our childhood become a part of us. Even as adults, we can be shaped by music, with a melody or lyrics that resounds in our hearts. Recently, I heard a song that had been sung in our parish community throughout my youth. As the familiar melody began, it was as if I were hearing the words for the first time. The refrain resonated with me, because each of the four lines reminded me of a moment with the children in the Atrium this year. The song was “Be Not Afraid,” composed by Father Bob Dufford, SJ. It is one of the most beloved worship songs of our time, appearing in the hymnals of every Christian denomination. Based on Isaiah 43:2–3 and Luke 6:20, the 1975 composition has comforted troubled hearts for more than forty years. The lyrics of the refrain:

Be not afraid,
I go before you always,
come follow me, and
I will give you rest.

BE NOT AFRAID

Fears are a normal part of life and can be a response to a real or perceived threat in a child’s environment. Typical childhood fears change with age. While these lyrics will not alleviate childhood fears, they can ease a troubled heart. How comforting to hear words spoken repeatedly through Sacred Scripture. We hear the words, “Be not afraid” spoken by the angel to Mary when announcing that she would be the mother of our Lord; to the shepherds on the night of Christ’s birth; and at the tomb when the women come seeking our Lord. Those must be important words, that we hear them so often.

I GO BEFORE YOU ALWAYS

In the parable of the Good Shepherd, we hear the words, “when he has led out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and they follow him, because they recognize his voice.” Why does the Shepherd not follow behind the sheep, or walk along side of them? Why is it important that he go ahead of them? The Shepherd leads the sheep and they follow

Do we sing this song in the Atrium environment? No, but it is important for our children to know the liturgical music of your community. In the Atrium, we do lift up these particular themes and words of comfort found in “Be Not Afraid” for the children and we ponder them together.
him. From Psalm 23, we know that the Shepherd uses his rod and staff, which brings the sheep comfort. A Shepherd may have used his rod to check the path for holes, so that the sheep would step in a hole and injure a leg. The children come to know Jesus as the Good Shepherd and as the Light. At the prayer table, Kinley, age 5 said to Jesus, “I will follow you wherever you go.”

COME FOLLOW ME
The Shepherd calls his sheep by name and they follow him. The children find joy in the fact that the Shepherd knows them and calls them by name, this means that the Shepherd knows them very well. He calls the sheep to follow him, they know his voice, they trust him. They follow the Shepherd, because they know he will lead them to a place where they will find all that they need.

“The littlest ones recognize the gift and enjoy it deeply. At the first level, together we hear the Good Shepherd call us by name. We note that the family forms the initial circle, which hold the youngest child where the call is heard. As the child grows, the circle broadens to include others. For the elementary child, ages 6 to 12, the question becomes, “Who else calls my name?” They recognize that others are also called and that God is in search of humans to help build the kingdom. As the circle widens the older children work in teams on timelines, a research project, or organizing a club. ...The Church is the place where we learn to respond alone and with others.” – Linda Kael, Annual Journal of the Catechisis of the Good Shepherd, 2007

I WILL GIVE YOU REST
While in Matthew’s Gospel Jesus speaks about “giving you rest,” it is from the Old Testament, in the Twenty-Third Psalm, that we read about the Shepherd making the sheep to lie down in green pastures and beside quiet waters. Both the child and adults are made to rest, and come to enjoy the silence found near the still waters. “Nicola was an older child, seven years of age, and he had learned about the Good Shepherd parable from a person who spent a few days at his home. At a later time, Nicola visited someone else’s house in another city; he was already in bed, but he called his aunt continually so she would reassure him with her presence. Then the child’s tone of voice changed and he said to himself, “There is a great fence all around the world.” Silence, then: “It is the Good Shepherd who pastures his sheep.” More silence; and finally he said: “We are the sheep.” And Nicola went to sleep peacefully, seeing the Good Shepherd’ sheepfold in a cosmic projection and feeling himself to be a part of it.” – Sofia Cavalletti, Religious Potential of the Child p. 70

Cavalletti goes on to write that the child finds peace and joy in the Good Shepherd parable for it meets the needs of the child. The parable will gradually unfold all of its riches to the child and give the child what he or she needs at that particular moment in his or her development. As parents, it is good for us to revisit the themes that impact the hearts and minds of our own children, so that our joy may be complete.

Parents, if you want to provide your child with the scripture they encounter in the Atrium, consider purchasing The Little Gospels from CGSUSA. With very readable font, the presentation of the individual Gospel stories in beautifully bound books allows the child to interact with the Word in a profound way. http://www.cgsusa.org/products/little-gospels-parables/