

The 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.

Work with Materials:

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.

Catechists:

The role of the catechist is to prepare the environment, the atrium, and present passages of Scripture which call forth the child's innate desire to draw near to God. Rather than pour in information, the adult serves as a guide and co-worker with the child. Together they ask questions and wonder: "God who are you? How do you love us? What is the kingdom of God like? What is our place in it?" *Adults who train as catechists often consider the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd to be the most exciting form of spiritual growth they've encountered!*

What Do They Learn?

Children in the Level I (ages 3-6) program spend time enjoying and nurturing a relationship with the Good Shepherd. The children are deeply affected by the boundless love of the shepherd for His sheep as described in the Scriptures. They learn that He knows His sheep, calls them by name, searches for a lost sheep, and celebrates the found sheep. Materials and presentations on the life of Christ and His teachings help to make the great mystery of who God is more understandable for the child. Through geography, the words of the prophets, and infancy narratives, Jesus is established as a real person. The Paschal narratives are treated similarly, using model cities of Jerusalem, empty tombs, and cenacles for the Last Supper. Selected parables further the child's wonder and curiosity about the great mystery of the Kingdom of God. Children become familiar with the articles of the Eucharist and Baptism by arranging them in their own atrium on miniature altars and fonts. The children also become acquainted with the gestures of our liturgy and their meaning of the Paschal Mystery: Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again. A prayer corner located in each atrium reflects the liturgical time of year by means of appropriate colors, prayer, songs, artwork, and readings.

Children in the Level II (ages 6-9) atrium come to know that God is working from Creation, through redemption, toward Parousia when God's love will be all in all. God calls us to participate in this plan. Jesus shows us the way to live together in peace and joy as we abide in him through the Eucharist and Baptism.

Children in the Level III (ages 9-12) atrium have the opportunity to explore more deeply the covenants with God revealed in Hebrew Scripture. Looking at more detailed history of humankind, they discover how God draws all of creation toward the Parousia. They see in a more challenging way how God calls us to use our gifts to write the blank page toward the Parousia, and to be held in covenant with God and each other through the Eucharist and Baptism.