

What is the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd?

The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd was developed in Italy by Sofia Cavaletti, a noted Biblical scholar and author, and Gianna Gobbi, a lay woman who once worked with Maria Montessori. They were interested in presenting the Gospel to children in ways that were age appropriate and dovetailed with Montessori's research into the nature of the child. They began to make concrete materials to use in presenting the Bible and the liturgy of the church to the children. Their technique was experimental. If children used the work they made, they kept it. If the children weren't drawn to the work, they put it away. In this way the work kept growing. It also began to spread. From Rome, Italy, it spread to the United States where it began to be used in Episcopal churches in 1985. The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd can now be found on five continents and recently the Sisters of Charity (Mother Theresa's order) adopted it as their official formation for children and adults. When Sofia asked the head of the order why Catechesis and not some other program, the Sister replied, "It is the only one that is contemplative."

Who would think children in our busy culture could be contemplatives? But they are naturally so – full of wonder and - if given the time, space and materials, able to delve deeply into the mysteries of God.

We use some words in catechesis that might be unfamiliar to you. Instead of a classroom, we call the room where the children meet an **atrium**. This is because we want both children and adults to know we're not dispensing paper and pens, as in a school classroom, or pouring information into the children that we expect them to repeat back to us so we know they've learned what we think they should know. Rather, the atrium is more like a retreat house where the child comes to nurture his or her relationship with God. We provide the materials and the child works with and absorbs the material at his/her own pace.

In the same way, we call the adults who work with the children **catechists** rather than teachers. That's because the catechist presents the lesson, then tries to step out of the way so the child can come to God through the power of the Holy Spirit, the teacher within. It is difficult for adults to learn to get out of the way of the Spirit. However, each catechist receives 90 hours of training for each Level they work in. In the training the catechists study the development of the child, how to present lessons and make materials and how to help the child develop his/her own relationship with Jesus, the Good Shepherd.

Through story and parable we proclaim:

- +Jesus, the Good Shepherd, has a great and everlasting love for us.
- +Jesus is the light of the world that overcame death and dispels the darkness.
- +Jesus shares His eternal life with us in baptism.
- +Jesus continues to give Himself to us in the bread and wine of the Eucharist.
- +God's kingdom is powerful, mysterious, and precious to us.

We also introduce the children to articles, gestures, signs, and prayers of the liturgy and encourage them to participate fully in our worship services.