

The Faith of a Child

An increasingly popular approach to teaching young people the faith



Few catechists in this country could have predicted the popularity of a religious education movement called the [Catechesis of the Good Shepherd](#). “In 1985, I sent a personal Christmas card to everyone in the United States who was involved in C.G.S.,” Tina Lillig, director of the National Association of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, told me. “I think I needed 23 stamps. Last month we sent out our annual mailing to 1,400 association members, and we estimate that there are an additional 900 or so people who are actively working in C.G.S.” As national director for 13 years, Lillig has seen interest steadily grow and spread, but nothing prepared her for the present. “Now we are receiving inquiries from dioceses as far away as the Philippines, Tanzania and Pakistan,” she says. “Suddenly it is something of a wildfire.”

The Historical Evolution

What is surprising is that the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is nothing new. It was founded over 50 years ago in Rome, in the shadow of the Vatican, by two Italian laywomen. The first, Sofia Cavalletti, was a bookish scholar with a penchant for ancient languages who completed a doctorate in Hebrew and comparative Semitic languages at La Sapienza University in Rome. After the Second Vatican Council, she participated in the commission on Jewish-Christian relations. A single woman, Cavalletti had no children of her own and was not particularly interested in the spiritual life of children until pressed by a friend to prepare her child for first sacraments. Moved by the child’s interest and insight, Cavalletti became fascinated by the religious potential of children and ways to nurture it within the church.

She found a colleague for her quest in Gianna Gobbi, a former assistant to Maria Montessori. Gobbi introduced Cavalletti to the pedagogical research of Montessori and the methods and approach she used early in the 20th century. Gobbi brought a deep knowledge of children and their developmental capacities to Cavalletti’s extensive theological foundation. Together the two formed a dynamic partnership that lasted almost half a century.

In Cavalletti’s home near the Piazza Navona in Rome, the women created what they called an atrium. In early church architecture, an atrium was a gathering place between the liturgical space of the church and the street. It was a space where the faithful recollected themselves before entering into worship and where catechumens received instruction in the faith as part of their initiation into the Christian community. Cavalletti and Gobbi understood their atrium to serve a similar purpose; it was not to be a children’s church separate from the adult church, but rather an aid to the fuller participation of children in the liturgical and communal life of the one church that includes baptized Christians of all ages.

Fashioned after a Montessori educational environment, the atrium included hands-on materials that children could use: small models of various objects they would see inside the church, dioramas and

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figures to accompany the Scripture readings, prayer cards, maps of ancient Israel, timelines of the history of salvation and resources for further study of Scripture and liturgy. When introducing any materials, the women would always listen to the children's responses and observe how they used them. The women discarded materials that did not provoke either intense reflection or individual work among the children. Those that did, they kept. Over time, by watching children's consistent attraction to certain materials, Cavalletti and Gobbi began to discern a unique tenor to the children's understanding of the Gospel, particular themes that captured their attention and ways of expressing the themes that were particular to childhood.

In the early 1960s, Cavalletti first began to write about what she and Gobbi were seeing. Her observations became widespread internationally after she published [*The Religious Potential of the Child*](#) in 1979. Atria were established in a number of countries, including Mexico, Colombia, Canada and the United States. A bishop in Mexico with whom Cavalletti corresponded gave the movement its name (Catechesis of the Good Shepherd) because of the distinctive image of Christ to which the youngest children were consistently attracted across numerous cultures.

Initially, atria in the United States—as elsewhere—emerged within the Montessori educational community, especially Catholic Montessori schools. Within a short period of time, however, parishes, traditional schools and communities of parents who were home-schooling their children began to seek training in this approach to religious formation. In 1984, the newly formed National Association of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd began to offer catechist formation courses. Since 1997, when the association first developed a computerized database, 820 courses have been offered. A conservative estimate of participants counts around 10,000, but the number is probably much greater. Most catechists have been trained to work with 3- to 6-year-old children, but many have gone on to complete further levels of training, allowing them to create and facilitate atria for 6- to 9-year-olds and 9- to 12-year-olds. It is very difficult to determine the number of children currently participating in atria across the country, but judging from membership and mailing list data, Lillig estimates it to be well over 20,000.

Distinguishing Characteristics

The following five characteristics distinguish Catechesis of the Good Shepherd from traditional religious education:

Theology of the Child. Grounded in Montessori's pedagogy, Catechesis of the Good Shepherd perceives the child not as a "tabula rasa" ready to be instructed about God, but rather as someone who already has a deep relationship with God and who needs language and a space to help this relationship to grow. The catechesis begins with the belief that the child has been given the Holy Spirit in baptism and that the Spirit will drive the child toward what he or she most needs. As a result, the children's questions and interests have guided the development of the atria curricula, rather than what adults think children should learn.

Role of the Adult. Catechesis of the Good Shepherd invites the adult to move out of the role of teacher and serve instead as a co-listener and co-learner with the child before the word of God. The adult functions in a role similar to that of a spiritual director, listening carefully to each child's needs and questions and matching that child with resources from the faith tradition that

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will best serve the child's spiritual journey at this time. The adult is like a matchmaker who wants to encourage the child to get to know God better. So the adult creates a place and time for them to meet and fall in love, but then backs away so that the two can encounter each other on their own terms.

Attention to the Environment. Catechesis of the Good Shepherd places a special priority on the space in which religious formation takes place. Maria Montessori observed that young children have “absorbent minds,” meaning that they learn language, culture and even religious belief largely through the process of osmosis or “absorbing” what is around them rather than through lessons and lectures. If children's experience of the Spirit or “Inner Teacher” drives them toward what they need to grow, the environment around the children can be understood as the “Outer Teacher”; it can help them meet those needs or it can stifle them. Unlike traditional religious education, C.G.S. emphasizes the atrium environment in which formation takes place. It is purposely structured not as a classroom, but a place in which the spiritual life can be lived.

Spiral Methodology. Whereas traditional religious education often dedicates each year to a different theme (e.g., second grade is dedicated to reconciliation and Eucharist, sixth grade to Old Testament), Catechesis of the Good Shepherd employs a spiral approach in which core themes are touched on every year, expanding what has been covered previously. These five themes—incarnation, the kingdom of God, the paschal mystery, baptism and Eucharist—first introduced to a child at age 3, provide an overarching structure to which all further study is linked. This promotes integration among various areas of Christian life.

Emphasis on Essentials. Catechesis of the Good Shepherd notes that one of the greatest gifts children bring to the church is their capacity to winnow through a vast Christian tradition and discern what is most essential and what is most important to hold on to. Cavalletti observed that children quickly become restless when they are given peripheral material, but concentrate and settle down when given what they are hungering for. C.G.S. seeks to remove from catechesis all that is extraneous. It seeks to use the fewest words possible, rid itself of “busy work” and introduce only themes that children, over time, have indicated meet the criteria of what is essential.

Assessing the Gifts and Challenges

While these five characteristics distinguish Catechesis of the Good Shepherd from other religious education programs currently in use, such distinctiveness has brought both blessings and challenges to the schools and parishes that use the Good Shepherd approach.

At the top of the list of blessings is the fact that most pastors, catechists and parents involved with C.G.S. find it exceedingly worthwhile and effective. In the midst of strong critiques of religious education in the decades since Vatican II, this catechesis has received acclaim for both its theological substance and its careful attention to the developmental capacities of the child. While more rigorous assessment of C.G.S. and its long-range impact are currently needed, widespread anecdotal evidence indicates that children in the program are active, engaged members of their Christian communities and articulate about their faith.

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Another positive outcome is the increased engagement of adults with their faith as a result of C.G.S. formation courses. Adults who participate in the three levels of catechist training discover that their own faith is greatly enhanced in the process. Even though not all course participants will go on to serve as catechists in atria, they report in course evaluations that the courses are personally enriching and helpful for other forms of ministry in which they are engaged (such as leading the adult catechumenate, Catholic adult education or serving in social outreach). Furthermore, Catechesis of the Good Shepherd can bridge divides within the church; it appeals widely to liberals and conservatives among Catholics and other Christian traditions. Participants in the formation courses include members of Opus Dei and the Catholic charismatic community, as well as Mennonites and Lutherans; approximately a third of the atria in the United States are hosted within Episcopal communities.

At the same time, the energy involved in this approach to catechesis has created great strain in many communities. To be effective and meaningful, Catechesis of the Good Shepherd has several requirements that many parishes and schools find almost impossible to sustain: atrium space, enough trained catechists and time. Many parishes and schools are simply short on space and find it difficult to dedicate space specifically to this purpose.

As to catechist training, each level of catechesis requires approximately 90 to 100 hours of training, plus additional time for creating atrium materials, observing in other atria and processing notes from the course. It can be difficult to find enough volunteers willing to invest that amount of time in their ministry, especially if they are active parents or work full time. Time is also required for the children: a two-hour atrium period each week that allows the children to receive a new presentation and also to work with materials that have already been presented to them. Many parishes and schools are accustomed to a 45- to 60-minute block and find it very difficult to change. Such expectations can create tensions with other groups in the community that must compete for space and time. Parishes and schools attracted to the method are often unsure of how to implement it fully and how it ought to relate to other religious education programs that may be running concurrently.

Another emerging challenge is the relationship between Catechesis of the Good Shepherd and the local diocese. As C.G.S. becomes more widespread, dioceses are taking note of it and asking how the curriculum matches diocesan standards. Since C.G.S. is based on an oral tradition and uses no textbook, diocesan offices and, indeed, the bishops' Ad Hoc Committee to Oversee the Use of the Catechism have found it difficult to evaluate. It does not fit into any of the categories to which they are accustomed. As a result, communication is a challenge as a charismatic, organic movement merges with established ecclesial structures and policies.

“These are issues that we haven’t had to address before, when we were a much smaller movement set primarily in the Montessori community,” admits Tina Lillig. “We are entering into a new moment in the history of this work. We began as a mustard seed and now we are experiencing the miracle and the burden of great growth. But there is something of the Spirit in all of this, and if we listen to it, it will drive us toward what we most need at this time in history.”

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