

**The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd** is an approach to the religious formation of children ages 3 to 12. It originated in 1954 through the work Dr. Sofia Cavalletti, a Biblical scholar trained in Catholic theology, and Gianna Gobbi, a Montessori educator. After 50 years of working with children all over the world, these women found that whatever their culture, children respond in the same way to certain elements of the Christian message. This observation has shaped the core content and methodology of the catechesis.

Scripture, liturgy, salvation history, and sacramental signs provide the content of the catechesis – with a special emphasis on scripture. The methodology of the Catechesis utilizes Montessori teaching principles to help children develop an informed and genuine relationship with God.

The children experience a formation that is profoundly biblical and sacramental ... and prayerful as well. The kind of knowledge that Jesus wills for His disciples is not a limited, academic knowledge, but a knowing that addresses the whole person – heart, soul, and mind. Therefore, while the children receive a thoroughly informed formation, the primary aim of the catechesis is to lead the child to an authentic, prayerful relationship with God.

**Underlying the entire catechesis are the following principles:**

God and the child have a relationship that catechesis seeks to serve with reverence and respect.

The child is capable of perceiving the greatest realities of faith, and must never be talked down to.

The catechist is a servant of a message that is not his or her own, and together with the child must humbly listen to God's word.

The child must be given the opportunity to discover the truth on as deep a level as possible.

Prayer, contemplation, and silence are natural components of the child's religious life, and must be honored.

Providing a joyful journey for the child and the adult is the essence of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd.

Montessori educational principles underlie the methodology of the Good Shepherd program. A trained teacher/catechist prepares a special environment for the children's work, worship, and reflection. Catechetical materials allow the children to work independently once the materials have been presented.

### ***The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd for the Young Child (Ages 3-6)***

Children from 3 to 6 years of age have demonstrated a particular sensitivity to the following points: Jesus Christ as the “Good Shepherd” who protects His sheep and calls them each by name; Eucharist as the greatest gift of the love of the Father; Jesus Christ as the “light of the world” and Baptism as the act with which this light is given.

The Catechesis provides close links to scripture and liturgy – with a special emphasis on scripture. Dr. Cavalletti believes that we learn to recognize God through the Bible, particularly through those events that constitute the basis of Christianity: the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Materials on the life of Christ and his teachings help make the mystery of God concrete for the child. The geography materials establish Jesus as a real person in time and space and Israel as the land through which God realized salvation for all. Infancy narratives announce the Incarnation with the words of Scripture, moving from the Annunciation, to the Birth of Christ, to the Flight into Egypt. The models of Jerusalem and of the empty tomb are the starting points for the Paschal narratives and the child’s celebration of the Easter mystery.

Selected parables serve as keys to unlock the mystery of the kingdom of God and to nurture the child’s natural sense of wonder. The 3-6 year old child enters the mystery of the Mass through the most important gestures including the preparation of the chalice, the epiclesis and offering, and the gesture of peace. From these gestures the Mass emerges as the Sacrament of the Gift. The child becomes acquainted with the historical character of the liturgy through the events of the Last Supper, Christ’s death, and His resurrection.

Materials that embody the liturgical colors and calendar situate the child in the church year. A prayer corner also reflects the liturgical cycle with appropriate colors, prayers, songs, banners, and readings to enhance the rituals and celebrations of the seasons.

### ***The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd for the Elementary Child (Ages 6-12)***

The elementary child is captured by the image of the True Vine. “I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me, bears fruit in plenty; for cut off from me you can do nothing.” The proclamation responds to the deep need of the older child to know better their relationships with God, family, friends, and the larger community.

Children at this age seek guidelines. The moral parables offer a model for comparing their behavior with that of Pharisee, the Tax Collector, or the Good Samaritan. The Found Sheep, the Found Coin, and the Prodigal Son are examined as the children prepare for the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The proclamation and meditation stress God’s love, which is constantly forgiving.

The elementary children see the parts of the Mass – the Liturgy of the Word, the Preparation of the Gifts, the Eucharistic Prayer, and Communion – as one unity. The children participate in a four-day retreat prior to the celebration of First Eucharist. Preparation of personal missals filled with illustrations and prayers is a process which deepens their love and understanding of the Eucharist.

Mother's reflection:

Catechesis of the Good Shepherd was founded in the 50's by two Italian laywomen, one a scriptural scholar and one an expert in Montessori education. Together they conceived of a simple, attractive method for sharing the richness of the Faith with children, who are uniquely capable of accepting the beauty of God's love. The program is presented in three levels, and includes time in the "Atrium," which is a quiet environment where children learn through tactile play.

Catechesis of the Good shepherd emphasizes quiet contemplation and -- imagine this -- "the enjoyment of God." The children hear Bible stories and watch them acted out with simple materials; they learn songs and prayers, and are encouraged to play quietly with simple and meaningful objects. One mother explained that catechesis "cracked the code" of the Mass for her son, as he learned to become alert to the details of the liturgy: the significance of color, the names and purposes of the various vessels and tools on the altar.

If Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is available in your parish, I can't urge you strongly enough to sign up next year -- even if you already homeschool, or if your child is already enrolled in some other type of religious education. Some of my children have enjoyed their time more than others, but they have all been drawn more intimately into the life of the Church through their time with CGS. My daughter just made her first confession, after being prepped through CGS. She was excited to go to confession, and she was almost dancing when she came out. "I'm so happy," she told me. "I feel so clean." She didn't groan and shuffle her feet when she heard we were going to confession again last week. "I want to go a lot!" she said. My younger daughter wants to spend Mass at my side, explaining things to me -- why the priest is wearing red, what certain candles mean, and so on. She gasps when she recognizes phrases. "The people who have walked in darkness have seen a great light!" she agrees in a stage whisper. "I KNOW THAT."

Some of my older kids -- especially the ones who haven't been through CGS for the earlier levels -- are tougher nuts to crack. My son came home with a three-page comic he had drawn, depicting the exploits of The Bad Shepherd, a vengeance-minded fellow who isn't afraid to use his staff. I still think CGS has gotten to this kid, though. They are conveying messages and images that are true, meaningful, and memorable to everyone, even the tough nuts. Next year, I hope my schedule allows me to stay with the younger kids during catechesis. More than once, I've seen a mother emerge from the Atrium with a shining face, or with tears in her eyes.

If you can get involved, do! The growing popularity of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is one of most tremendous signs of hope I've seen in the modern Church.