

Catechesis of the Good Shepherd

Adapted from the St. Athanasius Church web site, material written by Seraphima Butler

Overview

The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is a religious education program for children ages 3-12. Because it is attuned to the developmental and spiritual needs of children, the Catechesis experience is both religious education and spiritual formation. The focus is on helping each child strengthen his or her personal prayer life, participation in corporate worship, and growing knowledge of the Bible and of God's unfolding salvific work throughout history. This holistic approach to Orthodox catechesis should enrich both our children and the volunteers who serve them, fostering a culture of continual spiritual growth.

History and Methodology

The roots of CGS lie in the research and experience of Dr. Maria Montessori and those who have continued her work. These teaching methods were then adapted by Dr. Sofia Cavalletti, a Catholic scholar and educator. Members of the parish at St. Athanasius Orthodox Church began adapting this Catholic curriculum to reflect Orthodox theology in 2003. Since then, several Orthodox parishes have adopted it, including churches in Franklin and Murfreesboro, TN.

Two of the most distinctive elements of her work are hallmarks of the CGS: a) a specifically prepared educational environment that draws out a personal response in the child and b) an exacting skill of observation employed by the adult. These two tools allowed her original students to experience an unprecedented level of academic success. By applying her methods of instruction to religious education, we hope to better understand the spiritual nature of the child, enable adults to nurture the child's spiritual formation and present information most effectively.

Each week, students gather and listen to a presentation, taught by a trained Catechist. The area in which the students learn is called the Atrium. Created to meet the spiritual and educational needs of children as young as three years old, the atrium is like a retreat house, a place set apart for the children, where they learn, explore and experience the Faith.

The atrium space is structured with child-sized shelves and tables on which rest beautiful, generally hand-crafted materials used first by the catechist in demonstration, then by the children as they freely choose which aspect of God they wish to pursue and experience further. Everything placed in the atrium is for the child's use, according to his or her developmental needs. This enables the children to develop their physical, intellectual, and spiritual capacities in a safe environment under the direction of trained catechists and their assistants. Those who instruct also listen and observe as the children come into contact with God at their own paces and rhythms, guided by the liturgical cycle of the year.

Formation Courses

In order to begin using CGS as our Sunday school curriculum, we will have to have committed teachers who are willing to attend Formation Courses. These courses are offered at various times throughout the year. They range from meetings 1 Saturday a month for 6 months, to intensive 5 day retreats. The estimated cost per person to attend a Formation course is \$300-500. Once a person completes a Level 1 course, he/she is certified to be a leader in a Level 1 atrium. Leaders must complete a Level 1 formation course before moving on to a Level 2 course, and so on.

Each course begins with an introduction (Level I) or review (Levels II and III) of child development and spirituality. Courses are taken in order, as the Level I course sensitizes participants to the spirituality of children; offers a foundation in the basics of Montessori methodology; and covers pre-requisite material for future courses. The cognitive, physical, and emotional development of each respective age group is addressed, as well as the spiritual hungers that tend to be exhibited by them.

In general, one could expect the following from all levels of formation: themes presented to the child, and the pace at which these themes are presented; practicum for presenting material to children; instruction in the creation and use of materials; and assistance in writing one's own album (handbook of lessons). In addition, participants are blessed by the mentorship that formation leaders provide, with their wisdom and wealth of experience with both children and adults. For those starting CGS from scratch, the community of catechists and catechists-in-training can be one's greatest asset in the education of the parish on the spiritual needs of children. Upon completion of any level course, participants receive a certificate from the National Association, signed by their formation leader.

Curriculum Summary for Levels 1-2

Level I, ages 3-6 years, approximately

- The Parable of the Good Shepherd
- The Found Sheep
- Psalm 23/22 (LXX)
- The Articles of the Altar
- Liturgical Colors
- The Gestures of the Liturgy
- The Vestments of the Priest
- The Parables of the Kingdom of God
- The Eucharistic Presence of the Good Shepherd
- The Liturgical Calendar
- Geography of the Holy Land
- The Life of Christ (and those saints involved in these accounts)
 - Infancy Narratives
 - The Last Supper

- The Death and Resurrection of Christ
- Baptism and the Gifts of Baptism
- Prayer
- Prophecy
- Art
- Practical Life
- Celebrations
 - Advent
 - Nativity
 - Light (Paschal)
 - Pentecost (includes an introduction to the gifts of the Holy Spirit)
 - Children's patron saints

Level II, ages 6-9, approximately

In addition to the themes listed for Level I, we include for the older child:

- Sacred History
- The Gifts of the Kingdom of God
- The Passion Narratives
- The Wolf and Hireling
- The Moral Parables
- The Maxims of Jesus
- The Lord's Prayer
- An Introduction to the Structure and Study of the Bible
- An Introduction to the Structure and Prayers of the Liturgy
- Further study of Baptism, including the structure of the service
- The Mystery of Life and Death
- The Empty Tomb
- Communal Prayer
- The Reconciliation Retreat: a five-week series on the True Vine, followed by a two-day retreat, all focused on reconciliation (confession) and Eucharist.
- Art
- Practical Life
- Celebrations as listed above

(In addition to these themes, we at St. Athanasius include a very brief introduction to the great feasts for the Level I and Level II children. We hope to further the young children's experience of these seasonal liturgies by offering the essential “nugget” of each feast as it occurs. These introductions are incorporated into our time at the prayer table.)—This is hopefully what we will do at St. John as well.