

## THE CATECHESIS OF THE GOOD SHEPHERD

By Carole Buleza

In *The WORD* last September, I gave an update on my research for "The Path of Salvation," which will become a proposal for a new church school curriculum. One of my research tasks is to review a program called "The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd" (CGS) that has been implemented by eight or so parishes of the Archdiocese. "Catechesis" is a common word in the field of religious education and derives from the Greek, "to echo down," meaning, "to pass down," as we would think of Holy Tradition. "Catechesis" and "catechist" are ancient words and proper to use for Orthodox Church School ministry. In fact, we *should be* referring to ourselves as "catechists."

MARIA MONTESSORI, SOFIA CAVALLETTI  
AND GIANNA GOBBI

Dr. Maria Montessori developed the Montessori Method of education which is known for mixed-age classes and freedom of movement, uninterrupted blocks of time, specialized materials that guide the children to discovery, rather than direct instruction, and choice of activities. The children learn self-control, which leads to a positive self-concept. Their individual progress is charted and they are guided and challenged accordingly.

Dr. Sofia Cavalletti was a professor of Hebrew Scriptures who was asked to give a child religious instruction. She had no experience with children, but agreed. Beginning with the Book of Genesis, she invited the child's interest in God. The child shared his own ideas, which she carefully considered for his subsequent lessons. She continued working with this boy, and with others, and greatly valued these interactions, as do teachers of CGS today. She "found a way of being in the presence of God that is unique to the child and is a gift to the adult who stops long enough to notice."<sup>1</sup>

Gianna Gobbi was a Montessori educator. She brought the Montessori Method to the religious content that Sofia Cavalletti provided. Observations of each child's relationship with God, and the honoring of a "person unfolding," guided their work.

The honoring of the child united Montessori, Cavalletti and Gobbi. Their insights and ideas were shared, tried, observed, noted, and refined. The Catechesis began in Rome

Each set of materials is handmade, for the most part, by the catechist, although the parish can become involved and support the program with their skills. The materials can be sculpted, made of wood, or *papier maché*, and then painted. There are vendors who comply with the Association guidelines and supply templates for painting. The materials must be attractive and neat. The making of the materials begins during the catechist training. Only one set of materials is prepared for each theme, so the children will learn community values and sharing. The children are taught to handle these carefully and to return them to their place when they are done working with them.

The materials, Atrium and catechist are the three components that partially answer the question of how adults and children arrive at contemplation and enjoyment of God. The most important aspect of the catechesis is Jesus Christ. "In this shared religious experience which we, as catechists, are called to live with the children, there is only one true Teacher, who is Christ Himself."<sup>7</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

In order to adopt this religious education program, consideration must be given to the needs of its three components, the catechist, the Atrium, and the materials. The catechist(s) must commit to receive typically 10 months of training at a cost of \$1,000 or more, to the making of materials, and to the making of an album of presentations (similar to "lesson plans") throughout the years, as there are no texts. The Atrium, provided by the parish, must be a space large enough for the presentation areas and the children with child-size tables, chairs, and bookshelves. The materials carry a cost that the parish must be willing to assume initially and as the program continues. In addition, parishioners' time and labor is required throughout the first several years, for example, for the bookshelves, baptismal font, and wooden figurines.

With all considerations duly noted, the consensus is that the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is worth the effort. The adults who work with the program do experience God with the children – there is no problem recruiting helpers. The children are calm and respectful in the Atrium, enjoy the quiet atmosphere, and do grow in their relationship with God. Catechists in the program feel a great bond with one another and are dedicated to this effort.

Would our parishes want such a program? How important is it to us that our children know God? Of course, this

raises the question, Aren't they coming to know God in our church schools?

The Orthodox adaptations have made this program acceptable for our use. The way the three women studied children extensively, and combined the atrium, the materials, and the catechist to serve the child's religious needs is highly effective. The method of the Catechesis – the materials, the atrium – in its two-hour frame, allows the child a contemplative religious experience. (In the Orthodox worldview, to know God is to experience God.) It is almost as though the child were being taught at home, surrounded by lovingly, handmade objects. It is an artisan-crafted religious education effort which, in its promotion of contemplation, humility, calmness and attentiveness to the Holy Spirit, resonates with Orthodox spirituality. We can bring the children to know God to a certain point in our church schools, but we cannot match what the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd offers.

Reviewing the "Catechesis of the Shepherd" for my curriculum plan yielded many pages of notes. The research and insights of Cavalletti and Gobbi are an overlooked resource in the religious education field.

What I particularly find valuable about the Catechesis is that I have something in hand that I know works. In so far as I am able, given that my curriculum plan is spiritually-based as well, I will bring insights from the Catechesis into "Walking the Path of Salvation." I recommend Gianna Gobbi's *Listening to God with Children*. (See the footnotes at right.) There are many lessons for all educators. Her heartfelt love of children and God, which she shared with Montessori and Cavalletti, comes through clearly and no doubt plays a big role in the program's success.

If you wish further information about The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, please contact the Department.

- <sup>1</sup> The National Association of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, United States. [www.cgusa.org/history](http://www.cgusa.org/history)
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, /mission
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, /history
- <sup>4</sup> Gianna Gobbi, *Listening to God with Children*, translated and edited by R. Rojewicz, (Ohio: Treehaus Communications, 1998), p.19.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.
- <sup>7</sup> [www.cgusa.org/FAQS](http://www.cgusa.org/FAQS)

#### DIOCESAN CHRISTIAN EDUCATION COORDINATORS

##### Eastern Dioceses

Fr. George Alberts, 202.798.1774  
[frgeocar@sbcglobal.net](mailto:frgeocar@sbcglobal.net)

##### Toledo and the Midwest

Robert Sryder, 330.493.4029, [bobsny1107@aol.com](mailto:bobsny1107@aol.com)

Ottawa, Eastern Canada, Upstate New York  
 Fr. Christopher Rigden-Briscall, 519.807.2786

[englishorthodox@yahoo.ca](mailto:englishorthodox@yahoo.ca)

##### Wichita and Mid-America

Vasiliki Billia Oldziej, 512.694.7073, [vasiliki1@cox.net](mailto:vasiliki1@cox.net)

Worcester and New England

Kh. Anna Timko-Hughes, 978.656.3274  
[matannah@aol.com](mailto:matannah@aol.com)

##### Miami and the Southeast

Kh. Betty Randolph, 864.261.6058  
[bettyrandolphmailbox@gmail.com](mailto:bettyrandolphmailbox@gmail.com)

##### Los Angeles and the West and also

Eagle River and the Northwest  
 (Carole Buleza, 717.747.5221, [aodca@aol.com](mailto:aodca@aol.com))

in 1954, and is now an international movement. Although it is a Roman Catholic program, it has been adapted by Anglican and Orthodox educators with permission. There is a National Association of The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, with the following statement of purpose: To assist the involvement of children and adults in a common religious experience in which the religious values of childhood, primarily those values of contemplation and enjoyment of God, are predominant.<sup>2</sup>

#### CONTEMPLATION AND ENJOYMENT OF GOD

How do adults and children arrive at such a wonderful experience? The three components of the program (the catechist, the space, and the materials) provide a partial answer.

#### THE CATECHIST.

Usually there is more than one adult with the children, and children of different ages are grouped together: ages 3–6, 6–9, and 9–12. Each session lasts two hours, unfolding as follows. The catechist narrates (paraphrases) a parable, then he/she lights a candle and reads the passage solemnly from the Bible. The catechist brings out the materials (hand-made figurines of the parable), introduces them to the children and uses them with simple movements while rereading the text. This is followed by the catechist posing “I-wonder” questions, and allowing time for silence or responses. The catechist shows how and where the materials are kept. The children are invited to find a set of materials to work with (from previous lessons). They work quietly, recalling the associated story, contemplating its meaning, or asking that it be read to them again. Other sets of materials may recall lessons on the Liturgy. The catechist notes the activity the child chose so as to know how to offer guidance. The observation of the child is paramount.

Sofia and Gianna remind us constantly to look to the child for that sign of a deeply religious life – joy – and to always ask the question: “What face of God is the child telling us he or she needs to see?”<sup>3</sup>

Catechists must be trained in order to have an “Atrium” (the space) certified by the National Association of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. The cost for training can be

as high as \$1,500 for the ten sessions of Level I, usually held once a month over 10 months. Catechists are encouraged to ask their parish for assistance.

#### THE SPACE (THE ATRIUM).

In Italy, a light-filled patio or courtyard is called an *atrium*. Discovery-learning is foundational to the “Catechesis of the Good Shepherd,” and requires a room large enough for the following: a baptismal area, prayer area, presentation area, and Good Shepherd area. Bookshelves and cubbies are needed to hold the materials. As the year goes on, and in the second and following years, there will be many materials and the need for many shelves. Consider that when the children take them out to a table or onto the floor, they will need sufficient space. Their work cannot be done sitting side-by-side around a table. The room itself should be dedicated to CGS, and not shared with another group that meets during the week.

#### THE MATERIALS.

The materials are first used by the catechist and then made available for the extended self-chosen-activity time of the children. This time, in which they learn through discovery, is considered the “work” of the children and the materials are the vehicles for discovery. As in the Montessori Method, they are the cornerstone of the program. They bring order and clarity to impressions absorbed there, just as the alphabet enables us to read things. Thus the sensuous materials are also a guide to the spontaneous work of the child, leading to the repetition of the exercise and to concentration.<sup>4</sup>

Just as the catechists are not teachers in the traditional sense, and must retrain themselves instead to be observers – to “listen to God with children,” paraphrasing the title of Gobbi’s book – the materials are not teaching aids, but rather contain the potential to form the child. Gobbi writes at length and beautifully about the child’s exploration of the world through touch, and she is led to state, “The human person is constructed through the use of his or her hands.”<sup>5</sup> In the religious setting of the Atrium, with extended time for work (exploration) and contemplation, the materials take on even greater significance.

The child’s work with the material engages more than the senses or mind; it puts him or her in touch with the true teacher, the Holy Spirit, who speaks to the child of spiritual truths, of hidden, transcendent realities and calls the child into deeper relationship with God.<sup>6</sup>

