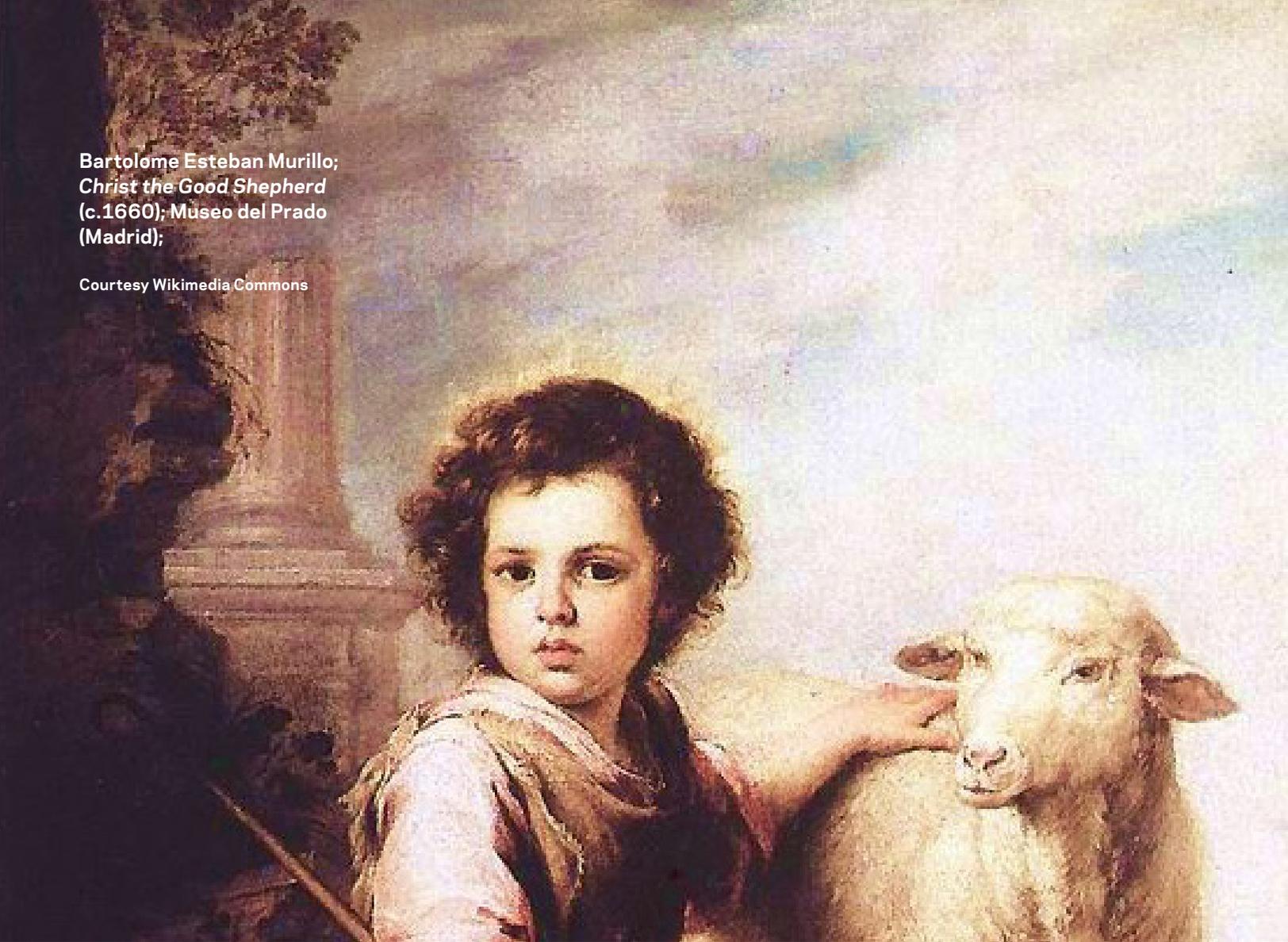


Bartolome Esteban Murillo;
Christ the Good Shepherd
(c.1660); Museo del Prado
(Madrid);

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LET THE CHILDREN COME TO ME

CULTIVATING THE CHRISTIAN IMAGINATION
OF THE CHILD IN SECULAR MODERNITY

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Recently I was talking to a mother of two young children, who explained that she drops her youngest son off at childcare while she attends Mass because “he is too young to get anything out of it.” Implicit in her remark is the assumption that the child, particularly the young child, neither possesses within himself a hunger for God nor is capacitated for worship—that his age prevents him from meaningful participation in the liturgy. Moreover, she clearly envisions worship in terms of its utility. It exists in order for us to “get something.” Cast in therapeutic and/or moralistic terms, worship functions either to meet one’s subjective needs, to make one “feel good,” or to make one a generically “better person.” Such a view, both of the nature of the young child and of worship, though deeply misguided, structures the Catholic imagination in the United States.

The narrative that this mother articulates sharply contrasts my experience with Catechesis of the Good Shepherd (CGS), a catechetical model developed in Rome in 1954 by biblical scholar Sofia Cavalletti and Montessorian Gianna Gobbi. Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is rooted in the conviction that the young child possesses the profound capacity to enter into a deep and meaningful relationship with Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd. As a level one catechist, I have the delight of spending my Tuesday mornings in a specially prepared environment called an atrium with sixteen four- and five-year-old children, encountering the Word of God with them. Walking into the atrium every Tuesday morning, I feel a bit like a giant. Chairs and tables come up to my knees, shelves to my waist. In this place of quiet joy, Annie prepares the altar, carefully placing the white cloth over the oak altar and arranging the candles, the chalice, and the paten. Here Caroline chooses a holy card for the prayer table, while Mark works with the Good Shepherd materials, tenderly moving the Good Shepherd and his flock in

and out of the sheepfold. Here Maggie works with the Nativity diorama, gently moving the shepherds toward the manger, and John intently prepares the cruets, attentively pouring water and wine from one delicate vessel to another. In the atrium the child’s work becomes opportunity for deep contemplation, which penetrates the child’s inner life. Here Laura affectionately kisses the crucifix at the end of each atrium session and says, “I love you, Jesus.” Here, in this inauspicious little space, eight children, heads thrown back and arms reaching upward, elatedly sing the “Celtic Alleluia” for a full ten minutes at the end of the Liturgy of Light. Each week in the atrium, children encounter with joy and wonder the mysterious beauty of Christ incarnate, crucified and risen. The atrium thus serves a kind of counter-narrative to the dominant narrative first described, a contestation of its assumptions and distortions of both the nature of the child and the nature of worship, and of the child’s capacity to engage in worship.

I. Crisis of Incarnation

Assessing the modern religious crisis in 1979, Sofia Cavalletti observed that we are currently experiencing a crisis of Incarnation. In *The Religious Potential of the Child*, Cavalletti states that “for the most part it is not God who is denied, but Christ Who is rejected; there is a diffuse acceptance of the existence of a vague divine person but we do not accept God-made-man.”¹ This rejection of the Church’s creedal confession cannot simply be dismissed as a secularist attack from forces outside the Church; rather, this crisis of Incarnation is alive and well among the faithful. In quite telling statistics, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life reports that 30 percent of self-identified Catholics believe in an impersonal God and only 60 percent believe in a personal God. Even more concerning, less than half of self-identified Catholics are absolutely certain that the God they believe in is one with whom they can have a personal relationship.²

Vague deistic sentiment shapes the religious landscape in the United States, a phenomenon which ultimately functionalizes God, cultivates a disposition of ingratitude, and domesticates the imagination.³ The mystery of God and God’s creation is no longer an object of deep wonder, but a flat, positivistic reality. Not only is the fact of the Incarnation denied, but the vision of God that has permeated the American imagination forecloses the very possibility of the Incarnation.

II. Turn to the Child

Given the reality of the truncated imagination of most Americans, we turn to the child for several reasons. First, the child has a rich and splendid imagination. By this I do not mean the capacity for make believe and fantasy. Rather, the child has an incredible ability to marvel at the glory of the God and creation. He does not possess by nature the flattened, positivistic imagination characteristic of contemporary Americans. Second, the young child is not by nature inclined toward engaging God as a vague and abstract concept. The three-to-six-year-old child does not deal in abstraction. Rather, her intellect is profoundly relational and concrete.

Third, God has placed “a marvelous love” within the heart of the child, and the child loves gratuitously (Ps 16:3). Between the ages of three and six, the child experiences a keen sensitivity for love and protection, exigencies that cannot be met in the abstract. Hans Urs von Balthasar commented that “the child can grasp the gift of all existence only with the concreteness of its relationship[s] of love.”⁴ This is why, according to Balthasar, parental “love is not at first separable from God.”⁵ Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus provides descriptive exemplification of this exigency for love in her autobiography, *Story of a Soul*. She recalls, “God was pleased all through my life to surround me with love, and the first memories I have are stamped with smiles and the most tender caresses. But although He placed so much love near me, He also sent much love into my little heart, making it warm and affectionate.”⁶ The child loves with an abundant, overflowing love; she clings to God in love, seeking “Jesus for the sake of Jesus.”⁷

Finally, the child possesses within himself a unique vocation. Each child is a “carrier of God’s secret.”⁸ Indeed, the psalmist exclaims, “You formed my inmost being; you knit me in my mother’s womb” (Ps 139:13); and the Lord tells Jeremiah, “Before I

formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you” (Jer 1:5). This vocation must be allowed to take shape, bringing to light and fruition the gifts God has bestowed upon the child.⁹ Developmentally, the young child inhabits a privileged period of becoming, in which he labors to form his personality according to the law of God written on his heart (cf. Rom 2:15). The young child possesses an inner sense which drives him toward perfection.

Describing the formation of one’s spiritual disposition, German philosopher and martyr Saint Edith Stein explained:

[T]he basic faculties which exist originally are unique in degree and in kind to each human soul. It is not inanimate material which must be entirely developed or formed in an exterior way, as is clay by the artist’s hand or stone by the weather’s elemental forces; it is rather a living formative root which possesses within itself the driving power (inner form) toward development in a particular direction; the seed must grow and ripen into the perfect *gestalt*, perfect creation. Thus envisaged, formation of the spirit is a developmental process similar to that of the plant. However, the plant’s organic growth and development do not come about wholly from within: there are also exterior influences which work together to determine its formation...just so, in the soul’s formation, exterior factors as well as interior ones, play a role.¹⁰

Stein establishes three points that are critical for our discussion of the child. She notes that each person possesses a unique spiritual disposition. Thus when we encounter the child, we encounter one whom God intimately knows, whose spiritual disposition is not inanimate material awaiting the formation by another. We encounter the child who, as one made in the image of God, already possesses a distinctive spiritual character. Thus Stein affirms that the spiritual substance of an individual is in fact “a living formative root” which bends toward God. In other words, there exists in each human person “an inner ontological tendency... toward the divine.”¹¹ To be sure, the goal, or *telos*, of the Christian life is to live a life “hidden with Christ in God” and each person possesses a driving power toward this particular end (Col 3:3). Stein also explains that the development of the spirit toward perfection, like the growth of a plant, is not merely an interior process, but is profoundly influenced by exterior conditions. Because the young child inhabits a privileged time of becoming, her inner form is both immensely powerful and incredibly vulnerable to her exterior environment. Thus special care must be taken in the religious formation of the young child.

III. The Child

The Inner Structure of the Child

In the early twentieth century, physician, scientist, and educator Maria Montessori began to observe the great mystery of the child, an endeavor that eventually yielded the educational method that bears her name. Explicating all that she observed about the nature of the child would be impossible, so I will examine three aspects which are essential for the present discussion about the religious formation of the child.

In *The Child and the Family*, Montessori observes that “[t]he child, like all human beings, has a personality of his own. He carries within himself the beauty and dignity of a creativity that can never be erased and for which his spirit, pure and sensitive, exacts from us a most delicate kind of care.”¹² Like the artist, the child engages in the great task of self-creation, a task which requires a mind distinct from that of the adult. Montessori calls this mind the absorbent mind. Contrasting the mind of the child to that of the adult, Montessori explains that the adult acquires with her intelligence what the “child absorbs with his psychic life.”¹³ The adult is a vessel; “impressions pour in, and we remember or hold onto them in our mind, but we remain distinct from our impressions, as water remains distinct from the glass.”¹⁴ The child, however, “merely by going on with his life...undergoes a transformation. The impressions not only penetrate the mind of the child, but form it.”¹⁵ Montessori compares the mind of the child to soft wax—everything in his or her environment makes an impression upon the mind.¹⁶

Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus beautifully articulates the fertile absorbency of the young child’s mind that Montessori expounded, as well as the child’s capacity for intimacy with God. Thérèse exclaims:

Ah! How quickly those sunny years passed by, those years of my childhood, but what a sweet imprint they have left on my soul! I recall the days Papa used to bring us to the pavilion; the smallest details are impressed in my heart! I recall especially the Sunday walks when Mama used to accompany us. I still feel the profound and poetic impressions that were born in my soul at the sight of the fields enameled with cornflowers and all types of wild flowers. Already I was in love with the wide open spaces. Space and the gigantic fir trees, the branches sweeping down to the ground, left in my heart and impression similar to the one I experience today at the sight of nature.¹⁷

In Thérèse, we can observe the “brilliance of the child’s way of seeing things”; the child’s intelligence burns with love.¹⁸ Saint Thérèse speaks of the fire burning within the child’s mind and heart, its impressionability and tenderness. Her recollection highlights the child’s particular aptitude for wonder. Even as an adult, Thérèse felt the impressions made on her heart as a child—they formed her spirit in a particular direction. The beauty of the created world, acting as an icon, lifted her soul to God.

Montessori also observes that the child passes through several periods of intense sensitivity. Sensitive periods refer to periods of time in which the child, based on her vital exigencies, is attracted to certain things in her environment and not to others. Commenting on the relationship between the child's inner structure and the external environment, Montessori observes that sensitive periods "show us that a child's psychic development does not take place by chance, that it does not originate in external stimuli but is guided by transient sensibilities, that is, by temporary instincts intimately connected with the acquisition of specific traits."¹⁹ The inner structure of the child is such that he is able "to choose from his complex environment what is suitable and necessary for his growth."²⁰ Thus such periods allow the child "to come into contact with the external world in a particularly intense way," such that "everything is easy; all is life and enthusiasm," all is permeated with joy.²¹ These periods of unique acquisitive potentiality are followed by a period of integration before the next period of intense sensitivity begins. Thus Montessori concludes that the child moves "within this fair fire of the soul, which burns without consuming" from "conquest to conquest in a constant rhythm that constitutes its joy and happiness."²²

Once a sensitive period has passed, the opportunity for natural acquisition is forever lost. This is not to say that one cannot acquire these traits at a later time in life, only that such acquisition occurs through the application of the will and not as a spontaneous fact.²³ For instance, an adult can certainly learn a new language, but only through the self-conscious application of the will and after years of arduous work, and even then the new language is not a part of the being of the adult in the same way as his native language. The new language always remains distinct from the inner being of the adult. The young child, however, has a particular affinity for language. She absorbs not only particular vocabulary but indeed the very structure of language.²⁴ The child

achieves this incredible feat with great joy, absorbing the linguistic impressions with peculiar alacrity into her unconscious mind. Rather than laboriously studying the language's rules, grammar, or vocabulary, the small child, "directed by a marvelously grand mysterious power" absorbs language spontaneously.²⁵

Interestingly, Montessori observes that "children... seem to pass through a period that is particularly sensitive to religion," noting that the young child seems to "be very close to God."²⁶ Sofia Cavalletti and Gianna Gobbi confirm Montessori's initial observations, remarking that while adults are prone to believe that the spiritual life and the drive toward perfection are foreign to the child, in reality "God moves freely in the world of childhood. Children thirst to know Him and to draw closer to Him."²⁷ At a tender age, the child is extremely receptive to the God of love and protection. When this spark is fanned even the youngest child cries out "That's it! That is what my nature points to and seeks."²⁸

Though Montessori did not write extensively on the religious education of the child, she did note that the church appears to be the *telos* toward which her method is directed. She noticed that the silence cultivated in the school "which had prepared the child to recollect himself now became that inner recollection to be observed in the house of God."²⁹ In *Teaching Doctrine and Liturgy*, Cavalletti and Gobbi argue that the reason religious education receives so little explicit treatment in Montessori's work is due to the fact that the method itself is "impregnated with the faith," that it is shot through and through with a sacramental imagination.³⁰ Indeed, describing an infant immersed in a sensitive period for language Montessori employs explicitly religious language:

[A] divine command is breathing upon this helpless being and animating it with its spirit. This inner drama of the child

is a drama of love. It is a great reality unfolding within the secret areas of his soul and at times completely absorbing it. These marvelous activities wrought in humble silence cannot take place without leaving behind ennobling qualities that will accompany the child through life.³¹

Montessori observes that the inner life of the child has a certain “immediacy with God” which is present within the child, “unfolding within the secret areas of his soul” long before the child can engage in discursive reasoning; indeed, the inner structure of the child bends toward this love.³²

A third constitutive aspect of the inner structure of the child emerges in Montessori’s observations. Closely related to the previous two aspects, she observes that the child incarnates in himself everything he sees and hears. While the adult merely remembers an environment, the child adapts to it, absorbing the environment into his very being.³³ The child has a “special kind of vital memory that does not remember consciously, but absorbs images into the very life of the individual.”³⁴ Returning to the example of language, when a child learns a language he “speaks it according to all its complicated rules and exceptions, not because he studied and remembers it by means of ordinary memory”; rather, it “forms a part of him.”³⁵ Language may be said to be incarnate in the child. Indeed, the child can never unlearn his native language. As already mentioned, the child does not remember the sounds or rules of language the way an adult does; rather by way of a “vital memory” that “does not remember consciously” the child incarnates language.³⁶ This language now forms the child’s “mental flesh” and becomes an essential aspect of the child’s interpretive apparatus.³⁷

The Child as an Icon of Christ

The interior structure of the child serves as an icon of Christ. An ever-present reminder to the adult of his position before the Father, the child reminds us of the type of humanity on which we must gaze as we strive toward perfection.³⁸ Applying Matthew 25 to the child, Montessori writes, “we can see that Christ appears to men also under the guise of the child.”³⁹ The child reflects the mystery of Christ, and in the child we glimpse something of the divine reality.

Scripture speaks of childhood, not merely as a passing biological phase, but as the very heart of what it means to be human. The psalmist likens his trust in the LORD to “a child quieted at its mother’s breast; like a child that is quieted is my soul” (Ps 131:2). Drawing on the intimate relationship between a mother and her suckling child, a relationship in which the utter dependence and receptivity of the child and the total gift of the mother is not a source of contention or competition, but the deepest expression of love, the psalmist indicates by way of analogy the contours of his relationship with the LORD.

The child also figures prominently in Isaiah’s prophetic eschatology. His vision of the peaceable kingdom is envisioned in terms of the young child: “a little child shall lead them ... The suckling child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder’s den (Is 11:6, 8). The young child guides creation toward its perfection, and his protection and joy are markers of the reconciled world. Indeed, Christ holds up the child as a model, saying in Mark 10:14-15: “Let the children come to me, do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.” Jesus proclaims that the disposition of the child is necessary to inherit the Kingdom. It is clear that the psalmist, Isaiah, and Jesus

do not, according to Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (later Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI), regard childhood “as a transient phase of human life that is a consequence of man’s biological fate and then is completely laid aside. Rather, it is in ‘being a child’ that the very essence of what it is to be a man is realized, so much so that one who has lost the essence of childhood is himself lost.”⁴⁰

Ratzinger and Balthasar agree that Christ’s emphasis on “being a child,” indicates a profound analogy between the nature of the human child and his “own most personal mystery, namely, his Sonship,”⁴¹ which “is inseparable from his being a child in the bosom of the Father.”⁴² The one who is Lord and Messiah is also Son, and His Sonship is rooted in his total openness to the Father, “the total relativity of his existence,” His “pure openness,” His pure receptivity.⁴³ The Son turns eternally toward the Father, and gazes on His countenance, such that the “I” of the Son is eternally derived from the Father’s “Thou.” This “I” does not strive for exclusivity and independence from the Father, but remains totally open to the love of the Father.⁴⁴

The “distinctive consciousness” of the child reflects Christ’s radical openness to the Father.⁴⁵ The young child experiences profound receptivity and openness to divine love, and this positions him to participate in the inner life of Christ in a unique way. Unfortunately scriptural representations of children, particularly children and Jesus, often undergo a sort of reduction such that the child becomes merely a quaint and romanticized image of bygone innocence, and Jesus is often depicted as a kind of quasi-divine babysitter; His assertion that the Kingdom of God belongs to children is sentimentalized rather than understood as a serious statement about the particularity of the child or Christ’s divine Sonship which is nearing its consummation on the Cross.

Long-time Catechesis of the Good Shepherd catechist Rebekah Rojcewicz reminds us that when Christ calls us to be like the child, He “is calling us to something far more serious and involved than merely trying to emulate a few of their easily observable characteristics.”⁴⁶ The uniqueness of the child is more than the sum of her characteristics, and indeed one must resist the temptation to commodify these traits and cut them lose from their ontological moorings. Thus when Christ holds up the child as a model, He is calling us to emulate the child’s mysterious relationship with God, which is an icon of His most personal union with the Father. We are to inhabit, as Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus did, what Ratzinger calls the “brilliance of the child’s way of seeing things.”⁴⁷ Christ is calling us to take up the position of the child in her radical orientation toward love.



Richard Cosway;
Christ Blessing Little Children (undated);

Courtesy Yale Center for British Art

IV. Catechesis of the Child

The development of the child, though directed by “transient sensibilities,” requires external nourishment.⁴⁸ Saint Edith Stein’s comparison between spiritual development and the growth of the plant provides an apt analogy. A seed contains in itself a “driving power toward development in a particular direction.” A cornflower seed will not produce a daffodil or rose. Rather, the perfection of the cornflower seed is to grow and ripen into a cornflower plant. However, the seed cannot actualize of its accord, but requires certain conditions: the right amount of rain, fertile soil, enough sunlight. If it does not receive these things from its environment it cannot develop as it ought.

In *Catechesis of the Good Shepherd*, the young child encounters the parable of the mustard seed. During the course of the presentation, the catechist invites the child to ponder the mysterious power that enables the seed to grow. Often children will say that rain and sunshine make the seed grow, which is true indeed. But then the catechist might ask, “If we planted a rock in the soil and watered it and made sure it got sunlight, would it grow?” Among other things, this question is designed to lift up the mystery of life and to cultivate a sense of wonder. There is something special about the seed; it contains the mysterious power of growth. The child, however, knows that without the right conditions the seed will not develop.

Traditional Catechesis

Keeping this parable in mind, we consider the catechesis of the young child. The inner structure of the child disposes him to development in a particular direction, and she requires an environment that with the most tender care facilitates her religious formation. Though the young child has “from his very origin... something like an incontrovertible faith-instinct, and this instinct provides an incalculable ‘capital’ for the education of the child in Christian faith,” most three-to-six-year-olds are not formally catechized; if they are, the catechetical models employed are typically shaped by educational paradigms that have their roots in 18th and 19th century models of instruction.⁴⁹ Such pedagogies exclusively instruct the cognitive dimension of the child. However, education—and particularly religious education—must address the whole child.

While the Church has the rich tradition of affirming the dignity of children as children of God, inviting infants to the waters of baptism and children to the Eucharistic banquet, she typically does not begin formal catechesis of her children until age six. Moreover, traditional catechetical efforts are often didactic and goal-oriented, focusing more on the adult who imparts information than on the religious life of the child.⁵⁰ God is often presented in childish terms, the underlying assumption being that the small child is not capable of “rising to concepts that transcend the senses.”⁵¹ This type of catechesis tends to be arid and, regardless of how it is dressed up with coloring sheets, word searches, and connect-the-dot saints, it does not permeate the inner life of the child.

The Inner Logic of Catechesis of the Good Shepherd

Catechesis of the Good Shepherd proceeds from a twofold conviction. The first is that being Christian is first and foremost “the encounter with an event, a person,” with the face of Love.⁵² Thus catechetical strategy must facilitate the child’s concrete encounter with the Person of Christ, who is “the way” to the Father (Jn 14:6). Sofia Cavalletti points out that the second structuring principle of CGS emerges from the conviction that “[c]ertain exigencies exist in the innermost depths of the child,” exigencies for love and protection, which must be satisfied.⁵³ She asserts that “if the Christian message is presented in such a way as to satisfy the [vital exigencies], the child will appropriate the message with a vital impulse, and will then be capable of reliving it in his everyday experience.”⁵⁴ In other words, the child will make flesh the Christian faith. Thus, far from imposing something foreign to the child, her encounter with the God who is Love corresponds to her deepest exigency, to love and to be loved. With the psalmist, the child cries out “God, you are my God whom I seek; for you my flesh pines and my soul thirsts; in the shadow of your wings I shout for joy” (Ps 63:1).

In *The Feast of Faith*, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger writes, “We are in such urgent need of an education toward inwardness. We need to be taught to enter into the heart of things.”⁵⁵ In the atrium, the child encounters the very heart—the essential reality—of the faith: the mystery of the God-made-man, the person of Jesus Christ. Here the living formative root of the child’s inner form encounters an environment which facilitates the soul’s formation in a particular direction. Here the Word of God is sown in the tender, absorbent heart of the child. Here, Cavalletti points out, the little child “freely unfolds her potentialities,” working joyfully toward her perfection.⁵⁶

Thus, unlike traditional catechetical models, Catechesis of the Good Shepherd presents the whole Christian message to the whole child.⁵⁷ In the atrium the child engages the essential reality of the Christian faith: Christ incarnate, crucified and risen. Rooted in Montessori’s observations about the child and guided by her educational pedagogy and following the rhythm of the liturgical year, the aim of CGS is not for the child to learn a lot of facts about God; rather, the purpose is to help the child to enjoy God and develop a living relationship with God. In the atrium, the child begins to live the reality of the Christian faith in an environment saturated in prayer and contemplation, which is the basic precondition for understanding, for appropriation of the gift of Christ.⁵⁸ Indeed, Ratzinger insists that the only way to understand Jesus Christ is by participating in his prayer, for “[w]here there is no relationship with God, there can be no understanding of him.”⁵⁹ This relationship, which engages the whole child, forms and directs the child’s imagination.

Incarnational Catechesis: The Good Shepherd

The young child's relationship with God is remarkably rich and utterly lacks the functionalism that marks the teenager's relationship with God. In the atrium, the child's "intelligence of love" meets the Author of love; the mystery of the child meets the mystery of God. The young child encounters the Sign of signs—the person of Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, which coordinates with the child's vital exigency for love and protection. Indeed, it is this face of God that the child most deeply desires.⁶⁰ The parable meets the child's psychological and developmental needs, but it is also a central text from a doctrinal standpoint. It introduces the child to the essentiality of the Christian faith, focusing on "the mystery of the person of Christ and His relationship with us, a relationship that is at once personal...and communal."⁶¹ Thus the Good Shepherd parable provides the lynchpin for all the works in the atrium: the Eucharistic presence, baptism, and the infancy and paschal narratives.⁶²

The child first encounters the Good Shepherd through hearing the Word of God proclaimed. After reverently proclaiming the Word, the catechist introduces the material: a model sheepfold, ten two-dimensional sheep, and a two-dimensional figure of the Good Shepherd. Utilizing the material, which is introduced only after the solemn reading of the Word, the catechist recapitulates the proclamation, unfastening its wrappings, as it were, and assisting the child in reflection.⁶³ The parable of the Good Shepherd emphasizes intimacy between the Shepherd and His sheep. The sheep know His voice, and the Shepherd knows and calls each one of them by name and walks ahead of them. Slowly and with great care, the catechist moves the Shepherd and the sheep, one by one, out of the sheepfold, highlighting the love of the Shepherd for his sheep—He leads them and protects them; He lays down His life for them.

The materials are now available for the child's personal work. The intelligence of the three-to-six-year old child is quite literally formed by the work of her hands. If it is indeed true, as Sofia Cavalletti and Gianna Gobbi assert, that the "senses are the windows of the intellect," then the catechesis of the child must engage the senses, particularly the hands.⁶⁴ The materials employed in the atrium serve to concretize the proclamation, allowing the child to meditate on the sweetness of Scripture, and thus grow in rapport with the Person of Christ. The materials assist the child in the absorption of the essential realities proclaimed in the intimacy and quiet of his soul. Gobbi points out that the materials are not intended "to lead to the formulation of concepts but to a vital encounter with a real Person," such that the child, both in the Scriptural proclamation and its concretization in simple and essential material that aid in his work of personal appropriation, encounters the beauty of Christ, the Good Shepherd, the Sign of signs.⁶⁵ This encounter with the world of signs permeates the child's inner life, arousing a sense of awe and wonder, dispositions that tune the child's soul to God's love.

The arousal of wonder and awe occurs through the acquisition of the language of Christianity, the language of signs that facilitates a particular depth of vision. In the atrium the child not only absorbs the grammar of faith, but a way of interpreting the world. The language of signs cultivates vision which capacitates the child to encounter the richness and depth of meaning of the world with a profound sense of wonder. With utmost facility the child absorbs this language that, because of its pluriformity of meaning, opens "ever wider horizons of the real."⁶⁶ Cavalletti and Gobbi both note that the multi-dimensional nature and concreteness of the child's intelligence and his capacity "to see the invisible within the visible" enable him to appropriate the sign with great ease and allow him, with relatively little effort, to penetrate "the veil of signs and 'see' with utmost facility their transcendent meaning, as if there were no barrier between the visible

and the Invisible.”⁶⁷ It is thus, Saint Augustine observed, that the Holy Spirit, who “prompts us externally...by means of signs” instructs the child “to be inwardly turned toward Him.”⁶⁸ Because signs are multivalent and evade exhaustive explanation, they invite the child into sustained contemplation of the mystery of God. Signs draw the child into this interior dialogue with God and provide the language that capacitates him to engage with mystery. As a result, like any spoken language, the language of signs becomes incarnate in the child, forming a constitutive part of her interpretative apparatus.

Thus, Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is incarnational in two ways. First, it is intentionally and explicitly Christocentric. The child is not catechized into the anti-incarnational vagueness that pervades the American religious imagination; rather this catechetical method is shot through with the Incarnation. Cavalletti explains the explicit christocentricity of CGS, observing that “from the Incarnation onward a particular bond was established between man and God that was sealed in the flesh of his Son.”⁶⁹ In the parable of the Good Shepherd that child encounters Christ, receiving the gift of the Shepherd’s love with joy and gratitude. The child does not respond to the parable in an academic way, but vitally and spontaneously, resting in the love of the Shepherd. This prayerful response to the Good Shepherd that forms the child’s understanding is unremittingly incarnational. The child’s object of contemplation is the incarnate Son of God, who, “presents us with a concrete vision of the life of the Trinity” and from whom “we may never withdraw our gaze.”⁷⁰ It is in the child’s appropriation of the parable in prayer that the incarnational mystery imprints itself on the soft wax of his intelligence.

Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is also incarnational in its pedagogical structure. The three-to-six-year-old child takes in information and makes meaning through the body, particularly the hands, such that these sense impressions

are “engraved on [the child’s] soul in an indelible way.”⁷¹ The material and works of the atrium are designed to aid contemplation of the kerygmatic proclamation, and facilitate the child’s appropriation of the mysteries announced. Thus the methodology coordinates the child’s vital exigency, her great need and capacity for relationships of love and protection, with the reality of the Incarnation. Again, the child does not respond to the parable of the Good Shepherd in an academic way, but vitally and spontaneously, and the parable imprints itself indelibly on the soft wax of his intelligence.

Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is uniquely positioned not merely to teach the child about God, but to facilitate the child’s living relationship with Jesus Christ. This catechetical method stands in stark contrast to standard conceptions of catechesis of the young child which, if it occurs at all, often only instructs the cognitive dimension of the child or is reduced to mere entertainment. The three-to-six-year-old inhabits an incredibly fertile period for catechesis. CGS offers a particularly compelling method in that it recognizes the child’s capacity to enter into a loving relationship with Jesus Christ and pedagogically facilitates this mysterious encounter, thereby helping to form the child’s religious imagination in a way that promotes growth in true discipleship.



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NOTES

- 1 Cavalletti, Sofia. *Religious Potential of the Child: Experiencing Scripture and Liturgy with Young Children*. Trans. Patricia Coulter and Julie Coulter (Chicago: Catechesis of the Good Shepherd Publications, 1992), 168.
- 2 Weddell, Sherry. *Forming Intentional Disciples: The Path to Knowing and Following Jesus* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2012), 43.
- 3 For a concise summary of the contours of the religious imagination in America see Christian Smith, "Is Moral Therapeutic Deism the New Religion of American Youth? Implications for the Challenge of Religious Socialization and Reproduction," in *The Faith of the Next Generation*, 55-74; see also Katie Ball-Boruff and Kristen Hempstead McGann, "Reawakening Wonder: Catechesis of the Good Shepherd as Medicine for Moral Therapeutic Deism," 45-56.
- 4 Balthasar, Hans Urs von. *Unless You Become Like This Child*. Trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 19.
- 5 Ibid., 19.
- 6 Lisieux, Thérèse. *Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux*. Trans. John Clarke, O.C.D. (Washington D.C.: ICS, 1996), 17.
- 7 Cf. Ps 91:14; Augustine of Hippo. *Homilies on the Gospel of John 1-40*. Trans. Edmund Hill, O.P. (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2009), 25 §10.
- 8 Cavalletti, Sofia and Gianna Gobbi. *Teaching Doctrine and Liturgy: A Montessori Approach*. Trans. M. Juliana, O.P. (Staten Island, NY: St. Paul Publications, 1964), 127.
- 9 Ibid., 126.
- 10 Stein, Edith. *Essays on Woman* (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1996), 98.
- 11 Ratzinger, Joseph. *On Conscience* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), 32.
- 12 Montessori, Maria. *The Child in the Family*. Trans. Nancy Rockmore Cirillo (New York: Avon Books, 1956), 60-1.
- 13 Montessori, Maria. *The Absorbent Mind* (Radford, VA: Wilder, 2007), 22.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Montessori, *The Child in the Family*, 50.
- 17 Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, 29-30.
- 18 Cf. Ratzinger, Joseph. *The God of Jesus Christ: Meditations on the Triune God*. Trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1976), 75; see also Montessori, Maria. *Secret of Childhood*. Trans. M. Joseph Costelloe, S.J. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), 103.
- 19 Montessori, *The Secret of Childhood*, 42
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Ibid., 40.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Gobbi, Gianna. *Listening to God with Children: The Montessori Method Applied to the Catechesis of Children*. Trans. and ed. Rebekah Rojcewicz. (Loveland, OH: Treehaus Communications, 1998), 79.
- 24 Montessori, *The Absorbent Mind*, 22.
- 25 Ibid., 23.
- 26 Montessori, Maria. *Discovery of the Child*. Trans. M. Joseph Costelloe, S.J. (New York: Random House Publishing, 1967), 299.
- 27 Cavalletti and Gobbi, *Teaching Doctrine and Liturgy: A Montessori Approach*, 56.
- 28 Ratzinger, *On Conscience*, 32.
- 29 Montessori, *Discovery of the Child*, 295.
- 30 Cavalletti and Gobbi, *Teaching Doctrine and Liturgy: A Montessori Approach*, 125; see also 24-5.
- 31 Montessori, *Secret of Childhood*, 43.
- 32 Balthasar, *Unless You Become Like This Child*, 16.
- 33 Montessori, *The Absorbent Mind*, 22.
- 34 Ibid., 57-8.
- 35 Ibid., 58.
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 Ibid., 22.
- 38 Cavalletti and Gobbi, *Teaching Doctrine and Liturgy: A Montessori Approach*, 126.
- 39 Montessori, *Secret of Childhood*, 106
- 40 Ratzinger, *The God of Jesus Christ*, 71.
- 41 Ibid., 72.
- 42 Balthasar, *Unless You Become Like This Child*, 10-11.

- 43 Ratzinger, Joseph. *Introduction to Christianity*. Trans. J.R. Foster (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 225, 210.
- 44 Ibid., 208.
- 45 Balthasar, *Unless You Become Like This Child*, 10.
- 46 Rojcewicz, Rebekah. "Forward: 'An American Experience of the Catechesis'" in *Religious Potential of the Child: Experiencing Scripture and Liturgy with Young Children* by Sofia Cavalletti. Trans. Patricia Coulter and Julie Coulter (Chicago: Catechesis of the Good Shepherd Publications, 1992), 14.
- 47 Ratzinger, *The God of Jesus Christ*, 75.
- 48 Montessori, *Secret of Childhood*, 42.
- 49 Balthasar, *Unless You Become Like This Child*, 42.
- 50 Searle, Mark. Preface to *Religious Potential of the Child: Experiencing Scripture and Liturgy with Young Children* by Sofia Cavalletti. Trans. by Patricia Coulter and Julie Coulter. (Chicago: Catechesis of the Good Shepherd Publications, 1992), 4.
- 51 Montessori, *Discovery of the Child*, 296.
- 52 Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2006), §1.
- 53 Cavalletti, *Religious Potential of the Child*, 173.
- 54 Ibid.
- 55 Ratzinger, *The Feast of Faith: Approaches to Theology of the Liturgy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 73.
- 56 Cavalletti, *Religious Potential of the Child*, 36.
- 57 Ibid., 27.
- 58 Ibid., 56.
- 59 Ratzinger, Joseph. *Behold the Pierced One: An Approach to a Spiritual Christology*. Trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1986), 26.
- 60 Cavalletti, *Religious Potential of the Child*, 174.
- 61 Ibid., 76.
- 62 Ibid., 65.
- 63 Augustine of Hippo, *Instructing Beginners in the Faith*. Trans. Raymond Canning; ed. Boniface Ramsey (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2006), 3,5.
- 64 Cavalletti and Gobbi, *Teaching Doctrine and Liturgy: A Montessori Approach*, 42.
- 65 Gobbi, *Listening to God with Children*, 20.
- 66 Cavalletti, *Religious Potential of the Child*, 160.
- 67 Gobbi, *Listening to God with Children*, 69; see also Cavalletti, *Religious Potential of the Child*, 43.
- 68 Augustine of Hippo, *The Teacher*. Trans. Peter King (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1995), 13,46.
- 69 Gobbi, *Listening to God with Children*, 62.
- 70 Balthasar, Hans Urs von. *Prayer*. Trans. A.V. Littledale (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1961), 132.
- 71 Montessori, *Discovery of the Child*, 298.