

REAWAKENING WONDER

CATECHESIS OF THE GOOD SHEPHERD AS
MEDICINE FOR MORALISTIC THERAPEUTIC DEISM

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The space is dark. The single flame of the Paschal Candle is the only light.
The light passes from person to person as each receives the light of Christ.
“Thanks be to God,” they reply.

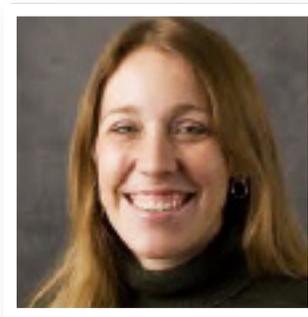


“They” are anywhere from three to six years old, and they gather in a room specifically prepared as their prayer space, the atrium. Contrary to what many might expect of this age group, they are still and quiet throughout the ritual. They are careful with the candles, having practiced using delicate objects for many months. Eventually they sing, “Alleluia,” a word they put away many weeks ago. Their joy at the return of this special word is clear.

These children are learning the ways of the Church through the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. They are exploring the connection between Scripture and liturgy. They are learning the ways God has acted in history. They are becoming part of the sheepfold, so that there may someday be one fold and one shepherd.

Catechesis of the Good Shepherd: History and Philosophy

The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd began in Rome sixty years ago with two women: Sofia Cavalletti and Gianna Gobbi. The two women differed in background. Cavalletti was a Biblical scholar, while Gobbi was an educator who studied under Maria Montessori. But each brought the gift of her previous experiences to the work of “listening to God with children.” Cavalletti’s contribution included the in depth knowledge of that which is essential in Christian faith, while Gobbi brought the insights of Maria Montessori’s educational philosophy and the tools through which she catechized the children in her care. In particular, the women incorporated two Montessori insights that cannot be separated from their pedagogical strategy. Montessori argued that the child “has its own difficult task to perform, that of producing a man” (Maria Montessori, *The Secret of Childhood*, 193). Everything the child does is directed toward this goal. The goal of catechesis—the cultivation of real faith for the present and the future—is best achieved when faith formation is incorporated into the natural process of growth and transformation that occurs in the life of the child. This strategy of “the whole message for the whole child” (Patricia Coulter, “Introduction,” *The Good Shepherd and the Child: A Joyful Journey*, 3) prevents a fragmentation of faith from the other aspects of one’s life and includes taking advantage of what Montessori called “sensitive periods,” times during which a child is developmentally primed for the acquisition of particular skills or knowledge.



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Cavalletti and Gobbi also incorporated Montessori's insight about the differing models of effort for adults and children. Adults operate, Montessori argued, on a principle of minimum effort. Children show no concern for the amount of effort expended, seeking mastery instead. A conflict then occurs. The adult seeks to substitute his or her efficient actions for the slower paced, complex action of the child, but in so doing deprives the child of the joy of mastering a skill by him or herself. Consider, for example, the preschooler putting on his or her shoes. The child is content to take the time needed to perform the action correctly. It is the adult who seeks to swoop in and put the shoes on for the child in the name of efficiency or punctuality. On the one hand, this is logical. Events begin at particular times, it is rude to keep someone waiting, and the child clearly has not yet mastered the skill. It does not appear harmful to step in. Montessori argues, however, that the act of substituting the efficient action for the awkward one deprives the child of justly earned confidence in the mastery of a skill and joy in the process of discovery.

This joy is, we would argue, essential in the religious education of children. Without it, the Christian message, which we rightly call the Good News, is reduced to a dry, wonderless understanding of Christianity. The focus of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is "the whole message for the whole child." This means that all the different aspects of the child must be addressed in a catechetical setting in order to facilitate the child's journey with God. This journey must not be only an intellectual one. In an atrium, there are no magazine collages, word searches, or quizzes. Instead, carefully prepared and tested materials are presented to the children; the children then use the materials in order to reflect on the teachings presented. Very few and specific words are chosen as part of the presentation to leave the bulk of the mystery for the child's own discovery. When reading from Scripture, care is taken not to deviate from the text unless it will enhance, rather than obscure, the child's understanding. The catechist is to use "many 'question marks'" and "few periods" so as to "invite the participation and response of the children" (Sofia Cavalletti and Patricia Coulter, "Presenting the Good Shepherd to Children", *The Good Shepherd and the Child*, 47). This pedagogical style enables the catechist to present difficult concepts without the dangers of oversimplifying the mystery or overwhelming the child. In addition, it follows in the footsteps of Christ the Teacher who didn't say, "I am the Good Shepherd; here's what that means," or, "The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, and now let me elaborate on that a little bit." Jesus resisted simple explanations of complex realities. He left room for meditation upon mysteries. He realized that God is so wholly Other that we, who are not both human and divine, can only know God through analogy. He used rich imagery to reveal what is concealed.

Catechesis of the Good Shepherd as Medicine for Moralistic Therapeutic Deism

The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd also resists the reduction of religion to morality. This resistance is particularly important in light of the challenge posed to the contemporary Church by Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. Moralistic Therapeutic Deism reduces Christianity to an enterprise that helps one to do the right thing, get through difficult times, and be a good person. It acknowledges the existence of God, but does not perceive this fact as being terribly important.

By the term “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism,” we are drawing on the work of Christian Smith and his collaborators on the National Study on Youth and Religion. Smith asserts that although most of the people he has interviewed through this longitudinal study would identify themselves as members of various diverse religious traditions, in fact the majority of them ascribe to a few common beliefs:

- God created the world and watches over us;
- God wants us to be good, nice and fair;
- The goal of life is to be happy;
- God’s presence in one’s life is mostly for emergencies;
- Good people go to heaven when they die (Christian Smith with Melissa Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching*, 162-63).

While some elements of this belief system resemble some tenets of the Christian faith, they are not sufficient in themselves. Furthermore, some elements, for example, that the goal of life is to be happy, are actually contrary. This belief system lacks any kind of personal and intimate relationship with God and any sense that God has a specific, individual plan for one's life in the context of the community.

Interestingly, Cavaletti was aware of this challenge to authentic Christian faith long before Moralistic Therapeutic Deism became a buzz phrase. One reason that she focused so extensively on the spirituality of young children, despite her background as a Biblical scholar, was that she recognized the danger that religion would become nothing more than morality. Because children develop their moral sense during the period from age six to nine (Cavaletti would call this the sensitive period for moral development) she worried that failure to begin a child's religious education before that time would result in reducing faith to morality. Indeed, her fears align with the image of the Church that popular American culture seems to have embraced: a purely human institution obsessed with regulating to the minutest detail the behavior of its members. Of course it is essential to instruct our young people in the ethical implications of Christian faith. But this cannot be the starting point of our reflection, lest religion become about us rather than about God. As an alternative, Cavaletti constructed a strategy of religious formation that begins with love. The intimate relationship that is cultivated between God and the child is just the opposite of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. Moral behavior then naturally unfolds from this relationship. The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd explicitly emphasizes the affective element in Christian faith and consciously prepares the child for full and active participation in the life of the Church.

The presentation of the Parable of the Good Shepherd, from whence the Catechesis takes its name, illustrates these points. In this presentation, the catechist begins by proclaiming the passage from John 10 in which Jesus offers the image of the Good Shepherd. A material is then introduced to aid the child in meditation on this text. The catechist invites the child to ponder the meaning of these words through carefully chosen questions and especially to consider "who are these sheep?" whom the Shepherd calls by name. The child easily appreciates that the Shepherd loves the sheep deeply, but only over time does the child discover that the sheep are people, and ultimately that one of them is "me." When the child comes to the realization that the Good Shepherd calls her or his own name, it is an appropriation of a personal relationship in which God is intimately present for the child.

After the text is presented in the words of the Scriptures and a material is introduced to aid in the child's reflection, carefully phrased questions are asked of the children. "Do you think that Jesus was talking about real sheep?" The catechist serves as a guide through the questions. Maria Montessori instructed her teachers to "follow the child," but a common mantra of Montessorians, often attributed to Maria herself is that "it does the child no favors to follow him off of a cliff." Therefore, if the children believe that Jesus was talking about real sheep, which they sometimes do, the catechist says, "I am not so sure." He or she does not strip the child of the joy of discovering the true identity of the sheep by saying, "No, you're wrong. We are the sheep." Instead the catechist waits, acting as a matchmaker between God and the child. Eventually the realization comes that the one who is loved so tenderly by the Shepherd is the child herself. Often the catechist can see on a child's face when he or she reaches that conclusion, but sometimes it is not clear until someone—

sometimes in a whisper— articulates their discovery. The children’s joy is apparent. If they have an art response, which they commonly do, it is common for a child to respond to the parable using the color yellow. In children’s artwork, yellow often represents joy. Joy is a frequent response to what occurs in the atrium. Joy is the proper response to the lived experience of God’s love. Without joy, one comes dangerously close to Moralistic Therapeutic Deism even while asserting one’s faith in the God of Jesus Christ.

Cavaletti engages in a kind of enculturation, tailoring the message to the developmental needs of her audience. She therefore omits certain elements of the text, but only very few. She believes “two images at the same time would be overwhelming for children” (Cavaletti and Coulter, 46) and therefore leaves out the image of the gate. Similarly, she omits the verses that refer to the hired hand and the wolf when speaking to young children believing them to be developmentally inappropriate to children ages three to six.

When meditating on the image of the found sheep, an adult readily identifies a moral message relating to sin and conversion. Such a message is not developmentally appropriate for the child between ages three and six, however, since the period during which they are sensitive to moral development does not occur until the child is slightly older, between the age of six and nine. Instead of a moral message, the relationship between the Shepherd and the sheep is the perspective from which Cavaletti frames the telling of the parable in this first level of CGS. One might be tempted to see this as eliminating a key theme from the teaching of Jesus, but that is simply not the case. Because the parable is told to the child in its entirety, the child is receiving the whole message. The difference is the emphasis, which is placed on that which is most likely to resonate with the child, not unlike what occurs in a well-written homily.

When the child does reach what the Church has historically named the “age of reason,” a new passage of Scripture begins to resonate for the child: the True Vine. In John 15, the word “remain” occurs eleven times in the first ten verses. This frequency does not escape the notice of the child. What does it mean to “bear fruit,” to be “pruned,” to “remain”? Remaining within the vine makes real and specific claims on life and behavior. In the context of Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, necessary moral choices are not a product of blind obedience to rules, but rather flow out of the relationship between Christ, the True Vine, and the child, the branch.

In reducing moral behavior to being good, fair and nice, without much further explication, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism values a kind of benign unobtrusiveness. As long as I don’t offend anyone else, I have done my moral duty. The radical obedience of Christ that led him to death on the cross is hardly benign unobtrusiveness, and yet it brought about life that is stronger than death.

In order to make moral choices, the child must be able to appreciate both the motivations and the consequences of her actions. Sofia Cavaletti observed that there is a link between historical consciousness (living in time: past, present and future) and responsibility for moral choices. Anyone who has driven on a car trip with a four year old knows that this child exists primarily in the present and is not comforted by the fact that “we’ll be there in five minutes.” Later on that child develops the ability to appreciate five minutes in relationship to other lengths of time. Around the age of six, the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd begins to attend to this historical consciousness in an intentional and specific way.



**Christ as the Good Shepherd,
Catacomb of Priscilla, Rome,
mid-3rd century**

The foundational presentation in this regard is entitled “The Unity and Vastness of the Kingdom of God.” It is also affectionately called “The Fettuccia,” the Italian word for “ribbon.” This presentation begins with the words “Since the beginning of time, a plan has existed in the mind of God...” A ribbon fifty meters long is unrolled as the gifts of creation are recalled: the universe, the sun and its planets, water and land, vegetation, animals and the gift of one another and the gift of the person of Jesus Christ. The length of the ribbon is proportional to the time that evolutionary scientists propose is the length of time since the Big Bang. Children have the opportunity to ponder the sheer quantity of time, how recently Christ has come, as compared to the rest of history and to ask the question “Who has prepared all of this for us?”

By presenting history as a single ribbon, the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd embraces what St. Augustine called “the golden thread” of history (Augustine, *De catechizandis rudibus* 6.6; also, Cavaletti, *Religious Potential of the Child: Six to Twelve Years Old*, 45; *History’s Golden Thread*, 15). God has a single plan that has unfolded over time even in the midst of sin and suffering. Children naturally begin to consider how they fit into this plan of God. The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd offers the image of a blank page of history, yet to be written and invites the child to consider what she will write on that page. The child has the opportunity to cooperate with and be a part of this one plan of God. This is education to vocation in the fullest sense. Moralistic Therapeutic Deism lacks an awareness of God’s real, specific and personal plan for each person; this attentiveness to history deepens and shapes the child’s appreciation of how the Shepherd calls her by name to follow Him in real, specific and personal ways.

This reality has roots in the experiences of the youngest children. In the atrium, the children are told, everything we do is a prayer. We pray when we work with a material, when we trace words from the Scripture, when we arrange flowers, when we sit quietly by the model of the altar. This prepares children to see their whole lives as prayer. As catechists, we want to make it possible for others to become ever more aware of the presence and action of God in their lives. To see even mundane actions as carrying within them the germ of a deeper relationship with God provides an opportunity for this to occur, for faith to become a lens (or even *the lens*) through which the child sees the world. It becomes possible for the child to see his or her whole life as a gift from God that is then offered to God: the universal call to holiness.



Image of Child Praying in Atrium,
© Katie Ball-Boruff

The “Fettuccia” does not end with the present. It includes a portion of white ribbon that serves as the end of the one ribbon, but it is not yet connected. This white portion represents the Parousia, the time yet to come when God will be “all in all” (1 Cor. 15:28). This history, this one plan of God is always moving forward to what Cavaletti calls “Cosmic Communion,” (*Religious Potential of the Child*, 43; also, Sofia Cavaletti, *Living Liturgy*, 18) when God will bring his people and all creation into God’s full presence. Moralistic Therapeutic Deism lacks a sense of hope: although heaven is a given for those who are good people, it does not speak of what that heaven will be like, whether anyone would want to be there and what that means for the present. Catechesis of the Good Shepherd aids the child in recognizing salvation history as a history that has a conclusion,

something worthy of hope and something united with our individual personal histories.

We have seen, therefore, that the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd can be a powerful agent for bringing the Good News to children in a developmentally appropriate way. It can also be a means to evangelize the whole family. The work of the child and the insights the child has through his work provide an avenue for the child to evangelize the parent. This is especially the case in the atrium of the youngest children because Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is so specifically targeted to their developmental needs. By focusing on the relationship of the sheep and Shepherd during a period when the children are particularly sensitive to relationship, the personal dimension of the Christian message is spread. In



emphasizing that the child is called by name, the child learns that the Good News is the Good News for me. The natural response is to share what has been received. That we are first loved by God and that we are only able to love in response would not be developmentally appropriate if presented to children in that way, but in using the very words of the Scriptures the truth becomes apparent, even to the very young child: he calls us by name! We know his voice! We would not follow a stranger! The catechist has given language to a lived reality. The child has received the Good News and is able to hand on what he or she has received.

Catechesis of the Good Shepherd and the Evangelization of Parish Life

In fact, curiosity about what is learned in the atrium can spur one to become more interested in the life of the Church even when one is from another Christian tradition. A friend raised in a mainline Protestant church witnessed the life of the atrium through her children, who were being raised Catholic, and eventually decided to assist her children's catechist in the atrium. As a result of what she witnessed there, she developed a much more positive view of the Church and later became an inquirer in RCIA. Where previously she had seen the Church as rigid and wonder-less, she came to find it full of joy. And she came to have an answer for her oldest child, who had asked her, "Why do I need to learn all of this if you don't believe that it's true?"

There are many aspects of Catechesis of the Good Shepherd that are capable of enriching parish life and making it a place of wonder, but none is more pressing than the way in which this pedagogy makes what happens during the liturgy relevant to those who are participating. The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd gives the child what is real, vital, and essential. It brings together Scripture and liturgy. It articulates the meaning of liturgical gestures. It offers a new lens through which to see the symbols of our tradition, a lens that holds the potential for revitalization.

It takes just a few seconds for the priest to lower his outstretched hands over the gifts, but when a child sees this gesture, he is filled with wonder. The real Holy Spirit is coming on the gifts and making them holy! Karl Rahner might be right about adults, that functionally the doctrine of the Trinity makes very little difference to any of us (Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*,

10-11). But not when it comes to children catechized in the atrium. It's true that they sometimes mix up the persons of the Trinity and sometimes lack vocabulary to describe what they are experiencing, but when they see the priest lower his hands over the gifts, they know that the Holy Spirit is making those gifts holy by its very presence. How humbling, that something that means so little to so many can be such a source of wonder for the child. The child learns that the appropriate response is to offer the gifts back to God in thanks for what we have received. The child will later learn that this is true in life as in liturgy, and it will enable a deeper sense of vocation. As the child shares the gifts he or she has received, the entire community of believers will be enriched.

Another way in which the life of the atrium can transform the life of the parish is through its explication of the symbols of baptism. When baptisms occur during Mass, some adults might be resentful that their "obligation" will take that much longer to fulfill, but the child catechized in the atrium has learned that baptism is an abundance of gifts. The child watches for the water, the light, the oil, and the white garment, eager to see the newly baptized person receive these gifts in much the same way that children crowd around at a birthday party. At St Joseph parish in South Bend, IN, the community sings, "Blessed be God," after each of the gifts is received. The children join in the singing, knowing in a special way that this is the most appropriate response to a God who heaps gift after gift upon us out of pure love. We respond by rejoicing.

In the atrium, radical hospitality is exercised. The adult prepares the space and the time in such a way that it is inviting and accessible to the child. Furniture is child-sized; artwork is hung at the eye-level of the child. Words are chosen according to developmental appropriateness. Ultimately, the child decides how to use her or his time (within a clear set of parameters). This approach respects the child as subject and as fully a person before God and others. Conversely, Todd Whitmore has observed that in the market-shaped world, a child is a commodity, a consumer or a burden (Todd David Whitmore with Tobias Winright, "Children: An Undeveloped Theme in Catholic Teaching", *The Challenge of Global Stewardship: Roman Catholic Responses*, 161-85). Catechesis of the Good Shepherd serves as a corrective to this deficient anthropology. Respecting the personhood of the child does not always come easily, but the Gospel compels us to do so.

When a parish is open to the influence of Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, the radical hospitality that is practiced can transform the larger community. At St. Teresa of Avila in Chicago, Catechesis of the Good Shepherd became known as a community that welcomed all children including those for whom a traditional schooling model catechesis didn't seem to work. When a family whose son had Down's Syndrome became a part of that community, this led the parish to look to ways to be more open and inclusive to all people with developmental disabilities. A Special Religious Development (SPRED) Center was established and annual masses with specific adaptations for people with developmental disabilities were implemented. The practice of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd led this community to look at who was missing from the community and to ask the question "how must we welcome the Other?"

The prevalence of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism poses particular challenges to the cultivation of authentic Christian faith. Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is a means to inspire authentic faith in the child and has the potential to inspire a growing faith in the adults who care for that child and the community that receives that child. By attending to the particular developmental needs of the child, the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd supports the child as child. It invites the child to see her life as vocation in the context of the plan of God for all creation. It enables the child to make real and concrete moral choices as a means to embody that vocation. It roots these realities in the real and intimate relationship between the child and the Shepherd who calls her by name.

