

The Characteristics of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd

32 Points of Reflection

What are the principle points which distinguish this catechesis and because of which it is called the “Catechesis of the Good Shepherd”? The following characteristics are intended to represent the principle aspects of the catechesis as they have emerged after more than fifty years of work with children of different countries, cultures and socio-economic backgrounds. These characteristics are reflective of the constants which have presented themselves in this work and are presented here with the invitation to go deeper into them for further reflection.

1. The child, particularly the religious life of the child, is central to the interest and commitment of the catechist of the Good Shepherd.
 - The catechist observes and studies the vital needs of the child and the manifestations of those vital needs according to the developmental stage of the child
 - The catechists live with the child a shared religious experience according to the teaching of the gospel: “Except you become like little children, you cannot enter the kingdom of God.” (Matthew 18:3)
 - The catechist attends to the conditions which are necessary for this life to be experienced and to flourish.
2. With this aim in mind, the catechist embraces Maria Montessori’s vision of the human being and thus the attitude of the adult regarding the child; and prepares an environment called the atrium, which aids the development of the religious life.
3. The atrium is a community in which children and adults live together a religious experience which facilitates participation in the wider community of the family, the church and other social spheres.
 - The atrium is a place of prayer, in which work and study spontaneously become meditation, contemplation and prayer.
 - The atrium is a place in which the only Teacher is Christ; both children and adults place themselves in a listening stance before his Word and seek to penetrate the mystery of the liturgical celebration.
4. The transmission of the Christian message in the atrium has a celebrative character.
 - The catechist is not a teacher, remembering that the only Teacher is Christ himself.
 - The catechist renounces every form of control (such as quizzes, texts, exams, etc.) in the spirit of poverty before an experience whose fruits are not her/his own.
5. The themes presented in the atrium are those to which the children have responded with depth and joy. These themes are taken from the Bible and the liturgy (prayers and sacraments) as the fundamental sources for creating and sustaining Christian life at every developmental stage and, in particular, for illuminating and nourishing the child in his/her most vital religious needs.
6. The Word is proclaimed in the most objective manner possible, so that the words of the adult do not impede the communication between God who speaks and God’s creature who listens. The only aim of the words of the adult is to discreetly serve the listening to God’s Word, in accordance with Jesus’ own statement in the gospel: “My teaching is not

mine but his who sent me.” (John 7:16)

7. The catechist of the Good Shepherd does not incorporate into the catechesis themes other than those which emerge from the essentiality and specificity of the vital needs of the children and our work with them.

8. The weekly atrium gatherings should last at least two hours, of which a small part is often dedicated to the catechist’s presentation, and the majority of the time is reserved for the personal work of the child.

9. In harmony with the universal church, the life in the atrium follows the liturgical year; therefore, moments which are particularly intense are those of Christmas/Epiphany and Easter/Pentecost.

10. Eucharist is central to the life of the atrium at every level, according to the various denominations of the Christian church in which the atrium is located.

11. At the annual announcement of the celebration of first communion, the children respond according to the desire for the sacrament and their personal maturity, which is discerned with the help of the family, the catechists and the priest.

12. The celebration of first communion is preceded by an intense period of preparation consisting of special weekly gatherings other than the regular atrium sessions.

13. The retreat for first communion lasts at least four days (from morning to evening.) Essential elements of the retreat include:

- a daily celebration of eucharist;
- sufficient opportunity for the children to work in peace with what they’ve already been given without receiving new presentations;
- extending the retreat until the evening also on the day of first communion, so that the children are not too quickly distracted from what they have lived.

14. The celebration of first reconciliation is solemnly linked to the baptismal signs of the white garment and the light, and, in the case of catechumens, of the celebration of baptism.

15. The attention given to meetings with families intensifies during the period leading up to first communion.

16. The catechesis continues in the years which follow first communion, returning to and enlarging upon themes already introduced and presenting other themes according to the new needs of the emerging developmental period.

17. A material is placed at the disposal of the children. The children’s personal work with the material aids their meditation on and absorption of the theme presented. In settings where it is not possible to have an atrium, another valid instrument for announcing the Christian message consists in the workbooks and catechists’ guidebooks: “I Am the Good Shepherd”. The voice of the Good Shepherd can reach the child through different instruments, but regardless of the particular instrument, the voice of the Shepherd resounds in the depths of the heart.

18. The material must be attractive but “sober” and must strictly adhere to the theme being presented. In making the material, the catechist refrains from adding superficial embellishments which would distract the child from the essentials of the theme being presented. In other words, the material must be simple, essential and “poor” in order to allow the richness of the themes content to shine through.

19. This same guideline (as in #18) applies to the atrium environment itself. The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd can be realized in any social or cultural setting.

20. The materials prepared by catechists for the atrium are faithful to the experimental models of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. The designs of these models are the result of a long, collaborative work of observation and experimentation and have been developed according to the needs of the child at each developmental stage.

21. The material makes it possible for the catechist to assume his/her proper “post” as “the useless servant.” (Luke 17:10) This expression indicates that the catechist has a task to perform, a role to fulfill, whose results, however, go much farther from what he/she does, because the only Teacher is Christ.

22. The catechists work together in a spirit of unity and harmony, in tune with God’s plan for communion in the history of salvation and in keeping with the themes of unity so strongly expressed in the parables of the Good Shepherd (John 10:1ff) and the True Vine. (John 15: 1ff) They generously offer their talents and experience for the good of all.

23. The attitude of the adult has to be marked by humility before the capacities of the child, establishing a right rapport with the child, that is to say, respecting the personality of the child, and waiting for the child to reveal himself/herself.

24. The tasks of the catechist include:

- to go deeper into the Christian message through the knowledge of the biblical and liturgical sources and of ongoing living tradition of the church, including the theological, social and ecumenical movements which enliven the church today;
- preparing an environment and maintaining order in that environment (the atrium) so that it fosters concentration, silence and contemplation in both the child and adult;
- preparing the materials oneself as much as possible while collaborating with others in areas that are beyond one’s abilities.

25. The reasons why the catechist is requested to make the materials with his/her own hands are:

- to absorb the content more deeply;
- to combat hurry, consumerism and even excessive “efficiency”;
- to pace oneself more to the rhythm of the child and thus also - or so we believe - to the working of the Holy Spirit;
- to try to reach the integration of hand, mind and heart.

26. The primary commitment of the catechist is working with the children in the atrium; however, this commitment also leads the catechist to be open to the needs of the catechesis in general and making him/her responsive to other forms of service which can be necessary.

27. The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is also concerned with helping adults open their eyes to the hidden riches of the child, especially to the child's spiritual wealth, so that adults will be drawn to learn from the child and to serve him/her. The guiding principles in this endeavor are:

- The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd does not seek success.
- It does not set about to be important or to impress others. (Isaiah 10:33-11:10)
- It is faithful to the spirit of the mustard seed. (Matthew 13: 31)
- It stands in solidarity with the least in the church.

28. The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd especially honors the spiritual values of childhood and wishes to nurture the formation of a consciousness which is oriented to the construction of the history of salvation in justice and solidarity.

29. The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is open to all Christians of various denominations and of different commitments within the church.

30. The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd offers its services to the diocese and therefore works in communion with the bishop.

31. Every atrium avails itself of the help of a priest who is attentive to the children, particularly to their religious capacities, celebrates eucharist and sacrament of reconciliation with them, and works in harmony with the spirit of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd.

32. The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd has an experimental character and is open to go always deeper into the infinite mystery of God and God's cosmic covenant with God's creatures.

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Translated by Rebekah Rojcewicz