

The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is a Montessori-based religious formation program for children, beginning at the age of three. The classroom is a specially prepared environment known as *The Atrium*, that aims to facilitate a sacred, “hands-on” space for children, in which both the children and the catechists can hear, ponder, and celebrate the most essential mysteries of the Christian faith as revealed in the scriptures and the liturgy. Originally developed in Rome by Dr. Sofia Cavalletti and Gianna Gobbi over 60 years ago, the Catechesis continues to spread worldwide and is used with adaptation in various Christian traditions.

The term *Atrium* was chosen because in the ancient church, the atrium was a gathering space between the Church Proper and the street. It was the place where the catechumens, those preparing for initiation to the Church, would receive instruction. The Atrium has a similar purpose for our children, as it is a place to help them enter into full, conscious, and active participation in the liturgical and communal life of the Church.

The prepared environment, a Montessori concept where the environment is designed to facilitate independent learning by the child. In a prepared environment, children work with materials of their own choice and at their own pace. They experience a combination of freedom and self-discipline in a place especially prepared to meet their developmental and spiritual needs.

During each atrium session, children are allowed to work alone and at their own pace. Children are encouraged to walk slowly and speak quietly, and to listen for the voice of Jesus in their hearts. The prayer life of the children is supported through use of Scripture, songs and silence. Your child will learn about the Kingdom of God, the Sacraments, the life of Jesus, and other elements of the Catholic faith tradition. But more importantly, your child will fall more deeply in love with God!

Catechesis of the Good Shepherd (CGS) is based on the belief that the young child is *already* in relationship with God! Each week your child will hear aspects of Bible or Liturgy expressed in ways that will lead to silence and study, contemplation and prayer.

- What happens in the Level I atrium?

We begin the year by learning about this special room called the atrium and how to walk, talk and treat the materials and each other while we are together in this room. Materials focusing on 'practical life' skills, e.g. pouring water or sweeping, are presented to the children. These exercises are of great interest to them, and as they repeat these exercises the children gain control of their bodies. Eventually, this self-control translates into the ability to sit in silence, and to pray!

Presentations follow the liturgical year: infancy narratives are presented in Advent, the Last Supper in Lent, the Empty Tomb in the Easter season. Other 3-6 materials include articles of the Mass, geography works exploring the land of Israel at the time of Jesus, gestures of the Mass and of Baptism, and other work. Cavaletti and Gobbi found that the parable that resonates most deeply with children this age is the parable of the Good Shepherd. This image is lifted up often and the children take time to enjoy the great love the Good Shepherd has for each one of them.

*I am the Good Shepherd, I know mine and mine know me. - John 10*

- What happens in the Level II atrium?

Level II contains many materials found in the Level I atrium, but with more detail. Salvation History is introduced and the role each of us plays in it, as well as many works on the Bible – how it came about, the names of the books, and how to look up Scripture passages. There are special parables presented in preparation for First Reconciliation and First Communion. The parable Cavaletti and Gobbi found resonated most with children this age is the parable of the True Vine (John 15:1-11). Moral parables are presented, and the sayings of Jesus called Maxims which help us understand how to relate to God, ourselves and each other from a moral perspective. Prayers and gestures of the Mass are synthesized. We ponder the gifts of God and our response to those gifts as we work to build the Kingdom of God.

*I am the vine, you are the branches; remain in me. - John 15*