

CATECHESIS of the GOOD SHEPHERD

Supposing I said there was a planet without schools or teachers, study was unknown, and yet the inhabitants - doing nothing but living and walking about - came to know all things, to carry in their minds the whole of learning: would you not think I was romancing? Well, just this, which seems so fanciful as to be nothing but the invention of a fertile imagination, is a reality. It is the child's way of learning. This is the path he follows. He learns everything without knowing he is learning it, and in doing so passes little from the unconscious to the conscious, treading always in the paths of joy and love.
Maria Montessori

In our Community Faith Formation (CFF) programs, beginning in the fall of 2009, Saint Patrick Parish will be using the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd method.

The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is an approach to the religious formation of children. It is rooted in the Bible, the Liturgy of the Church, and the educational principles of Maria Montessori. Children gather in an "atrium," a room prepared for them, which contains simple yet beautiful materials that they use.

You may be wondering how these materials help the religious life of children? If an adult hears a beautiful passage from the Bible, the adult might take a Bible, find the passage, and read it slowly again and again. He or she may think deeply about the words and perhaps speak to God in a thankful or hopeful prayer. But a little child, too young to read, needs another way. In an atrium the child can ponder a biblical passage or a prayer from the liturgy by taking the material for that text and working with it - placing wood figures of sheep in a sheepfold of the Good Shepherd, setting sculpted apostles around a Last Supper table, or preparing a small altar with the furnishings used for the Eucharist. Older children who do read often copy parables from the Bible, lay in order written prayers from the rite of baptism, or label a long time line showing the history of the kingdom of God.

The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd includes four Language Genres, they are; Sacred Stories, Parables, Liturgical Action and Silence. Each of the Language Genres includes 'wonder questions' specific to the genre that are meant to help the child incorporate the story into their own story.

Below is a brief description of these four Language Genres adapted from the work of Jerome Berryman, an Episcopal Priest who has developed the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd into the Godly Play Method.

The Four Language Genres

1. The Language of the Sacred Story

Telling the Story So Children Can Become the Story

In a sacred story, God is the main character and the People of God are encountering God's elusive presence. The people meet God in each of these stories...from Creation through the patriarchs, into the Exodus, at Sinai, in the Temple, in prophets' visions, in psalms of presence, in Sabbath, in the Word, in Annunciation, Transfiguration, and so many other times and places.

Materials are used to help the children enter into the story using all of their senses and incorporating all of the learning styles.

The Wondering Questions are consistently:

- I wonder what part of this story you like best?
- I wonder what is the most important part?
- I wonder what part of the story is about you or has you in it?
- I wonder if there is any part of this story we can leave out and still have all the story we need?

We understand that children have already experienced the presence of the mystery of God. What they need is an appropriate language by which to identify, name, value, and express in community what such an event means.... to remember, to be aware of it, and to hope for a continuing relationship. Sacred stories help children find their story.

2. The Language of the Parable

Entering with Wonder to Live the Question

The Godly Play approach to Parables includes six guiding parables in gold boxes, parables about parables, side-by-sides, the parable cards, and the parable games.

Materials are two-dimensional, supporting the timeless quality of Jesus' words to us.

The Wondering Questions vary:

- I wonder what this could really be?
- I wonder where this could really be?

The pattern of communication in the parable is the closest we can come to the actual voice of Jesus. This very different and curious kind of communication must be included for children so they can hear the best approximation of the voice of Jesus during the time of their language formation.

3. The Language of Liturgical Action

Marking Life, Time, and Space So Children Can Know the Holy

Liturgy helps express inner and outer existential realities in a way that allows others to participate. It involves action, so all of our senses can be involved in this kind of knowing.

Materials are both two- and three- dimensional, supporting a deeper understanding of the liturgical focus.

The Wondering Questions include but are not limited to...

- I wonder if you have ever come close to this in church?
- I wonder what happens when you see this in church?
- I wonder who puts it there?

Children need meaning and companions to share their faith journey. Like any art, to learn to worship, one must worship. These lessons only help show how.

4. The Language of Silence

Showing the Sound of “...” in an I-Thou Relationship

Silence is hard to speak about. Many languages are ambiguous in their terms to describe silence. For example, in Latin, *quietus* means quiet, *tranquillus* means still, and *silentium* means silence. What exactly are we trying to say with these words? We might call quiet the large category with stillness, a sense of calm coming from within, being a subcategory. Silence, then, could be another subcategory which comes from making no sound and can be imposed from outside. There is then a third and fourth kind of quiet to complicate matters. Sometimes there is nothing to say and at other times there is too much to say. Any of our four fundamental relationships (God, deep self, others, and nature) can involve one to the point of being overwhelmed, quiet.

At every stage of the Godly Play class there is silence: entering, the lesson, wondering, art and material response, the feast, and saying goodbye. A comfort with silence is shown and the assumption that silence is not empty but full is made.

The wondering questions include:

- I wonder where the silence materials are?
- I wonder where the silence is?
- I wonder where the silence comes from?
- I wonder how silence speaks?

Children have a growing inability to listen. We can make them be silent, but it is stillness (from within) that children need if they are going to learn. The ability to contemplate is the foundation of wonder, which opens the creative process, which in turn gives us life.