

# Catechesis of the Good Shepherd (CGS)

St Elizabeth Ann Seton Roman Catholic Church  
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It is an approach to faith formation of children ages 3 to 12. The focus of the program is to deepen the child's existing relationship with God; to encourage the formation of a personal prayer life; to participate fully in the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church; and to develop a deeper understanding of Catholic identity and tradition. It is rooted in the educational principles of Maria Montessori, Dr. Sofia Cavalletti and Gianna Gobbi.

*If we want to help the child  
draw nearer to God,  
we should  
with patience and courage  
seek to go always closer  
to the vital nucleus of things.  
This requires study and prayer.  
The children will be our teachers  
if we know how to observe them."*  
*Sofia Cavalletti*

The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd takes its name from the parable and image of Jesus that seemed to appeal most to young children, no matter what their race, gender, and/or socio-economic status. The statue above is representative of the one of the earliest known Christian images, discovered in the catacombs of Rome.

CGS National  
Website

[www.cgsusa.org](http://www.cgsusa.org)

## Sofia Cavalletti

Born: August 21, 1917

Died: August 23, 2011

Dr. Sofia Cavalletti was a Hebrew and Scripture scholar and member of the Vatican Commission for Jewish - Christian Relations. Dr. Cavalletti was asked by a mother to give her son religious instruction in preparation for Eucharist. At first she refused (not having much to do with children in her academic world) but eventually she consented. This experience with the 7-year-old boy changed her whole life and began what we now know as the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. Dr Cavalletti saw in that child, a way of being in the presence of God that is unique to the child and a gift to the adult who stops long enough to notice.

Sofia's background in scripture made it possible for her to present God to the child in a way that opened a plethora of ideas and images that the child could grasp and comprehend.



## Gianna Gobbi

Born: December 15, 1919

Died: January 29, 2002

Gianna was one of the primary people, along with Cavalletti, who worked at applying the principles of the Montessori method to religious education now embodied in Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. Prior to her contributions to Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, Gianna worked for 15 years in Montessori schools. Professor Gianna Gobbi and Dr. Sofia Cavalletti began the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd in 1954.



## Maria Montessori

Born 1870 died 1952

Maria Montessori became the first woman medical doctor in Italy, and early in her career, she started working with children in the slums of Rome. Her training as a scientist allowed her to observe children with an eye to recognizing their intrinsic needs. Montessori accumulated a series of materials that are still used in Montessori schools around the world. As well as the materials, her observations led her to theories on how children learn best. Many of her “discoveries” are well accepted in early childhood education today.

## The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd: Principles of the Atrium in the Home

Everything in its place  
Teach them  
Quiet is relaxing—peace-filled  
Less is more.  
In the atrium,  
Everything has its own place.  
In the atrium,  
The child sees each step of a process- often without words.  
In the atrium,  
The child learns to do it by themselves.  
In the atrium,  
The child chooses.  
In the atrium,  
We whisper.  
In the atrium,  
We use as few words as possible.  
In the atrium,  
There are not enough materials for each child to use at the same time. We share.

With child, design their room or special area with an interesting place for each of their things. Include a very special place for a statue, a prayer book or Bible, a holy picture, a journal to write or draw their prayers. Show a child step by step without words how to do something. Show, then speak. Speak, and then show. Don't do both at the same time

One of the principles of the Atrium is that the children experience the Atrium as 'theirs'—that they are the caretakers of the beauty and the order that is the Atrium. This care and respect for the physical environment enhances the child's ownership of his or her own actions and helps to develop a healthy self-concept.

As each child takes on responsibility for the good of this little community of the Good Shepherd, he or she can also take care in the community of his or her family. Simple tasks such as dusting, sweeping or mopping with child-size brooms and mops, watering plants, keeping and putting things in order in their room and around the house, all contribute and build a child's confidence and the joy of work in our daily living. Mother Theresa said, "to pray work". The joy is doubled and tripled when the child gets to work when mom and dad are working at the same time: to make the home a place of beauty and order and simplicity, with humor and kindness.

Adapted from a parent handout from St. Mary's in Phoenixville, PA –

### **For Parents, Catechists, and Pastors...**

#### ***A word from Dr. Sofia Cavalletti - Rome, 1983***

*In the absence of a faith environment where the child may live, of which he feels himself a part, and in which he feels himself almost held, we risk cultivating hothouse flowers in the atrium, which are incapable of enduring the severity of the external climate. On the other hand, without a place where the child can come in touch with the religious reality in a way and at a pace suitable to children, there is the danger the child will pass by great things without ever being able to grasp, interiorize, and make these realities his own. The initiation of a child into Christian life is not a work that can be fulfilled by the catechist alone, nor by the parents alone. It is the whole Christian community that proclaims Christ, and the child must enter into contact with the entire Christian community. The catechist, valuable as it is, must be sustained and confirmed by a community that lives what the catechist proclaims.*

From *The Religious Potential of the Child I* by Sofia Cavalletti.

### **Message to Catholic Teachers**

On the eve of her death, Dr. Maria Montessori sent this message to Catholic teachers gathered at a meeting in London, England.

*Never, as in this moment, has the Christian faith needed the sincere effort of those who profess it. I would like to ask all of you, who are gathered in this meeting, to consider the great help that children can bring to the defense of our faith.*

*Children come to us as a rain of souls, as a richness and a promise which can always be fulfilled but which needs the help of our efforts for its fulfillment.*

*Do not consider the child a weakling: the child is the builder of the human personality. That this personality be Christian or not depends on the environment around him and on those who guide his religious formation.*

*Do not think that because the child cannot understand in the same way that we adults understand that it is useless to allow him to participate in our religious practices.*

*The staunchest and deepest faith is generally found among the unsophisticated people whose women take their children to church while they are still breastfed: the child's unconscious absorbs divine powers while the conscious reasoning of adults is only human.*

*You who enjoy the great gift of belonging to the Catholic faith must intensely feel the great responsibility you have for future generations because, among you, there are those who have renounced the world to bring the world to God.*

*Take then, as help in your task, with faith and humility, "the all-powerful children" (Benedict XV). Take as your special task to watch that their limpid light be not dimmed. Protect in their development those natural energies implanted in the souls of children by the guiding hand of God. May God be with you at this meeting, and may He guide you in your conclusions and decisions.*

Maria Montessori

## The Catechist

The role of the adult in the atrium is secondary. It is the child's own inner guide and teacher, the Holy Spirit, which directs the mind and heart. The importance of the catechist is to place materials within reach and share scripture that fills a particular longing at each stage in a child's spiritual life

Formation in the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is designed to attune participants to the religious life of the child at 3-12 years. Each level requires 100 hours of lectures, lesson presentations, material making, and direction. The Association of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd grants a certificate upon completion of each approved training course.

All courses cover age-appropriate themes for children, from the Bible and liturgy as well as, the purpose and use of the handmade material, an introduction to the atrium, experience in presenting material, and help in preparing a personal handbook (the catechist 'album').

The Formation of the catechist is also a time for their own growth in their relationship with the Good Shepherd. After all, "we cannot give what we do not have."

## The Atrium

*The atrium is the meeting ground of two mysteries:  
the mystery of God and the mystery of the child.*

In the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, children gather in a room especially prepared for them, called the **Atrium**. The Atrium is a place of community and worship rather than a classroom for academic study. It is a place to be with and enjoy God, listen to the Word, and to pray. It contains simple, yet beautiful handmade materials, that are all child size. All the lessons are hands-on activities. In working with the hands-on lessons, the child comes to understand the meaning of God's presence in their life and the world.

*The atrium is a place where the child comes to know the great realities of...life as a Christian, but also and above all, a place where the child begins to live these realities in meditation and prayer. There is nothing of the academic classroom about the atrium; it is not a place for religious instruction but religious life. (Sofia Cavalletti, RPOC, p. 56)*

### **Level I (Ages 3+ to Kindergarten)**

Level I encourages children to develop their innate potential for a faith-filled relationship with God. They encounter Jesus, the Good Shepherd who loves them, cares for them, and knows them by name. Catechesis includes Scripture, Mass gestures, prayers, artwork, and music. Level One is for pre-kindergarten and kindergarten children.

### **Level II (Grades 1-3)**

The principles and goals for children in Level II is to help further the child's relationship with Christ and the Catholic faith. The children also prepare for the first reception of the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist. The children will attend mandatory retreats with at least one parent prior to celebrating the sacraments.

### **Level III (Grades 4-6)**

In Level III the 9-12 year-old listens to the Old Testament and follows the history of God's plan for salvation, linking all people together in communion. They begin to ask, "What is the Reign of God, and what is my place in it?" It is a primary question which lays the foundation for a lifetime commitment to God.

## There are many wonderful benefits to the multi-age Atrium-

\* Children learn from one another. They learn by observing and interacting.

\* Collaborative learning is encouraged. The older children are encouraged to help the younger children and it's amazing to watch the older child solidify what they know by teaching it to the younger child and it's just as amazing to see a young child's eyes focus intently on the older child as they give a lesson-this is more powerful than an adult giving a lesson. They connect more deeply with other children.

\* Multi-age grouping helps children develop a sense of community and supports social development. Children in this environment learn to respect others as individuals. We do not all have to be 'the same' or it does not have to be 'fair and equal' when all children are being respected for who they are.

\* Children work at their own levels, which may vary in different curriculum areas.

\* Children re-explore the same materials at different levels. When these materials are used often and at different levels, the opportunities for learning are endless.

\* Multi-age groupings lend itself well to the inclusion of children with special needs into the Atrium with typically developing peers. The benefits of inclusion for all children have been demonstrated and they range across all developmental and educational domains.

\*Children who are given the freedom to interact with children of different ages build a sense of themselves and a sense of confidence that provides a foundation for them which will help them move through life with the belief that they can try new things, and not be afraid of stepping out of their comfort zone.