

The Faith Formation of Children: Are We Asking the Right Questions?

Beginning by watching how children relate to God leads to a different perspective.

by Chris Aridas

In the area of children's faith formation, we all have questions. Bishops, pastors, and religious educators ask, "Are the children learning what the church teaches?" and "Are the catechists orthodox? Have they been prepared?" and "How can we get the parents to come to Sunday Mass and bring their children?"

Parents have a different set of questions: "What should I do when my child doesn't want to attend Mass (or class)? Should I force her to go?" or, "Class time conflicts with my child's activities: isn't there a book I could use instead?" or, "My ex-spouse has my son on the weekends and I can't guarantee he'll get to Mass; does that mean he can't receive first holy Communion?"

Those are reasonable questions for those people to be asking. But what if we posed a different question: What does the child need to develop his or her relationship with God? That's a question concerned with the child's needs, rather than with adults' need to fix something or to try to fit in one more responsibility in a busy life.

A Different Question Brings a Different Starting Point

Depending upon one's questions or concerns, the responses differ widely. Stunned by the religious illiteracy among many Catholic families, some bishops mandate that only approved textbooks be used. Others require that catechists complete specific course requirements to try to guarantee their competency as teachers of the faith. In some parishes, mandated class attendance by both children and parents is enforced in order for the child to "move on" to the next level of instruction.

Parental response, on the other hand, often involves an increasing disconnect with the church, developing a consumer attitude toward faith and the sacraments, or long suffering with a program that does not appear to meet the child's or family's interests. Oftentimes, frustration, anger, and confusion emerge. The frustration arises from a perceived disconnect that church leaders have with the lives, lifestyle, and ability of parents to respond in today's world. In addition, if the parents themselves often feel that the church's liturgy, preaching, and/or teaching is irrelevant to their lives, it's fairly easy for them to believe that their child is being bored to tears at a faith-formation class.

But when we look at a faith-formation process with the child's needs as the starting point, adversarial positions lose ground. After all, what parent does not want to fulfill his or her child's needs? In addition, by starting with the needs of the child, clergy, professional educators, parents, and catechists are placing their faith where it belongs—in God's revealed plan of creation and salvation. Do we not believe that humans are made in the image and likeness of God? Do we not say that at baptism an "indestructible seed" of faith is placed within one's very being?

This being the case, why do we instruct the child as if she or he needs to be filled with something from outside in order to know and respond to God? This strikes me as contrary to what we're told in the National Directory for Catechesis, which reminds us that the communication of faith is "an event of grace under the action of the Holy Spirit, realized in the encounter of the word of God with the experience of the person." That being the case, might it not be time for us to identify the grace of the Spirit already working within the child in ways appropriate to a child, rather than treating the child as a small adult who should see, know, and experience God in the same way as an adult?

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If we are patient enough to observe and accept the child as a child, we will discover—with the patient observation of a child’s art, song, silence, movement, or comments—that a child’s grasp of the transcendent is as authentic, incredibly rich, filled with wonder and awe, and, yes, even contemplation, as is our own adult version!

Is it possible that our current approach to the faith formation of our children is doing more harm than good? Is it possible that within the child herself or himself, God has planted all that is needed for the child to begin that long journey toward holiness that Jesus commanded we take as we move toward God’s kingdom? Is it possible that God has placed within the child a potential for knowing God that goes beyond what we have assumed? What if this potential requires the adult catechists to nurture and draw forth from the child his or her response to the divine gift of grace?

Catechesis of the Good Shepherd

More than fifty years ago, Sofia Cavalletti, a noted Hebrew scholar, and Gianna Gobbi, a disciple of the renowned educator Maria Montessori, asked similar questions about the religious potential of the child. From their observations working with children, they developed a way of building upon the gift of God’s grace operating within the child that allows the child to express his or her deep love of God within the faith tradition of the church, especially through Scripture and liturgy.

Employing the insights of Maria Montessori’s educational paradigm, they realized that at certain times within a child’s growth, the child is particularly sensitive to various aspects of the faith. By identifying those “sensitive periods,” they were able to help the child help himself or herself in identifying and expressing her or his relationship with God. Working with children as early as age three, they observed that the children were able—indeed needed and desired—to come before the wonder and glory of the God they have not yet named.

Identifying this God for the children as “The Good Shepherd,” Cavalletti and Gobbi found that the children in their class were grasping the truth of the gospel message (and being grasped by it) when the gospel was presented in its essentiality. By providing age-appropriate materials—removing any extraneous materials that might distract—they observed that the children worked individually or with others in an atmosphere of reflection and self-expression. The “classroom” in which this took place was called an atrium. Unlike other faith-formation classrooms, the atrium drew the children to a heart-conviction experience of the Scripture, a love and understanding of Eucharist, and the implications of disciple-living within the framework of active participation of the church community.

A great deal has been written about their ongoing work, so there is no need for further explanation in this article. What remains important, however, is that we ask yet another question: “If such a fruitful program exists, why have so few heard about it or utilized it?” The answer to that uncovers what burdens and immobilizes the church at this particular point in time.

Naming the Whirlwind

It is no secret in today’s church community that communicating the faith effectively is more and more difficult. The reasons for this are varied and understandable. Look at the current situation: fewer participate in the Eucharist; many cling tightly to the name “Catholic” while holding a different understanding from those in authority in terms of what’s expected of a Catholic; young people appear to know little about the basic truths and teaching of the Catholic faith; generation X or millennial parents

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who do not practice their faith demand the sacrament of baptism for their children, without offering any reasonable indication that they intend to practice the faith with their children.

For pastors, struggling with a limited number of paid staff and an ever-decreasing number of volunteers, solutions appear elusive. Though the few who have heard of the “Catechesis of the Good Shepherd” (CGS) program usually respond positively, they cannot imagine redirecting a parish program when they barely can manage the one they have. Upon finding out that the CGS program requires approximately ninety hours of training for each of the three levels of instruction, they look with disbelief, as if to say, “I can’t get catechists to attend a ninety-minute meeting four times a year, much less ninety hours of training!” Furthermore, the thought that each child would be spending approximately two hours weekly within the atrium seems impossible to implement and sustain. “The parish has a difficult enough time convincing parents that one hour per week is required. How could we implement more than that?”

One Parish’s Experience

I discovered Sofia Cavalletti in a footnote that referenced her work *The Religious Potential of the Child*. What she said about the child, and the observations she made regarding the child’s response, resonated deeply within me. God was already working with the child, according to Cavalletti. It’s the work of the catechist to become the child’s humble servant by providing what is age-appropriate so the child can hear and respond at an age-appropriate level to the Good Shepherd speaking within him or her. The thought that God was already speaking to the child struck me as both obvious and radical. Certain that this was an insight I had to pursue, I shared my excitement with other members of our paid parish staff, as well as lay catechists. To find out more, several agreed to pursue the training course offered monthly in Tarrytown, N.Y.—a ninety-minute drive from our parish.

From that small beginning the parish slowly but surely began to embrace the CGS program. In addition to training catechists, we found parishioners willing to offer their talents in making the materials needed for the atrium space where the children spend their faith-formation time. These materials involved child-sized model altars, liturgical calendars, dioramas depicting the infancy narratives and Kingdom parables, model baptismal fonts, wall charts, etc. Over the past seven years, our program has grown to serve 200 children: 100 from ages three to five; 68 from ages six to nine; 30 from ages nine to twelve. This is only a small portion of what eventually will become our complete program serving more than one thousand children. (Other parish children now continue to take part in a more typical contemporary program of religious education.)

Since the program’s initiation, we have seen many people receive blessings at different levels of life and faith. Best of all, the parents whose children attend the program have responded with enthusiasm and support, willingly sharing with others the change of attitude within their families regarding the practice of the faith. This has been evidenced by the return of families to the Eucharist and a noticeable increase of parents now involved with and excited about their children’s faith formation.

Most important of all, by responding to the question, “What does the child need to develop his or her relationship with God?” we have begun to observe the same results that Cavalletti and Gobbi observed during their fifty-plus years of working with children: children now willingly attend faith-formation sessions; there is an increase of joy, reverence, and trusting faith growing within the children. The

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youngest preschool and kindergarten children (Level I) now speak openly of Jesus the Good Shepherd; younger elementary and those preparing for first Eucharist (Level II) share freely their growing desire for communion with the Lord; and the older elementary children (Level III), through their study of Scripture and church history, begin to identify the ways they are called to work within God's plan to bring about the Kingdom.

Some may say that the amount of time, effort, and money spent goes beyond what a parish can reasonably expect to accomplish. However, the fruit of the program has convinced us that we would be remiss if we remained satisfied with the status quo simply because a more fruitful direction took more time, effort, or money. All of us are called to be servants of the Lord by serving the least among us. In terms of the faith formation of children, the fruit of the "Catechesis of the Good Shepherd" program has convinced us that we have found an energizing and faithful way to respond to that command by humbly serving the children God has entrusted to our care.

Further Reading

For a theological perspective, see Karl Rahner, "Ideas for a Theology of Childhood," *Theological Investigations*, VIII (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1971), 33-50.

For an educational perspective, see Maria Montessori, *The Discovery of the Child* (New York: Random House Publishing Group. Ballantine Books, 1972), 294-301. For a medical/psychological perspective, see Robert Coles's study *The Spiritual Life of Children* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1990).

The text that got me started was *The Religious Potential of the Child: Experiencing Scripture and Liturgy with Young Children* by Sofia Cavalletti (Liturgy Training Publications, 1992). *The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd in a Parish Setting* by Tina Lillig (Catechesis of the Good Shepherd Publications, an imprint of Liturgy Training Publications, 1998) is a helpful, easy-to-read guide outlining how the program works in a parish. *The Good Shepherd and the Child: A Joyful Journey* by Sofia Cavalletti et al. (Liturgy Training Publications, 1993) contains articles of pastoral wisdom and insight regarding the child's participation in the program.

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