

St. Michael Catholic Church
RELIGIOUS EDUCATION PROGRAM

CATECHESIS OF THE GOOD SHEPHERD



ADMINISTRATIVE POLICIES

ENVIRONMENT – The Atrium is a special place of prayer and enjoyment of God, where children listen to the Good Shepherd's voice during catechetical presentations and can meditate on God's Word while working. In order to cultivate a prayerful environment, we teach children to use the slow Atrium walk and a quiet Atrium voice. Please model a quiet manner of speaking and walking to help your children become accustomed to using their Atrium voice and Atrium walk.

ARRIVAL – On-time arrivals are essential so that you do not disrupt group presentations given at the beginning of Atrium. If late arrivals become habitual (more than 3 times), the catechist will discuss an alternative plan for your child. Before arriving at the Atrium, please be sure children have eaten a well-balanced meal and have gone to the bathroom. Since the Atrium is a reverent environment, like a church, please encourage your children to use their Atrium voice and Atrium walk when entering. Toys from home are not permitted in the Atrium.

ILLNESS and ABSENCES – Please keep children who are sick at home until they recover. In the event of an illness or absence, we are unable to let children make up Atrium sessions on other days in order to keep consistency with each session.

CHILD'S PAPERWORK – Each child will have a folder in which to keep papers (coloring, pasting, etc.) At the end of the year, we will send the work home. Parents should not expect paperwork after each session, since one of the key Montessori principles is that young children work for the process and not the end product.

CANDLES – Candles are lit in the Atrium when Scripture is read and during sacred moments. An adult always supervises the children when they are near candles. Only the adult handles matches.

DISMISSAL – At the end of Atrium, the children gather around the prayer table to listen to the Word of God, pray and sing. When Atrium is over, children are called by name to line up for dismissal. Children will only be released to designated persons authorized by parents or legal guardians. If you arrive late, your child will wait for you in the Atrium. In the best interest of your children and catechists, please be prompt in collecting your child.

PARENT VOLUNTEERS – We are very grateful for parental help. It is a wonderful way to be involved in your child's Atrium experience while offering help to the program. We need volunteers to assist during the Atrium, clean-up after Atrium, artistically paint figures, sew, and do wood-working. Please contact the Religious Education Office if you are interested in volunteering.

ENROLLMENT, TUITION, FEES - Registration for the fall begins each spring and ends on August 31. Tuition is due at registration and covers the cost to furnish and construct the catechetical materials used in the Atrium.

New students. To be enrolled in our Program, students must be baptized at the time of registration or by August 1 (one month before the beginning of the school year). The student's Baptismal Certificate is required at the time of registration. Registration will not be considered completed until all required documents have been presented and the tuition paid.

TUITION SCHEDULE

| In parish | |
|----------------------|---------|
| 1 child | \$375 |
| 2 children | \$700 |
| 3 children | \$1,000 |
| 4 or more children | \$1,275 |
| Out of parish | |
| 1 child | \$575 |
| 2 children | \$1,100 |
| 3 children | \$1,600 |
| 4 or more children | \$2,075 |

Checks should be made **payable to St. Michael Church.**

REFUNDS – During the first 3 weeks of Atrium, we assess the child's readiness for the Atrium. If we determine that the child is not ready (i.e., not potty-trained or not able to follow simple instructions and work independently), we will ask that the child wait till the following year. Tuition will be refunded if this determination is made by the Catechist. After the first 3 weeks, tuition is non-refundable.

ATRIUM BEHAVIOR – Following the discretion of the catechist or assistant, if a child hurts another person in the Atrium (by hitting, kicking, biting, pinching, scratching, etc..) we will ask that the child skip the next week of Atrium. This is to cultivate an atmosphere of respect in the Atrium. If this happens a second time, the child will be asked to wait until the following year before returning.

TOURS – Registered children receive a brief Atrium tour the first week of Atrium. (If you would like a tour, please contact the Religious Education Office at least 2 weeks before classes begin to schedule a tour.)



General Information

What does the word “catechesis” mean?

The word “catechesis” is often defined as oral instruction given to catechumens (those preparing for baptism). It is from a Greek word, related to the word, “to teach,” and means “resounding” or “echoing down.” It refers to the passing on of the truths of our faith.

The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd takes its name from one of the earliest and most central presentations offered to children, the parable of the Good Shepherd (John 10:3-5, 11-16). This catechesis is rooted in the Bible, the liturgy of the Catholic Church, and the educational principles of Maria Montessori. The children’s “classroom” is an “atrium,” a room that has been prepared specifically for this catechesis and which contains simple yet beautiful materials for the children to use.

How can the beautiful materials in the Atrium help the religious life of the child?

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 the 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.

Is Catechesis of the Good Shepherd Catholic?

Yes. This catechesis came about through the work of two Roman Catholic laywomen in Rome: Sofia Cavalletti and Gianna Gobbi. They were inspired by the educational principles of Maria Montessori, also a Catholic. The materials they prepared for children, beginning in 1954, were based on the Bible, the Roman Catholic liturgy and sacraments, Tradition, and church teachings.

A Window into the Atrium:

The children are gathered around the catechist who gives a brief introduction to the scriptural story, recalling something the children already knows about Jesus (lifting up any words that may be unfamiliar to the children). Then a candle is lit and the solemn reading of the scripture takes place. The catechist might ask, “What did we hear in this scripture?” At this point the material is introduced. “This is the sheepfold.” (It is placed on the table.) “This is the Good Shepherd. These are the sheep.” The catechist reads the parable again, moving the material with very simple movements: placing the sheep in the sheepfold, the shepherd calling them out, the shepherd going ahead of them, the sheep following.

The second narration is followed by the catechist posing a few, open-ended questions: i.e., “I wonder how far the Good Shepherd’s voice can be heard?” or “I wonder how the Good Shepherd knows each sheep by name?” The catechist invites a prayer response from the heart of the child. (There are other moments when the catechist begins to introduce formal prayers.)

The catechist shows the children how to gently put the materials away and where the materials are stored so that they can choose this work for themselves during their individual work time. The

expectation is always to return materials to their place ready for the next person. It is in this work time after much repetition where the child comes to know the scripture passage by heart.

It is with this text that the children are introduced into the mystery of the person of Christ. It is primarily the children's responses that account for the choice of this parable. The children work repeatedly with this material, moving it in their own way as they appropriate its truth.

The children teach us the importance of the Christocentric way of catechesis: to come to God through Christ. This is our religious reality, having been born into the time of redemption. And so religious experiences, and even the reading of the Old Testament, are always in this light.

"The points on which we linger, for it is these that most enchant the children, are above all the personal love and protective presence of the Good Shepherd: He calls each one of His sheep by name, He knows each intimately even if there are many sheep; He calls His sheep and gradually they become accustomed to the voice of their Good Shepherd and they listen to Him. In this way, a precious relationship is established; a thread of love binds the sheep always more closely to their Shepherd. The Shepherd's voice is powerful and supremely patient; it never tires of calling and reaches out even to those sheep who are far away, beyond the sheepfold. Slowly they too turn to hear His voice and they gather together into one great flock. The Shepherd knows the needs of His sheep, and He guides them to good pastures, walking ahead of them to show the way and to be the first to confront any danger should it arise. So the sheep are safe and peaceful with their Good Shepherd; they know there is someone to protect them even in danger." (Sofia Cavaletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child*)

Cavaletti mentions that for a long time she thought the most powerful part of the Good Shepherd image was the protective aspect of the shepherd. It was an obvious thing because little children have a particular need to be protected, to feel secure. But as she studied their artwork, she saw another element, fuller and deeper, and at the root of the sense of protection. It is the element of relationship. The sense of security is rooted in the relationship and is indeed a fringe benefit of that relationship. Later the child will encounter the depth of this relationship in the paschal aspect of the parable: "The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep." (John 10:11)

(from *The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd in a Parish Setting*, Tina Lillig)