

The Atrium of the True Vine: 6-9 year olds Level II Atrium

The Atrium is a special place set aside for the child aged six to nine. It is an environment prepared by the catechist in order to allow the relationship between God and the child to grow into one of true friendship. The atrium is not a schoolroom, but rather a quiet place of prayer and reflection that prepares the child for full participation in Holy Mass and the life of the church. It is a place to step away from the *noise* of the world and enter into a quiet space to think about God.

The Program: Based on Montessori Principles of Education

Catechesis of the Good Shepherd (CGS) is an approach to the religious formation of children, three to twelve years of age. It originated in 1954 with the founding of the Children's Centre or "Atrium" in Rome by Sofia Cavalletti, a biblical scholar, and Gianna Gobbi, an educator of children and teachers. Inspired by Montessori principles of education, the catechesis holds that God and the child are already in relationship – they simply need time to nurture their friendship and the child needs catechesis to grow in the knowledge of God. CGS deals with the vital religious needs of the child and is faithful to the essentials of Christian tradition based on the Bible and Liturgy.

The Child: Six to Nine Years

Six to nine year olds have a reasoning mind and want to know why things are like they are, and where things come from. Imagination is very important to them, and they are interested in the total universe. We begin the year by introducing them to the idea of the universe, as in Creation, and then we narrow our focus to talk about specifics within Creation. They appear to lose a sense of order and become messy with their work, but actually, they are making a change in focus from the physical order of reality to the mental. They are capable of great work, like projects, that take them a few weeks to complete, and they enjoy this. They are becoming proficient readers, and in the second half of the year they learn to find scripture passages in the books of the Holy Bible as well as learning where the different books of the Holy Bible are located. The presentation of the Books of the Holy Bible is a great work project for them, taking many weeks to complete. Children at this age also have a strong sense of right and wrong and are very concerned with rules, thus they enjoy meditating on the Maxims and tracing them.

The Meeting Place: The Atrium

The Atrium of the True Vine can be compared to a Retreat House - a special place set aside for children aged 6-9 to meet with each other, to meditate on God's Word, to work with specially prepared materials, to find their particular place in the Kingdom of God, and to explore what it means to

become a branch of the True Vine.

The Content: The Holy Bible

Most presentations are given in a three-week cycle: the first moment being one of wonder and awe, the second to look again at the mystery of God, and the third a chance to ponder their own place in God's Kingdom. With their growing ability to reason, they draw comparisons with a synthesis of the familiar Level I parables.

Scripture – The children are encouraged to look up passages and read from the Holy Bible: parables about prayer (The Pharisee and the Publican), and moral parables (The Good Samaritan). Awe and wonder about the universe and God's Creation are experienced through scripture reading. Jesus' invitations, called the Maxims ("Pray for those who persecute you) satisfy their need for rules.

Geography and the Birth and Life of Jesus - Study of the geography of the Holy Land becomes more extensive. Further narratives of Jesus' life are introduced, particularly the Presentation at the Temple and the Flight to Egypt. We continue to meditate upon the Messianic prophecies during Advent.

Liturgy – Hands-on charts give an overview of the Eucharist, and small symbols, objects, and scripture cards allow the children to revisit Level I and early Level II presentations of the articles, prayers, and gestures of the Eucharist, gathering the moments together in proper order to form a whole - a synthesis of the Eucharist. They learn the Lord's Prayer and study the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Holy Eucharist. Communal Prayer is an opportunity for the children to prepare the prayer table and to lead in scripture reading and prayer. These tasks help to build independence and responsibility in planning a Liturgy and aid in future participation in the life of the Church.

Moral Development – Using the "keys of the Kingdom" (the Maxims) that Jesus gives to help us to know, love, and serve the Father in this world, so that we can be happy with Him in the next, the children meditate on Jesus' parables using the Maxims and begin to think about their place in the Kingdom of God. (For example: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind." (Luke 10:27a); "Love your neighbour as yourself." (Luke 10:27b); "Love your enemies." (Matt 5:44)).

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