

**PARISH SACRAMENTAL PREPARATION: HOW DO WE TRANSLATE  
GOOD THEOLOGY INTO PRACTICAL PRACTICE?—INVITED SESSION**

Topic: Parish Sacramental Preparation  
Convener: Martha Rheame, St. Nicholas Church, O'Fallon, IL  
Moderator: Natalie Kertes Weaver, Ursuline College  
Presenters: Martha Rheame, St. Nicholas Church, O'Fallon, IL  
Barbara Furdek, St. Nicholas Church, O'Fallon, IL  
Julie Kilian, St. Francis Xavier College Church, St. Louis, MO

This invited session featured three presenters. Martha Rheame presented “Understanding the Methodology of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd.” Barbara Furdek presented “The Collaboration of Catechesis of the Good Shepherd and Practical Theology.” Julie Kilian presented “Practical Experiences of Sacramental Preparation from a Catechesis of the Good Shepherd Perspective.” Natalie Kertes moderated the session. The session explored the catechetical program called “The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd.” This program was designed by Sofia Cavalletti in Rome, in 1954, based on the self-learning pedagogical model of Maria Montessori, and designed for the sacramental preparation of children between three and twelve years of age.

Martha Rheame’s presentation focused on the practical methodology used in this religious education model. The presentation began with a demonstration of an actual lesson that would be used for three- to six-year-old children. Rheame’s sample lesson focused on the teaching that God’s Kingdom is like a mustard seed. The lesson began with session attendees gathering around a child-sized prayer table and proceeded to include the following: lighting of candles; a Scripture reading; distribution of actual mustard seeds for observation and discussion; observation and discussion of a photograph of a fully mature mustard tree; a return to the Scripture reading; and a closing prayer. Conversation was play-acted at a register appropriate to a three to six year old audience. At the conclusion of the demonstration, session attendees reflected with Rheame about the experience: considering the effectiveness of the method; the participatory role that the children would play in an actual lesson through their questions and observations; and the value of child-sized physical materials (such as small altars, chalices, nativity scenes, and so on) used in the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd programs.

Julie Kilian’s presentation followed, moving from the demonstration part of the session into a more structured discussion of the methodology. Julie discussed the concept of the “atrium,” which is the physical space in which teachers and children in the Good Shepherd programs meet. The term “atrium” derives from the name of the space in early Christian churches where catechumens were prepared. The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd uses this term, as opposed to “classroom,” in order to denote the unique purpose of the gathering space and its sacredness as the location where young persons are prepared for worship within the larger community of believers. Kilian also discussed the catechetical materials used in the program and the means by which the beautiful, tactile tools enhance a child’s sense of relationship to God.

Barbara Furdek’s presentation focused on some specific aspects of preparation for first communion and confirmation, including the way parents are incorporated in their children’s Good Shepherd catechesis. Furdek also spoke to the logistical issues related to starting a Good Shepherd program, allocating space for an atrium, training catechists, making physical materials

*Invited Session: Sacramental Preparation*

for atrium usage, and supporting adolescent children beyond the conclusion of their Good Shepherd program.

The session was highly informative, most of the attendees having little prior knowledge of this mode of catechesis. After the presentations, conversation focused on a number of salient questions: how can Montessori learning be constructively applied to religious education for children beyond elementary school age? How do Good Shepherd tools and models compare to traditional sacramental preparation? What are the joys and benefits of this catechetical model? And what challenges do parishes face in starting and sustaining the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd?

NATALIE KERTES WEAVER  
*Ursuline College*  
*Pepper Pike, Ohio*