

Nurturing Religious Potential

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“I love Jesus!” Monica exclaimed one morning during her Catechesis of the Good Shepherd presentation.¹ This three year old boldly and confidently shared with me a great proclamation, and in this instance her deep love of our Savior filled my heart with joy, hope, and a sweet reminder of Christ’s love for each one of us. For where could her love of Christ come from except from Christ himself? This little one, with only three years of life experience, has already encountered Jesus personally and He has captivated her heart. Each one of us finds ourselves moving and living within the context of the ultimate love story ever told.² Some of us have experienced the intensity of this love story, and some of us are still waiting to encounter the Lover and all that He has to offer.

In the parable of the Good Shepherd, we hear Jesus tell us that He has come that we “might have life and have it more abundantly” (*NRSV*, John 10:10). We have each been created to desire this fullness of life and love, and we often find ourselves searching for something to satisfy this longing in our hearts. As St. Augustine addresses God, he reminds us, “You stir us so that praising you may bring us joy, because you have made us and drawn us to yourself, and our heart is unquiet until it rests in you” (Saint Augustine 14). The people who come to our Church doors and those that we encounter in ministry long to know that they are loved because they have been created to desire a most unconditional love that only an infinite and perfect being can satisfy. In his classic work on the Holy Spirit, *The Sanctifier*, Archbishop Martinez explains,

“Therefore the only full and perfect love, the only love that completely satisfies our heart, is the love of God: it is the only love that can become adoration. If God were not so great, if he were not so infinite, if we could comprehend him or exhaust him, we would not love him as we do; he would not satisfy our hearts.

¹ Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is a Montessori based religious formation for children primarily ages 3-12. For more information, please visit www.cgsusa.org.

² Please see Mongoven for more on this discussion. “The Bible is a love story. It is the story of God’s inimitable, infinite, eternal, and unconditional love for all of humanity...It is a story that doesn’t make sense unless you have been loved and have been a lover. It is a love story that calls many to ministry” (Mongoven 17).

The supreme enchantment of divine love lies precisely in this, that God is a truth never to be encompassed, a good never to be exhausted, a beauty ever renewed.” (Martinez 108)

It is often easy in our work to see all the challenges to overcome and the problems to be fixed. We live in a society where the faith and everyday life are often disconnected, and all the while we are bombarded by secular ideology. We see a lack of catechesis in the faithful and watch arguments ensuing amongst catechists as to how best to proceed with handing on the faith. Time seems to be a rare commodity as we encounter families and try our best to draw them into the faith and into understanding the importance of a life lived with faith and love. Some of us have large communities that we are working with and volunteers who have minimal formation. We have textbooks to aid us, but are our communities truly encountering the Risen Christ (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 13-15)? Indeed, there is much brokenness in our world, much work to be accomplished, and many challenges to overcome. Our hearts can often feel as if the people in front of us or the situations at hand are our enemies. We hear our thoughts echo, “If only this circumstance were different or the parents would make more time to engage in the faith.” And then I stop myself and wonder, “How might my ministry be changed and transformed if I focus on each person in front of me as someone with religious potential just waiting to be awakened or cherished?”

God has created each person with a deep religious potential, a potential in the season of nurturing. In our ministry, we encounter a challenge to see the people in front of us as beloved children of God. We may even be invited to help God nurture the religious potential that they already have within themselves. In this paper I will explore ministry through the lens of religious potential, building off of Sofia Cavalletti and Gianna Gobbi’s work with Catechesis of the Good Shepherd as well as engaging the directives of our bishops in an effort to engage the

role and benefits that a nurturing attitude and disposition can have in the catechetical life.

It is first important for us to explore the phrase “religious potential.” The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the word *religious* as “of or relating to religion” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). Religion in turn comes from the Latin word *religare*, which means, “to bind fast” (Online Etymology Dictionary). Our religious practices become the avenue of being bound to God. Christ Himself came to be the bridge between the Father and us. The bond that was broken with Adam and Eve is bound again by Christ’s sacrifice and triumph over death. (S. a. Cavalletti 54). Today, over 2000 years later, we are invited into this same binding and saving mission of Christ. As we are baptized into Christ, so we live with Him and for Him, acting as His hands and feet in the world, to borrow St Teresa of Avila's image from one of her attributed poems (Saint Teresa of Avila). All baptized people, but professional ministers in particular, have inherited the family business of binding people to God; however, we do not accomplish this work on our own account. It must be the Holy Spirit working within us and pouring forth from us that draws people into deeper relationship with God (CCC #735).

During the Annunciation, our Blessed Mother witnesses to this incredible binding power of religion with her Fiat, her act of faith. Mary humbly accepts God’s invitation to become the Theotokos, the Christ bearer. Jesus is formed within her and from her womb comes the Christ. She cooperates in the saving act of Christ, our Emmanuel, our God with us. She not only bears Christ to the world, but God entrusts her with nurturing Jesus’ own religious potential and the religious potential of each one of us, Christ’s beloved brothers and sisters (Martinez 6-7).

We know that Christ’s mission is to pour out His life so that we might all have a fullness of life with Him forever (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 42). He has come to bind us to the divine life, but He does not accomplish this work without our consent (CCC

#1730). We are each budding with potential, waiting to see this relationship with God actualized and solidified. As we know, the definition of potential is something “existing in possibility: capable of development into actuality” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). Our relationship with God will be fully realized in the after life, but in the moment, we are called to embrace the faith where we are and to do our best to grow in acts of faith and works. We each have a deep capacity for God and for continuing Christ’s mission in the world.

Over sixty years ago, Sophia Cavalletti, a Hebrew Scripture scholar, and Gianna Gobbi, a Montessori teacher, set out on an adventure to explore this deep capacity for God with the child. In their work and in their friendship with one another and with God, they began to notice that children have an incredible religious potential. By creating various hands on materials, they brought the faith to the children in concrete ways. Abstract realities became tangible, and the children deepened their capacity to love God and to respond to the love that they had received. By bringing their backgrounds and talents to the table and listening to the Holy Spirit’s movements along with the child, Sofia and Gianna became collaborators with God. They took the children who were in front of them and helped them to encounter God through the Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition, namely the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. These two women gave the children ways to express themselves and articulate what was already present within them, a desire to be in relationship with the divine. As the children came to recognize their place in salvation history, they began to explore their response to the many gifts that God gives them and began to see themselves as beloved children and collaborators of a loving Father. (S. Cavalletti).

Catechesis of the Good Shepherd has many gifts to share with the life of a minister. This method of catechesis encourages a deep listening to God with the people in front of us. We find that God reveals himself to his little ones, whether in age, in heart, or in low estate. In the midst

of this lowliness, we encounter the joy of God and respond to this joy in our love of one another and in our love of God. This love is manifested in our charitable acts and in our participation in prayer and liturgy. The children that I have been working with this past year rejoice in the new life that they find in their midst. Most of them will have new siblings arriving this year, and they are filled with such joy when they remember these babies who will soon make their appearance into their families. As you can imagine, this past Christmas was a most joyful time to be meditating with them on Jesus' own birth. These little ones of God could relate to Jesus on a most personal level, and we found Christ present with us in our everyday lives as we listened to the Sacred Scripture of Christ's birth, in our response through prayer and liturgy, and in our community gathered in His name.

Sofia Cavalletti spoke often of the religious potential of the child, and this religious potential extends to the adult as well. As the *National Directory for Catechesis* shares, "More and more, adult catechesis is understood to be the chief form of catechesis and is given priority in catechetical planning" (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 11). All people of all ages have a need to encounter God, and it is the role of the minister to approach these people with the knowledge that they have a beautiful religiosity within them that might be in need of some nurturing. It is not only the role of the minister to hand down the teachings of the faith, but also to encourage people to embrace what is already found within themselves, the love of a Father and an invitation to be in an eternal relationship with Him.

As we embark on our role to serve as nurturing ministers, we must keep in mind that we are called to form the whole person. That *National Directory of Catechesis* inspires us to return to and embrace the model of the baptismal catechumenate by providing a well-rounded formation for the people in front of us and by drawing them into the parish community (United

States Conference of Catholic Bishops 10). We are created as a relational and communal people, and in order to be in relationship we must encounter the other. How does a mother nurture her children? She does so by knowing intimately the needs, personality, and passions of her child and responding to those qualities of her child.

As the Good Shepherd knows each of His sheep by name and longs to be in relationship with them, so too are we called to know our God and to be in relationship with Him. From this relationship will come the ministry of encountering the people in front of us by name and the ability to nurture their religious potential. When we know intimately the Beloved, we then are able to match the Beloved with the people He longs to be in relationship and serve as a bridge. Our first task then must be to nurture our own relationship with God. The late Archbishop Luis Martinez shares,

“As with Jesus, the foundation of our interior life must be this profound adoration of the Father. We must adore him in spirit and truth, for this is what he expects. Without this interior adoration our exterior acts are nothing, or very little. For the Father to be pleased with and glorified in them they must come forth from the abundance of our hearts, the overflow of our own sentiments of adoration and love.” (Martinez 105)

We must take the time to sit before the Lord and spend time with Him. From this place of prayer and strength of relationship, God will reveal His particular mission for each one of us and bestow upon us the gifts necessary to carry out our task. I know for myself that spending time before the Blessed Sacrament has offered consolation, peace, and strength as I prepare to reenter the ministry to which God has called me.

As we are sent forth into the world and into the life of ministry, we encounter God’s beloved children. The love that we have found in our own relationship with God becomes transparent and speaks to the love that Christ has for the other. We minister to the person at hand, recognizing him or her as a unique child of God and with his or her own unique path to

God. Working in a large parish, I often encounter the difficulties of tailoring my ministry to the person in front of me. With so many people and with a limited amount of programs and resources, it becomes difficult to shape the catechesis at hand. We then must rely on the Holy Spirit to guide us as each person comes to our office, as well as gather resources to be able to share with him or her.

Our personal love of Christ and how He has captivated our hearts bears witness to those we encounter. And those we encounter have much to bear to us as well.³ We each have our stories and backgrounds as to how God has been present to us. Recognizing this reality, we come together to listen to God, just as the child in the Atrium (the room where Catechesis of the Good Shepherd takes place) listens with the adult to the voice of God. One of the beautiful aspects of the Montessori method carried out in Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is that it provides the environment to encourage individual and communal growth simultaneously. The truth and mystery of our faith that captivates one child may not captivate another in the same way. Our role as minister, then, becomes one of preparing the environment and inviting the guests for people to encounter, whether that guest be our Blessed Mother, the Holy Spirit, or one of God's sheep who has a story to share. When we encounter these guests in Scripture, in the Liturgy, or in the community, we have the opportunity to explore our faith, to ask deep questions, and to grow in our relationship with God. As my 2nd grade parents help to prepare their children for 1st Reconciliation, I have them spend some time meditating on the story of the Forgiving Father. Together we explore this Scripture passage and encounter the characters of

³ See David W. Fagerberg's work *Theologia Prima: What is Liturgical Theology*. Fagerberg encounters the idea of Mrs. Murphy, the regular woman of the pews. She celebrates liturgy and also has much to say about theology even though she may not be able to explain it in the language of academia. Fagerberg writes, "The definition of liturgical theology I am proposing not only acknowledges the theologian as believer, it further asserts the believer as theologian." No matter what our educational background may be, we each have encountered God in some way and can bring our own knowledge and experience of God to the conversation and to the witness of the faith (Fagerberg 133-159).

this parable through the eyes of Rembrandt's *Return of the Prodigal Son*. This parable and the reality of who God is becomes tangible, so much so that the parents begin to relate the truth of forgiveness to their own lives. As we all enter more fully into our relationship with God, our love of God begs us to respond. We have heard the Good Shepherd call us by name, and we hopefully respond by answering the call to live within the fold and to love our Good Shepherd and our fellow sheep in return.

Out of understanding that we are beloved children of God who have encountered Jesus Christ, we are sent forth with Christ's same mission to bring people into relationship with the Father. As we each cast our gaze upon the Father and invite the Holy Spirit and our Blessed Mother to enter into our lives, we experience an ever-greater transformation into Christ Himself. As we experience this transformation, we are then better equipped to go into the world and to share the love of Christ with those we meet. In the midst of our encounter with others, we recognize that they have a deep religious potential and that we do too. As our relationships form and deepen, we encounter the Lord together through our life stories, Sacred Scripture, Liturgy, and all of creation. In experiencing the love of Christ together, we become collaborators with God and with one another to infuse more love into the world. We each become ministers called to nurture one another's religious potential.

The above paragraph highlights a beautiful ideal, but we all know that bringing forth the ideal into everyday life can prove quite difficult. Most of us work long hours to ensure that our programs are running well and smoothly. When do we actually have time to set aside time for God and for our own faith formation? Encountering Christ and listening to God in an intentional way takes more time and also trained facilitators who can lead people into this kind of reflection. How do we train people with little time and minimal resources? Often our programs are missing

much of the flock. How do we better encourage them to come to our formation opportunities? At the end of the day, we must surrender to God and trust that the Holy Spirit is filling in the gaps. We must also take the time to discern the movements of the Holy Spirit and where the Spirit desires our programs and our ministries to move. We cannot be so attached to our work that the Holy Spirit has nowhere to move. Where is the balance between this movement of the Spirit and what has already been revealed to us and is taught by the Catholic Church?

The practical realities of our parish environments cause us to ask many questions and to explore our roles in the Church. Attentiveness and a listening heart are key to being able to nurture the religious potential at hand. We know that our work has cosmic significance in that how we encounter people and how we lead them to Christ either helps to build the kingdom of God or diminish it. May our hearts be set on fire for love of God so that we may be able to exclaim as Monica did, "I love Jesus!" In this enthusiastic love, may we draw others more deeply into this greatest love story every told, one that shares the utmost self-sacrificial love and fullness of life. And may we each find that the nurturing that we have received and the nurturing that we have given finds its fullness in the loving arms of our Good Shepherd.

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This text holds and explores the teachings of the Catholic Church by engaging Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition.

Cavalletti, Sofia. *The Religious Potential of the Child*. Chicago: Catechesis of the Good Shepherd Publications, 1992.

This book encounters the great capacity of the child to engage in relationship with God and with the Church in the context of a Montessori environment. Sofia explores some of the presentations that have emerged from her work with children in the Atrium, the room in which Catechesis of the Good Shepherd takes place.

Cavalletti, Sofia and Patricia Coulter. *Ways to Nurture the Relationship with God*. Chicago: Catechesis of the Good Shepherd Publications, 2010.

This work explores different meditations surrounding Christ's life and aspects of the Church's teaching in an effort to lead the reader into deeper relationship with God.

Fagerberg, David. *Theologia Prima: What is Liturgical Theology*. Chicago: HillenbrandBooks, 2004.

Fagerberg explores liturgical theology and how all of God's people are called to participate in celebrating the mysteries of our faith. He encounters previous work in liturgical theology and leads his readers into a deeper and broader understanding of liturgy.

Martinez, Luis. *The Sanctifier*. Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2003).

This book portrays the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of a soul. Archbishop Martinez encounters the beautiful work that the Holy Spirit does on the soul as He gives gifts and cultivates the love of God in the soul. Archbishop Martinez's beautiful writing style as well as his profound love for the Holy Spirit draws the reader into an amazing meditation on the faith and purpose of our lives.

Mongoven, O.P., Anne Marie. *The Prophetic Spirit of Catechesis: How We Share the Fire in Our Hearts*. New York: Paulist Press, 2000.

Mongoven explores the historical roots of catechesis and discusses the role of catechesis

today. She explores the use of symbolic catechesis, the role of community building, liturgy, scripture, and shared experience.

Saint Augustine. *The Confessions*. Hyde Park, New York: New City Press, 2010.

This autobiography of one of the fathers of the Early Church testifies to the merciful work of God in the life of a stubborn sinner. Augustine's work beautifully and honestly reflects his life, his transformation, and his deep love for God and His Church.

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. *National Directory for Catechesis*. Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005.

The *National Directory for Catechesis* serves as a practical resource for parishes and parish catechetical leaders. It highlights many of the challenges of catechesis in present times and directs the role catechesis should play in the life of a parish. It lists the tasks of catechesis and reminds the reader that catechesis is more than just giving facts about the faith. At the heart of catechesis is Jesus Christ, and it is the catechist's role to cultivate the relationship with Christ.

About the Author

Amy Winkler was born and raised in Memphis, TN, home of the blues, delicious BBQ, and the king of Rock & Roll! Theology and parish ministry have been passions of hers since a young age. Catechesis of the Good Shepherd (CGS) has been near and dear to heart since she was six years old. Growing up in CGS encouraged her to pursue a theological career and to continue her formation in all three levels of CGS. She attended Saint Louis University for her Bachelor of Arts in Theological Studies and the University of Notre Dame for her Master of Arts in Theology through the Echo program. Luckily she can root full heartedly for the Irish during college football season since the Saint Louis Billikens are not currently blessed with a football team. As part of her studies through the University of Notre Dame, she served as an Apprentice Catechetical Leader in the Diocese of Camden, New Jersey for two years. Currently she enjoys serving the parishioners of Our Lady of Good Counsel in Vienna, Virginia as their Director of Catholic Christian Formation. In her down time, you can often find her enjoying the company of good friends, watching movies, laughing, reading books, soaking in the sunshine, or scavenging around for a delicious piece of chocolate.