HOPE EMBODIED IN HUMAN HANDS: FAITH FORMATION IN CATECHESIS OF THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Abstract
The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd (CGS) employs the tactile and sensorial pedagogical method that was first widely promoted and disseminated by Dr. Maria Montessori. Modern research in neuroscience, developmental psychology and educational psychology has validated her maxim – “The hands are the instruments of man’s intelligence.” [sic] In CGS, the proclamation of the Biblical narratives, both historical narratives and the parables, are presented with manipulative materials as ways for the child to enter into the mystery of God more holistically. This allows the child to more deeply explore the greater personal and communal existential questions, as basis for hope, pertinent to each developmental stage of the human person.

“This is education, understood as a help to life; an education from birth, which feeds a peaceful revolution and unites all in a common aim, attracting them as to a single centre. Mothers, fathers, politicians: all must combine in their respect and help for this delicate work of formation, which the little child carries on in the depth of a profound psychological mystery, under the tutelage of an inner guide. This is the bright new hope for [hu]mankind (sic).” (Montessori 1995, 17)

Throughout her writings Maria Montessori articulated her conviction that the child is the apotheosis of hope for humankind. By designing classrooms responsive to the adaptive needs of a child, social microcosms could be built that optimized developmental outcomes in ways generative of hope. In contrast to traditional practices of education which are structured so that every child does the same thing at the same time, practices that serve more to stifle the promise inherent in the child than to cultivate potential, Montessori created ‘prepared environments’ where the child’s developmental needs and capacities could be honored and served in a way that allowed the child to develop pro-social sentiments and skills. In this paper we explore how hope and harmony is fostered in children of ages 3-12 through Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, a model of religious formation that uses the Montessori method as its pedagogical framework.
The Montessori Method

During her early work with children with disabilities, Maria Montessori discovered that all children possess not only greater potential than they are given credit for, but also the drive to learn – she called this drive “the inner teacher.” She also observed that the primary way that children learned was through their senses, particularly through their hands. She designed and developed didactic materials that would teach through the senses – the sensorial materials. Concurrently, she also realized that the child displays certain needs and certain capacities at each developmental phase, and that there were ‘sensitive periods’ during which the child exhibited an inner drive to the mastery of a particular skill, and if taken advantage of, the learning of that skill could be accomplished almost effortlessly. However, if a sensitive period was not used optimally, the leaning of that skill would become more difficult, if not impossible at later stages. Later psychological and neurological research has shown that this is a cogent concept, typically distinguished into “critical periods” (irreversible acquisition or non-acquisition of skills within a short window early in life); and “sensitive periods” (longer windows of learning that are similar to Montessori’s conceptualization of her sensitive periods), that should be given consideration in developmental and cognitive practices, particularly in early and elementary education. (Sylva 1997, 187)

In contrast to the prevailing educational models, where the adult was considered to be the authority and the child an empty vessel that needed to be filled by the adult, Montessori insisted that the child operates in obedience to its “inner teacher” and that the adult should be attentive to the child’s needs and capacities at each particular stage. Rather than being the one in charge, the adult takes on the role of a guide, or facilitator who provides direction for the child. (Kramer 1988, 178) Montessori also defined some key characteristics that were necessary for the adult to cultivate – what she called “spiritual preparation” (Standing 1984, 298; Montessori 1965, 45ff.) - in order to see the optimal outcomes that she saw as possible in children using her method. The most important of these characteristics is humility – a true humility that comes from the knowledge that one is an instrument through which learning is imparted to the child. (Standing 1984, 301) This also leads to a disposition of hope – hope that comes from the acceptance of the child as he/she is, and that he/she has much to teach the adult. When the adult approaches the child with self-abnegation, she is better able to recognize the needs and capacities of the child and honor them. It also enables the adult to recognize the “inner teacher” within the child, thus providing education that is more communal, cosmic and transcendent than merely intellect driven. One of the most important effects of this outlook is the positive relational context that is provided for the child. Besides being substantiated by modern research, all of the above attitudes in a teacher/significant adult form the very backbone of Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, the model of faith formation that is based on the Montessori Method.

Early on in her work, Montessori intuited that the Liturgy was a particularly rich environment for the children to imbibe the faith through the reading of signs and symbols, (Montessori 1965, 32) and providing meaning to their being part of a community within and without the church itself. Montessori envisioned a “children’s chapel” (Standing 1984, 65) that she proposed be called an “atrium” (Montessori 1965, 35) in recognition of the fact that in the early church, catechumens desiring to become a Christian would be taught and prepared in this space between the street and the worship space called the atrium.
Catechesis of the Good Shepherd

Sofia Cavalletti and Gianna Gobbi, the former a Hebrew Scripture scholar, and the latter a Montessori directress, began a journey of collaborative work that was committed to observing and serving the children’s spiritual and faith formation. Over a period of two decades they developed sensorial materials based on Scriptural and Liturgical narratives and symbols that were most meaningful to children, as seen in their being repeatedly drawn to them. Other materials based on other Biblical narratives or Liturgical aspects were discarded. These core materials were then recognized to be the most essential tenets of our Christian faith – narratives that reinforce hope for humankind rooted in the love and mercy of God. Soon, this model of faith formation came to be called the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, in recognition of the image of God that captivated and engaged the children in so singular a manner.

In following the Montessori Method, Catechesis of the Good Shepherd (CGS) is taught in a carefully prepared environment called the atrium. (Gobbi 1988) The atrium is furnished with hand-made wooden and clay manipulative materials that the children can use. Typically, the younger children need more sensorial materials than the older children, but all children are given some manipulative materials to work with, as they engage with Biblical narratives or Liturgical practices and symbols. The manipulation of the sensorial materials allows the children to enter more deeply into, and contemplate the mystery of God. In his recent encyclical, Pope Francis reiterates this ancient wisdom: “All Christian formation consists of entering more deeply into the kerygma.” (Pope Francis 2013, #165)

The preparation of the environment and the preparation of the catechist go hand in hand, insofar as they both serve to facilitate and eventually, establish, a relationship of love and trust with God – in other words, a covenantal relationship is fostered and nourished. In this environment, it is more important for the catechist to pay attention to the child than for the child to pay attention to the catechist. Systematic and careful observation of the child allows the catechist not only to assess the developmental needs and capacities of each child under her care, but also gives her the opportunity to learn from the child. The liberating power of this exchange is not unlike that promoted by Paulo Freire: “Through dialogue ... the teacher is not merely the one-who-teaches, but the one who is himself taught in dialogue with students...they became jointly responsible for a process in which all grow. ...Here no one teaches another, nor is anyone self-taught. People teach each other, mediated by the world, by the cognizable objects which in banking education are "owned" by the teacher.” (Freire 2000, 80)

In being attuned to the potential and need of each developmental plane, manifested uniquely in each child, the catechist becomes able to direct the learning and spiritual experience of the child. According to the developmental stages proposed by Montessori, the child up to the age of six, is in need of unconditional love and careful nurture. This is similar to what Erikson proposes – the early years are crucial for the formation of trust, thereby cultivating hope. This need of the child is discernible in his/her pure joy when presented with the Good Shepherd, who “calls by name,” who “lays down” his life, who “knows” his sheep (cf. John 10), a shepherd who will go after his sheep even when it goes astray (cf. Luke 15:4-6). A relationship has been initiated between the child and God, one that will build the foundation of trust and hope, on which moral formation can then be built as a celebration of God’s mercy and a resolute hope in the redeeming power of God. (Cavalletti 1992, 62-78) The relational need of the child is nourished by the catechist/teacher who, in his/her disposition gives temporal meaning to the love of God. As Fr. von Balthasar says: “For a child, his parents’ concrete love is not at first separable from God’s. In the beginning the child cannot distinguish between absolute goodness, which is
divine, and the creaturely goodness he encounters in his parents.” (von Balthasar 1991, 18) In this case, a well-prepared catechist takes on the role of the parent as described above. Such a gift of love evokes a response of love in the child, whose later moral formation is more a reluctance to offend the One she loves, rather than the fear of punishment. (Cavalletti 1992, 58) The child is offered the image of the Forgiving Father (Luke 15: 11-24) as the epitome of God’s mercy, and continued meditation on the parable provides the older child a way to approach the merciful Godhead with more contrition than guilt and shame.

The predictability of the prepared environment and the communal existence within a classroom furnishes the child with freedom to choose and engage in what he/she is called to. However, since the environment has only one of each material, the children learn patience and forbearance. Also, such freedom also bespeaks the possibility of refusal to repeatedly make the choice in favor of harmony. But most children seem to be intuitively aligned to the community, even at a personal disadvantage, such as not being able to work with a particular material until the following week, despite a great eagerness to do so. Even a four- or five-year-old can display self-control and discipline, if guided with love and steadfastness. As they get older, children are taught that virtue is a matter of doing the good rather than avoiding evil, and it is cultivated by consciously choosing it repeatedly. Having contemplated on the Parable of the True Vine (John 15:1-11), the children recognize how inextricably we are connected to each other, whether in the immediate community or the global community, and even the heavenly community. This develops in them a deep empathy and respect for others and informs their choices, first in the prepared environment of the atrium, then in their larger communities outside with atrium, thereby building virtue and character.

**Corroboration from social and medical sciences**

Other social scientists have also linked dynamics of the Montessori method to the cultivation of hope. Erikson, for example, regarded hope as the virtue that proceeded from the successful resolution of trust versus mistrust in the first stage of life. During the earliest years, emphasis was given to the nurturing provided by an infants’ primary caregiver, most often the mother, and generally in terms of visual contact and touch in response to a child’s bid for nourishment and attachment. When a child’s cries were accurately discerned and appropriately met the child would naturally develop a sense of optimism, trust, confidence, and security in the world. Care that is consistent, predictable and reliable, like that found in the ordering of a Montessori classroom and CGS atrium, and in the love nurtured between catechist and child, develops a transportable sense of security. For example, the secure child would be better funded with the resources for developing autonomy in the second stage of life than the child without trust who carried deep-seated insecurity or an internalized sense of worthlessness. The importance of this first psychosocial stage can be felt throughout the life course whenever a person encounters unpredictable events, enters new relationships, or moves into new social contexts where uncertainties cause them to ponder whether the world is a safe place. Where the infant looks to the primary caregiver for stability and care, adults may turn to more transcendent sources evoking a sense of Divine companionship and protection. Hence, Erikson writes, “Hope is both the earliest and the most indispensable virtue inherent in the state of being alive. If life is to be sustained hope must remain, even where confidence is wounded, trust impaired.” (Erikson 2000, 192)

Discoveries in neuroscience are also providing scientific vindication of Montessori’s teaching methods. “The hands are the instruments of man’s intelligence” (Montessori 1984, 37)
compelled Montessori to provide the child with manipulative materials for most every learning task. This was true not simply for learning the “courtesies of social life” through such things as sweeping, cleaning and allowing others to finish their use of objects before taking them for themselves; it also provided avenues for the child to experience and explore existential questions through the handling of sacred objects, liturgy, and ritual. Freire echoes this insight when he says: "...thought has meaning only when generated by action upon the world……Liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferals of information.” (Freire 2000, 77-79)

Neurobiology evidences not only that some brain structures may not form unless scripted by bodily experience, but has also evidenced neuroplasticity – i.e. the capacity for the brain to change, contrary to previous views that it was largely immutable. Gestures stimulate neural pathways that become avenues for embodied thought – “neurons that fire together wire together.” (Hebb 2002, 62) Motor mirroring is activated first in a child’s observance of the parent, and later, the catechist, engaging in liturgical acts and the telling of sacred stories. (Westbrook 2016, 108) In CGS, age appropriate participation in liturgies provide mental rehearsals and actual embodied experiences stimulating neural patterns that anticipate further engagement with the transcendent. Religious materials provided in the atrium effectually give physicality to early engagement in worship, reifying a sacred world that the child can feel and imagine their way through. Further linkages between neuroscience and Montessori’s method can be found to evidence that empathic prosocial behavior, as well as virtue, is now thought to derive less from deliberate decision-making and more from habituated interactions with the world. (Strawn and Brown 2016, 120-122)

This also builds a cosmic awareness within the child, and he/she is impelled from within to explore the world outside the relatively smaller communities that he/she has so far been conscious of. As in a Montessori classroom, the catechist in the CGS atrium is trained to be keenly observant of the child, knowing that it is the child who will guide what path is to be taken next. The child, in obedience to his/her own developmental needs and capacities, as well as the “inner teacher,” who Cavalletti identifies as the Holy Spirit (Cavalletti 1992, 54), will provide the catechist with the key to his/her unique formation. At the time the catechist recognizes in the child an awareness of the universe, the child is introduced to the sweep of history, beginning “in the beginning” – with the Creation account. All of Salvation History, as it plays out in human history, is presented to the child over a period of five to six years as a series of timelines. The history that begins at Creation ends at the Second Coming of our Lord, when God will be all in all (cf. 1 Cor. 15: 28). God created and prepared the world for humankind, and gave it us as a gift to enjoy and the children are invited to meditate upon their response to this gift. It is then proclaimed to the child that the greatest gift that humankind has been given is the very own self of God, in the person of Jesus Christ. It is then pointed out to the child that we, as children of God, are given the task of being collaborators (cf. 1 Cor. 3:9) with God as He continues to accompany humanity in the present time in the building of His Kingdom. This is called the “blank page” that we are each given, on which we “write” with God the story of our lives. How and what we write on our own blank pages are for us to choose – the freedom that the child experienced in the atrium, leading to the formation of inner discipline and virtue, is now mirrored in the disciplined exercise of the freedom that is given to us by God. But history does not end with our stories – no matter how rich or bereft they be. History ends with the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, as St. Paul tells the church in Thessalonica: “may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we have for you, so as to strengthen your hearts, to be blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of
our Lord Jesus with all his holy ones.” (1 Thess. 3:12-13) As surely as we must prepare for this “coming” like the wise virgins, (cf. Matt. 25:1-13) we do so with an abiding hope, a joyful hope. The children are challenged to imagine what that coming will be like, what the Parousia will be like when “God is all is all.” (cf. 1 Cor. 15:28) This is not far from the assertions of Jurgen Moltmann, for whom creation and eschatology are on a continuum of God’s engagement with humanity, and each derives meaning and fulfillment from the other. (Moltmann 1985, 88)

The cumulative outcome of this method is the development of the child’s innate perspicacity, especially during the adolescent years, when he/she seeks to comprehend the cultural and religious status quo, and begins to question and challenge it. Within this turbulent questioning and challenging lies the deep need of the adolescent to belong, to carve out his role in society. He/she strains to hear the call to his/her vocation. In this process, the growing child is guided to be the prophetic voice that expresses discontent with the ways of the world. Yet, this expression is one of dynamic action rather than passive despondency, the action emerging out of the conscious and habitual preference for hope, a hope “that inspire men's activities and purifies them so as to order them to the Kingdom of heaven; it keeps man from discouragement; it sustains him during times of abandonment; it opens up his heart in expectation of eternal beatitude.” (Catechism of the Catholic Church 2000, #1818)

Religious educators will also find it important to test Montessori’s assumptions against revered models and methods of education. The brevity of this paper will not permit a comprehensive treatment of this matter, but perhaps one illustration of how this might bridge is in order. For this purpose, we have chosen to offer a few bridges to Groome’s praxis model. (Groome 1999, 184ff.) Groome’s model begins not with a teacher propounding a theoretical or definitional explanation (e.g. what is the Eucharist?), but by first tapping into a person's experience “what do you do with the Eucharist in your life?” or “What do you say when you talk to God?” CGS similarly prioritizes the child's present experience. Groome’s praxis model blends a high regard for the past (knowledge inherited by tradition), present (present needs and experience of the student), and future vision for what the student can become in serving the needs of society. In the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd a high regard for past (knowledge inherited by tradition) is contained in the sacred symbols and learned in the telling of parables. The present social, cognitive and emotional needs of the child are central to the developmental planes that inform not only each educational environment, but also what experience each individual child is guided towards. The development of the personality via the society of other children, the careful accompaniment of a virtuous catechist, and the assumption of work roles that balances individual initiative with community goals prepares the child for future engagement in the intentional effort towards the building of the Kingdom of God in the here and now while looking forward with faith and hope to the fullness of the Kingdom that will be manifest in the Parousia. The dialectic, central to Groome's theory, is anticipated in CGS as the programmed direct experiences of the growing child interact with Biblical narratives through sensorial and imaginative work.

Looking forward to the Parousia

The pedagogical philosophy and methodology employed in CGS, in the author’s experience, are applicable across a wide spectrum of recipients, regardless of age, culture,
ethnicity, Christian denomination, and even religion. This then, is a model that is generative of
hope in its very ability to be the “great equalizer,” as we who were created in God’s image and
likeness offer our response of love to God through the work of our hands. And so, with all those
who share this journey with us, especially the children, who do so most joyfully, we exclaim:
Hope, O my soul, hope. You know neither the day nor the hour. Watch carefully,
for everything passes quickly, even though your impatience makes doubtful what
is certain, and turns a very short time into a long one. Dream that the more you
struggle, the more you prove the love that you bear your God, and the more you
will rejoice one day with your Beloved, in a happiness and rapture that can never
end. (Saint Teresa of Avila, Excl. 15:3)
Bibliography


