



Sisters trace an image during a Catechesis of the Good Shepherd training program. (Handout photo)

Children are embracing hands-on Catechism

BY AGNIESZKA KRAWCZYNSKI
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An innovative program has revamped religious education at St. Francis of Assisi Parish in Vancouver.

According to Fr. Eugenio Aloisio, since the parish moved from a lecture-style classroom to the interactive Catechesis of the Good Shepherd (CGS), the Church's youngest Catholics have been far more interested in their faith.

"I think it's the way of the future," said Aloisio. "Kids nowadays learn in such different ways just because of the use of mass media and technology."

He swapped the parish's PREP program with CGS after he'd learned about it at a priests' study day nearly two years ago, and he hasn't looked back.

"In the old program, there was a teacher in front of the classroom and going over material in the book. Then, they would be dismissed," said Aloisio.

With CGS, children are invited to explore child-size versions of actual elements they might see at Mass, like a miniature altar, baptismal font, Easter candle or tabernacle, in a Montessori-inspired classroom.

The program has been adopted in many parishes across the country, including in Toronto, Ottawa, Saskatoon and Edmonton.

"It motivates the children on their level to enter into the liturgy or to understand the liturgical year or the different elements of the sacraments," the pastor said.

"It moves from a passive retention of the Catechism to an active process by which the kids can claim as their own the Catechism."

There are 17 children in St. Francis of Assisi's religious education classes. It's a relatively small number (most children in the parish attend St. Francis of Assisi Elementary), which made the transition easy.

"Seeing how it worked out well at the parish, it's

something I'm thinking about bringing into the school," said Aloisio.

He admits that would be a much more challenging feat since many more CGS teachers would need to be trained.

CGS is used in 21 classrooms across the archdiocese. There are more than 60 Level 1 (ages 3-6) CGS teachers in the Vancouver area, and at least a dozen who can also teach Level 2 (ages 6-9). Level 3 is for ages 9-12, but according to co-ordinator Murita Chua, only teachers who have completed Level 1 can go on to Level 2, then 3, making for a tedious training process.

It's not just children who are being inspired by this program. Religious sisters, deacons and lay people study CGS to teach religious education, but, like Sr. Xaviera Bilung, also find it personally rewarding.

"The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd has proven to be very effective because it enables the child to encounter Christ, the Good Shepherd, in a very concrete and personal way," said Bilung, a Missionary of Charity living in Vancouver.

"It is focused on what is essential: human formation, the Word of God, and the liturgy. It catechizes the heart; it motivates; it attracts."

She said being a facilitator for a class requires her to deepen her faith.

"There is an awareness, on the part of the facilitator, of the capacity of the child for a deep and profound relationship with God, and therefore the child is given the space and aid to grow in that relationship in their own particular way and in God's own time," said Bilung.

"Facilitators must also give space and time for our personal relationship with Almighty God, because what we share is meant to be the overflow of our union with God in silence, study, prayer and liturgy."

Vancouver will host the national CGS conference Oct. 19-21.

(The B.C. Catholic)

First Communion requires team effort

What is your memory of the time you received your first Holy Communion?

Do you remember being given a gift — a cross, a rosary or a prayer book? Do you still have them? Perhaps you may even remember what you learned about the sacrament, what you were told to do and say when you received Holy Communion on this special day.

According to the laws of the sacraments, a proper sacramental preparation program is required to ensure a child can receive the sacrament with "great reverence and due care."

At the beginning of every academic year parishes begin registering children for the sacramental preparation prior to their first Confession and first Holy Communion. Parents and guardians are especially important in this process. They may use the program to reflect on their own understanding of the sacraments and on their spiritual responsibilities.

In terms of spirituality, we can describe the sacramental preparation as the beginning of a new chapter in the journey of faith for children. In his recent apostolic exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate* ("Rejoice and Be Glad"), Pope Francis reminds us that every Christian is called to holiness — a practical life-long process of constant spiritual relationship with God and with neighbour.

According to the Holy Father, this holiness to which the Lord calls us "will grow through small gestures" and it is "a journey in community, side by side with others." Pope Francis' exhortation is relevant to parents and guardians, who become stewards by helping children with their workbook on the sacraments, attending the required classes,



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workshops and bringing the children to Mass.

On the practical side, parents and guardians looking ahead to the day of the celebration of the sacrament in the spring may be concerned with things like the clothes their children will wear, the relatives and friends to be invited, and the parties. We all plan for special occasions but these things are not meant to be the focus of the sacramental preparation.

The day of first Holy Communion can be described as the end of the child's spiritual journey that includes the celebration of first Confession. As a community of faith, we hope the spiritual preparation has helped both children and adults to journey faithfully towards that celebration of the sacrament.

The first Holy Communion Mass is special for the whole community. Seeing the children in their beautiful clothes, coming forward to receive the Eucharist, they look like angels. With their parents and guardians smiling, and a wonderfully large attendance at Mass to support the children, the atmosphere is full of spirit and life.

The celebration of first Holy Communion brings joy to us all. With renewed hearts we joyfully welcome our new communicants in our parishes.

(Fr. Yaw is pastor at Our Lady of Peace Parish in Toronto.)

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