

Action and Contemplation

There are many things required of the catechist of the Good Shepherd, be they on the level of study or of manual work. On the level of study it is necessary to know and continue to study the Bible, liturgical texts, tradition and Montessori's writings, and to stay current on the most recent research on childhood. On the level of manual work it is necessary to prepare the environment, to keep it in order, and to make material with one's own hands—all things that require much work and time. So one could say that the catechist of the Good Shepherd should be an activist, busy with many things.

Contemplation is a big word. Even so, I would like to ask if it has a place in the life of the catechist of the Good Shepherd and, if so, what place it holds.

One can certainly study and work with one's hands in a contemplative spirit. Without a doubt, the time that we spend in manual activity is valuable in our coming to know and absorb the message we wish to transmit, to establish equilibrium among our hands, our mind and our heart.

Nevertheless, manual work is activity. When one speaks of contemplation, one means, instead, an attitude that leaves aside specific activity, such as the kind we have mentioned. Contemplation is an attitude in which the searching moment has been overcome, and within which prevails "a tranquil look that rests upon the known object." Obviously, this is not what happens to catechists who give themselves over to the business of preparing an atrium.

In contemplation there is a component of enjoyment, one in which "the believer penetrates and tastes the luminous realm of divine truth." Contemplation reaches

its highest summit in the "bliss" that proceeds from the "vision of truth and divine goodness" (T. Alvarez, E. Ancili, *Dizionario Enciclopedico di Spiritualita*, [Roma: Ed. Studium, 1975], 449).

Could it be that contemplation has nothing to do with the spirituality of the catechist of the Good Shepherd? If so, this would be a weighty problem. The Second Vatican Council insists on the importance of contemplation in the Christian life "because it belongs to the fullness of the church's presence." (Translators note: The Italian version states literally, "Through it [contemplation] the presence of the Church in the world reaches 'its fullest form'" [*Ad Gentes Divinitus*, 18; *Perfectae Caritatis*, 5].)

SOFIA CAVALLETTI

Or could it be that the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd contains within itself a special kind of contemplation, one proper to it?

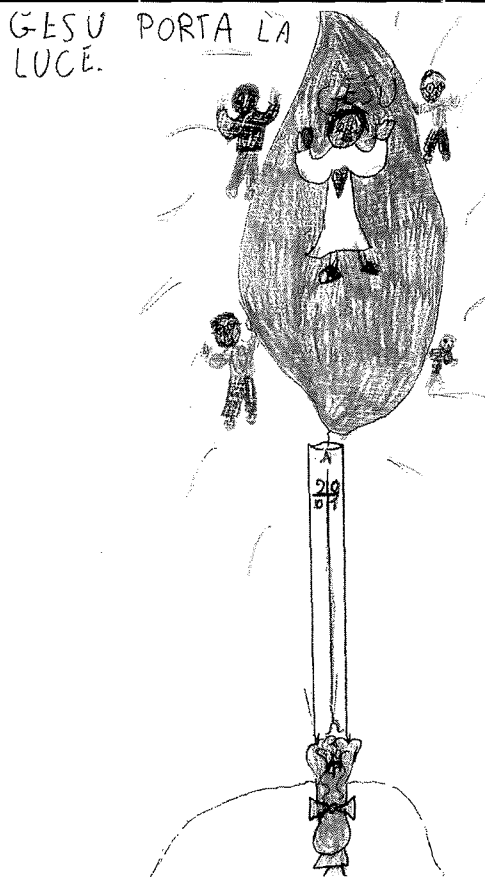
Let us think about certain moments in our life in the atrium, when the children have chosen their work, and we have nothing to do but breathe the particular atmosphere created, an atmosphere in which a Presence seems to touch us palpably. As time passes, little by little, with a sense of growing wonder, of peace, of enjoyment, we feel progressively more involved in this particular atmosphere. It is truly this experience of "tranquil rest" that is considered an element essential to contemplation. If at a certain moment a child seeks us out in need of help, the

joy and peace that was born within us does not abandon us but accompanies us for a long time, and we continue to savor it. Are not several of the elements of contemplation present in these situations?

If we should answer "Yes," it seems to us that we are speaking about

Matteo, age 7
Via degli Orsini
Rome, Italy

This drawing was done after the meditation on the prophecies of Christmas (Isaiah 9 and so on) and the infancy narratives. Looking at the drawing with Matteo, the catechist remembered the words of Simeon: "Light for all the people." At that point, Matteo returned to the table and drew the four figures around the light.



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contemplation with a particular character. We are speaking, certainly, of contemplation of God and of God's love, otherwise we could not give it this name. However, it is a contemplation that takes place when looking at the action of God and God's love in the *child*; its source is the reflection of God in the smallest creature. It is a contemplation through a "mirror": the child (*Dei Verbum*, 7; the document alludes to the presence of a mirror in contemplation). God manifests himself in the way in which he "grasps" the creature; we see the delight that springs forth, and we share it.

We all know the feeling—esthetic but also religious—that one experiences before a sunset, before the first light of dawn, before the infinity of the sea, or before some other beauty of nature. The Fathers of the Church say that such spectacles draw us into an inner attitude that transports us into praise of God (G. Damasceno, and others, *De Sacris Imaginibus*, PG 1268 b).

But the spectacle that the atrium offers us is grander than any spectacle of nature. There we see not the plant that turns spontaneously toward the sun but the human creature turning, in a way that is completely natural and spontaneous, toward God in the enjoyment of the light and warmth of God's presence. We can assist in the wonder of the encounter of two persons who, being connatural, attract each other.

If contemplation means "to look at," then what does the catechist of the Good Shepherd "look at" in the atrium? What is given us to see is how God attracts his creatures: We have the privilege of being able to see God in the act of "seducing" (Jeremiah 20:7) the creature, and seeing

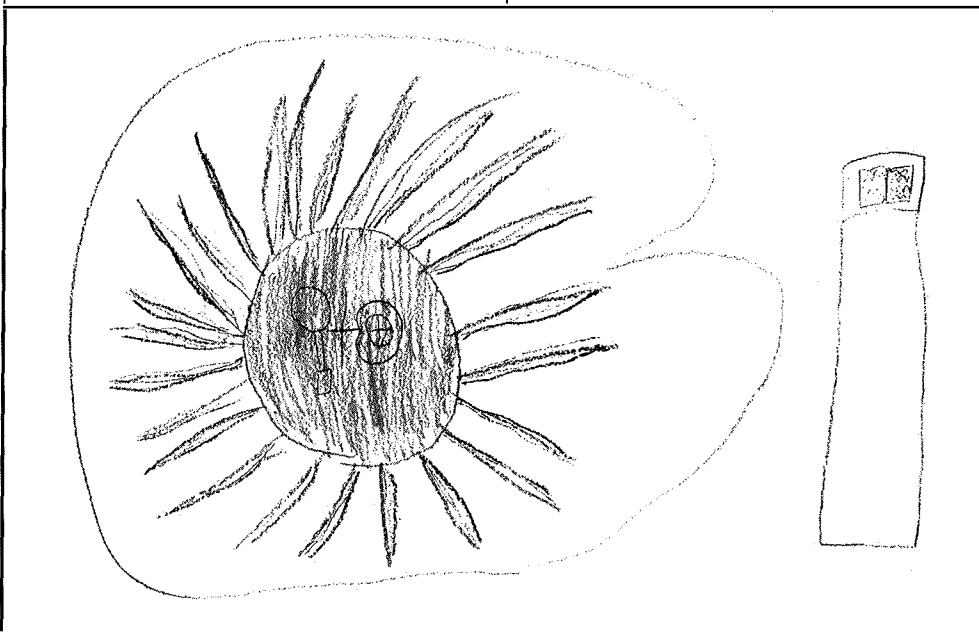
how that creature lets herself or himself be grasped in enjoyment. In other words, in the atrium we can contemplate how the covenant is born and how one lives it.

For example, who does not remember with emotion the meditation on the True Vine (John 15:1–11) conducted with the children as the date of their First Communion approaches? It is one of the culminating points of John's theology at its heart and that of revelation as a whole: We are made to know the mysterious bond of life that unites us to God in Christ. The children are delighted to listen to it. They want to prolong the listening without

expressed in the shining of their eyes, in their concentrated attitude, happy and serious at the same time. All this is their response to God who searches for them, who calls them by name, who attracts them toward himself. This response makes the gift—through its joyful acceptance—become the covenant.

We are in the heart of the Christian reality. This is the contemplation given to the catechist of the Good Shepherd.

Translated by Maureen Armas



end; they want to "remain" without time limits in order to enjoy it.

We do not have any didactic contrivance when we present this parable; we have only the Word, in its essentiality. And the Word, with evident strength, delights the children.

What joy they express through their desire to prolong the listening, the joy

"The Precious Pearl"

Mihaela, age 6

Dakovo, Croatia

When asked if she was able to say something about the drawing, Mihaela explained, "This precious pearl is Jesus. Brilliant, most beautiful, pure, and for all." When asked what is inside the pearl, Mihaela said, "This is the paten and the chalice." To the right she drew the ambo with the Bible open. The drawing reveals the unity of Bible and liturgy.