Mustard Seed Preaching

Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, Next Generation

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Abstract

The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd (CGS) is a global Montessori-based catechism program that invites children (age 3 to 12) and their helper to reflect upon Sacred Scripture and the Liturgy of the Church. The experience is an invitation to fall in love with God. As a certified Level 1 Catechist (for children age three to six), it is my hope that through experimenting with CGS and Montessori-based methods for dementia, I will be able to effectively broaden the reach of the CGS model to include people with dementia.
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Jesus chose to preach the Gospel first to the poor and marginalized. In Mustard Seed Preaching, author and teacher Ann M. Garrido advises, “If we wish to truly understand the Gospel first announced to the anawim of Palestine, then we must sit beside and listen to this Gospel with their modern counterparts, and hear what it means to them. When the poor and the marginalized are able to ‘speak back’ what they have heard, it is a gift to the whole Church. We are able to glean a privileged perspective on our faith from those who were nearest to the heart of Jesus.”

Parable of the Mustard Seed:

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that a person took and sowed in a field. It is the smallest of all the seeds, yet when full-grown it is the largest of plants. It becomes a large bush, and the “birds of the sky come and dwell in its branches.” (Matthew 13:31-32)

Sofia Cavelletti, founder of the great experiment, Catechesis of the Good Shepherd (CGS), identifies the poor and marginalized as children. Cavelletti’s fruitful experiment began almost 60 years ago and continues today to humbly remind educators of Jesus’ Gospel message,
"Let the children come to me, and do not prevent them; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these (Matthew 19:14)…. Amen, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever receives one child such as this in my name receives me.” (Matthew 18:3-5)

CGS invites the helper to enter into a journey of faith with the child. “Its purpose is not only to educate the children in the Church; it is to educate the Church about the religious potential of children. It invites the whole church to enjoy and consider the implications of children’s reflection on the faith.” (Garrido, 2004, pp. 41-42)

Garrido points to Karl Rahner, prominent 20th century theologian, who teaches that at the core of every human person is a child:

We do not lose childhood as that which recedes ever further into our past, that which remains behind as we advance forward in time, but rather we go toward it as that which has been achieved in time and redeemed forever in time. We only become the children whom we were because we gather up time – and in this our childhood too – into our eternity. Throughout our entire life span… childhood may always remain open. And we may still have to go on living through our own childhood in our life taken as a whole because it always remains an open question for us. (Garrido, 2004, pp. 41-42)

“Our eternal childhood is clearly a common denominator of great potential,” adds Garrido. Regardless of our age, metaphysical questions are never exhausted. “Children are natural theologians,” adds Garrido (Garrido, 2004, p. xiii). They “possess great ‘faith,’ and a thousand questions to which they are ‘seeking understanding.’” (Garrido, 2004, p. xiii) “This is a population that knows very well what it means to be small and hope in the power of God. As such, children’s theology may have more to say to preachers’ lives than was first imagined possible.”
If the childhood in our life remains an open question, might the application of CGS be open to another group classified as poor and marginalized; perhaps those with dementia? Like the child, do they know what it means to be small and hope in the power of God?

Pope Benedict XVI addresses the elderly on his visit at the Viva Gli Anziani (Long Live the Elderly) Home in Rome on November 12, 2012, he says, “When life becomes frail, in the years of old age, it never loses its value and its dignity: each one of us, at any stage of life, is wanted and loved by God, each one is important and necessary… Feeling the affection of others is a grace! It is beautiful to be old! Those who welcome the elderly welcome life!” (Palmo, 2013, ¶ 2)

What if we rewrite the CGS purpose to reflect another segment of the poor and marginalized, “Its purpose is not only to educate the dementia patient in the Church; it is to educate the Church about the religious potential of the dementia patient.” Might we rewrite CGS’s 32 principle aspects of the catechesis? (CGS, 2013) If we enter into a journey of faith with those with dementia using the CGS model, will we be gifted with a privileged perspective?

Pope Benedict says to the elderly:

All too often we hear about the suffering of those who are marginalized, who live far from home or in loneliness. I think there should be greater commitment, starting with families and public institutions, to ensure that the elderly be able to stay in their own homes. The wisdom of life, of which we are bearers, is a great wealth. The quality of a society, I mean of civilization, is also judged by how it treats elderly people and by the place it gives them in community life. Those who make room for the elderly make room for life! (Palmo, 2013, ¶ 2)

I am reminded of Kathy Kalina’s book, Midwife for Souls. Kalina writes of her career change from midwife to hospice nurse. Both paths assist with birth – birth into new life – from God, back to God. Through storytelling, Kalina shows how the helper’s Catholic faith and the power of prayer guide one in ministering to the dying person.
An atheistic society may argue that the sick and dying have no purpose, but we, as midwives of the souls, are eyewitnesses to the infinite value of the last days. We see the miraculous spiritual growth and reconciliations, the heroism, humor, and unconditional love of the dying. We feel the graces that flow and, if we are attentive, we see the eyes of Jesus. (Kalina, 1993, p. 75)

Pope Benedict in his address to the elderly:

Dear friends, at our age we often experience the need of the help of others; and this also happens to the Pope. In the Gospel we read that Jesus told the Apostle Peter: “when you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you would; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go.” (John 21:18) The Lord was referring to the way in which the Apostle was to witness to his faith to the point of martyrdom, but this sentence makes us think about that fact that the need for help is a condition of the elderly. I would like to ask you to seek in this too a gift of the Lord, because being sustained and accompanied, feeling the affections of others is a grace! This is important in every stage of life: no one can live alone without help; the human being is relational. And in this case I see, with pleasure, that all those who help and all those who are helped form one family, whose lifeblood is love. (Palmo, 2013, ¶ 4)

In Pope John Paul II’s encyclical *Evangelium Vitae, On the Value and Inviolability of Human Life*, he writes:

It is this deep love for every man and woman which has given rise down the centuries to an outstanding history of charity, a history which has brought into being in the Church and society many forms of service to life which evoke admiration from all unbiased observers. Every Christian community, with a renewed sense of responsibility, must continue to write this history through various kinds of pastoral and social activity. To this end, appropriate and effective programmes of support for new life must be implemented, with special closeness to mothers who, even without the help of the father, are not afraid to bring their child into the world and to raise it. Similar care must be shown for the life of the marginalized or suffering, especially in its final phases. (Pope John Paul, 1995, ¶ 87.4)

According to the Myers Research Institute, the greatest barrier to providing high-quality care for those with dementia is not the lack of resources, but overcoming the belief that because a person has dementia, they are incapable of learning new things, only capable of declining. Dr. Cameron Camp with the Myers Research Institute labels this barrier as 'therapeutic nihilism' (Camp, 2006b; Clark, 1995). Therapeutic nihilism results in a prescription of palliative care as the inevitable deterioration of dementia unfolds. Overemphasizing the defects of dementia
overshadows the emphasis on the individual’s remaining strengths and abilities. Camp says, “Therapeutic nihilism is insidious because it destroys hope and condones acceptance of the status quo. How, then, is this barrier to be overcome? (Camp & Jones, 2007, p. 1) One solution is Montessori-based activities for those suffering with dementia, an idea that was introduced by Camp and the Myers Research Institute in 1995.

Camp recognizes that the mission statements of both an ideal Montessori school and an ideal dementia care facility were parallel, if not perfectly matched. Both mission statements stress goals to develop a high-level of self-esteem and both promote the highest level of functioning possible. When viewed from the standpoint of older adult care, “Montessori programming is grounded in rehabilitation,” explains Camp. “We’ve adopted a rehabilitation approach to dementia care, by breaking down tasks into their simplest steps and guiding residents through each component, one step at a time.”

After Camp’s initial study, he received funding for a feasibility study, and following, a three-year study conducted at Menorah Park (special care and advanced dementia units) and at the Mandel Adult Day Center. Scientists at the Myers Research Institute continue to study ways to generalize the Montessori approach to include all activities of daily living (ADLs). The Institute continues to develop intensive training for home health agency staff, volunteers, and family members. The Institute also encourages the use of intergenerational programming for older adults and pre-school children. He recommends future study and provides a list of ideas for those who wish to pursue and extend the line of work. (Camp & Lee, 2011)

Camp notes that some residents have regained or at least maintained their cognitive capabilities, while experience and increase in pleasure and decrease in anxiety. “Persons with advanced dementia aren’t ‘supposed’ to be able to sort cities by geographic location, as they are
doing here. But the proper guidance and the willingness to focus on a resident’s strengths can paint a very different picture of a person’s capabilities, especially when their time is spent being challenged and stimulated.” (Bruck, 2001, pp. 33-34)

Resources on the subject are plentiful from organizations such as the Alzheimer’s Association, American Occupational Therapy Association, and the Gerontological Society of America. We should expect to see more positive results from researchers such as Myers Research Institute and others, such as the ACH Group in Melbourne, Australia. ACH Group is studying one-on-one interaction activities based on Montessori principles in hopes that their findings will provide a non-pharmacological solution for dementia patients who suffer from pain, major depression, and psychosis. (Ploeg & O’Connor, 2010) Of further interest is how the restorative results from Montessori-based activities with dementia patients may qualify as Restorative Nursing under Medicaid laws.

Also on the horizon is the prediction of a dementia care cost doubling by 2040. According to the RAND Corporation in its government-funded study (results originally published in The New England Journal of Medicine), the cost of dementia care is currently (at least and probably) higher than the cost of heart disease or cancer care. The report projects the number of people with dementia will more than double within 30 years. The report claims the skyrocketing cost of care is rare and will pose a financial burden that will “swamp the system.” Currently, 15% of people aged 71 or older (about 3.8 million people) have dementia. By 2040, the number balloons to 9.1 million. (Belluck, 2013) Now is a good time to prepare the Church in Moral Theology, specifically end-of-life issues.

Pope Francis at his Wednesday audience on May 1, 2013, reminds us of the dignity and importance of work as was revealed to us in the book of Genesis. He says:
Work is part of God’s loving plan, we are called to cultivate and care for all the goods of creation and in this way participate in the work of creation! Work is fundamental to the dignity of the person. Work, to use an image, “anoints” us with dignity, fills us with dignity, makes us similar to God, who has worked and still works, who always acts (John 5:17); it gives you (us) the ability to maintain ourselves, our family, to contribute to the growth of our nation. (2013)

What might the work of the dementia patient look like? In Myers Research Institute’s *Montessori-Based Activities for Persons with Dementia*, recommended activities for the individuals are sorted into categories: “Care of the Environment,” “Sensory Discrimination,” and “History and Geography.” Restorative care/nursing rehabilitation practices include activities for range of motion, splint, brace, and prosthesis assistance; mobility, walking, and transfer; dressing and grooming; eating and swallowing; and communication. Might the dementia patient benefit from similar CGS activities? Perhaps instead of the “Care of the Environment” activity of washing and drying dishes, the dementia patient might choose the CGS “Eucharist” work of preparing the cruets for Mass? Instead of the “Sensory Discrimination” activity of texture match, the dementia patient might choose the “Nomenclature for Life in the Church” work of the presentation of the liturgical colors of the Church. Instead of the “History and Geography” activity of north/south state sort, the student might choose the CGS “Biblical Geography” work of the globe and raised surface map of Israel. *With CGS, ordinary tasks become catechesis!*

Pope Benedict’s message to the elderly holds a larger message for all – that of the religious potential of the poor and marginalized, even those with dementia:

Dear elderly brothers and sisters, the days sometimes seem long and empty, with difficulties, few engagements and few meetings; never feel down at heart: you are a wealth for society, even in suffering and in sickness. And this phase of life is also a gift for deepening the relationship with God… Do not forget that one of the valuable resources you possess is the essential one of prayer: become interceders with God, praying with faith and with constancy. Pray for the Church, and pray for me, for the needs of the world, for the poor, so that there may be no more violence in the world. The prayers of the elderly can protect the world, helping it perhaps more effectively than
collective anxiety…God will always be with you and with all those who support you with their affection and their help. (Palmo, 2013, ¶ 4-5)

As Garrido suggests, if we want to truly understand the Gospel that was first announced to the *anawim* of Palestine, we will need to sit beside and listen with today’s poor and marginalized — those closest to Jesus’ heart. Their reflection on the faith is a gift the Church.

In Pope John Paul II’s letter to the elderly, October 1, 1999, he writes:

Grant, O Lord of life, that we may be ever vividly aware of this and that we may savor every season of our lives as a gift filled with promise for the future. Grant that we may lovingly accept your will, and place ourselves each day in your merciful hands.

And when the moment of our definitive "passage" comes, grant that we may face it with serenity, without regret for what we shall leave behind. For in meeting you, after having sought you for so long, we shall find once more every authentic good which we have known here on earth, in the company of all who have gone before us marked with the sign of faith and hope.

Mary, Mother of pilgrim humanity, pray for us "now and at the hour of our death.” Keep us ever close to Jesus, your beloved Son and our brother, the Lord of life and glory. Amen. (Pope John Paul II, 1999, ¶ 18.2, 18.4, 18.5)
References


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The National Association of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, http://www.cgsusa.org/about


