

Wondering

Following the story, "I wonder" statements engage children with the story and invite reflection. A statement like "I wonder what part of the story you liked best" or "I wonder what you think is the most important part of the story" invites the children to ponder and share their understandings. There are no "right answers" to wondering statements. They are not comprehension questions. As Rebecca Nye points out, "there is no attempt to manipulate responses to reach a premature 'teaching point' or to explain what the story 'really means'."²²

In this way children learn by experience one of the most important lessons of all, "that Scripture holds never ending layers of meaningfulness for each one of us, rather than collections of finite answers or recipes for Christian life."²³ The children will not only become familiar with the stories of Scripture but will also learn through experience that these stories give meaning, direction and hope to their lives. Above all the catechists or teachers will "avoid the risk of clouding God's Word with their own words"²⁴ and will be able to apply to themselves the mysterious words of Jesus: "My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me."²⁵

Wondering together also teaches the art of dialogue, of listening to others, accepting and learning from others' ideas and contributions. It lays the foundation for relating to others in Christian community. Wondering together allows for learning that comes from within each person. It recognises Scripture as the living Word of God, acknowledging the work of the Holy Spirit.

Responding to the story

This element provides the opportunity for children to "stay with" the story, reflecting on and exploring aspects which are personally meaningful for them. In most Religious Education there is an experiential element which usually involves asking the child to identify a life experience and relate it to a religious message. However, in the approaches of Berryman and Cavalletti the story itself, told well, evokes meaningful connections with each person's experience. It is indeed the *living Word of God*.

Children explore these connections as they retell the story using the story materials, or through art work or other creative media. Young children find it easier to explore and express their feelings and ideas through art and drama. These activities differ from the usual art and craft work used in Religious Education. They are not "craft activities" with a set finished product. Rather the creative arts provide the "tools" for children's own imagining, reflecting, and expression. The teacher's role is to respond to children's "work" by engaging in dialogue with the child, asking open questions, describing what they see and not interpreting it.

Play

Research confirms the importance of play in children's development and early learning. The

approaches to Religious Education and spirituality discussed in this article are based on "play", hence the term "Godly Play". Play is a natural way children explore their world and experiences. Through play and fantasy children investigate, create, role play and discover meaning. In imaginative play children are able to step out of the limits of their real situation to explore other worlds and experiences. In this case they step into the world of the biblical and liturgical stories. They are invited to "play" through engagement with the story and materials, the symbols, actions and words.

Prayer and Liturgy

Young children have a particular capacity for prayer. They often use few words and are comfortable with silence. They also enjoy ritual and repetition. In the approaches being discussed, the belief is that young children learn to pray through the experience of prayer. This respects young children's natural way of learning. Teachers help the children to pray by praying with them and providing regular opportunities for both traditional prayers and children's own prayers. Telling the stories of God's great love offers children a rich source and stimulus for prayer. In the liturgical stories children engage with key symbols, ritual actions and words of the liturgy as a means of coming to know God through the language of symbol.

Moral Formation

By this stage you may be wondering when and how children are taught morality. Sofia Cavalletti believes that moral formation happens at two levels. The first level is the formation of the person, which is the foundation for moral behaviour. In this formation we gain our fundamental attitude towards life. Formation happens in relationship – we are formed by our relationships. This highlights the importance of the child's relationships with parents and others. It is why both the "Catechesis of the Good Shepherd" and "Godly Play" place such importance on the teacher's facilitation of communication and relationship within the community of children. But as Cavalletti points out, there is another relationship that is of paramount importance: the relationship with God. "There is a Person who calls them by name, who creates the most steadfast and enduring relationship of love..."²⁶

Catechists and teachers build the foundations for the moral life by helping children to know the God who is calling them by name and who loves them so deeply. In telling the stories, and inviting children to wonder and respond, "we are feeding that inner wellspring, the source from which the child's behaviour will flow forth in later childhood."²⁷ In that later stage the focus shifts more naturally onto moral concerns and teachings. This is the second level of moral formation, that of doing.

We began by asking how we could engage and nourish children's innate spirituality in Religious Education. Both the "Catechesis of the Good Shepherd" and "Godly Play" were specifically



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developed to do this. They engage children's natural curiosity, imagination and wonder as they hand on the greatest story of all in ways that meet the children's deepest needs. Their content is drawn from the richness of our Catholic Tradition: the Bible, the liturgy and the wisdom of the Church's teaching. As Sofia Cavalletti suggests, "if we hold faithfully to these we will have a secure foundation".²⁸

²² Nye, Rebecca, *What is Godly Play?* 2004 (www.godlyplay.org.uk/)

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Cavalletti S, Coulter C, Gobbi G, Montanaro S, *The Good Shepherd and the Child: A Joyful Journey*, p38

²⁵ Jn 7:16; cf. *On Catechesis in our Time*, no. 6

²⁶ Cavalletti S, Coulter C, Gobbi G, Montanaro S, *The Good Shepherd and the Child: A Joyful Journey*, p84

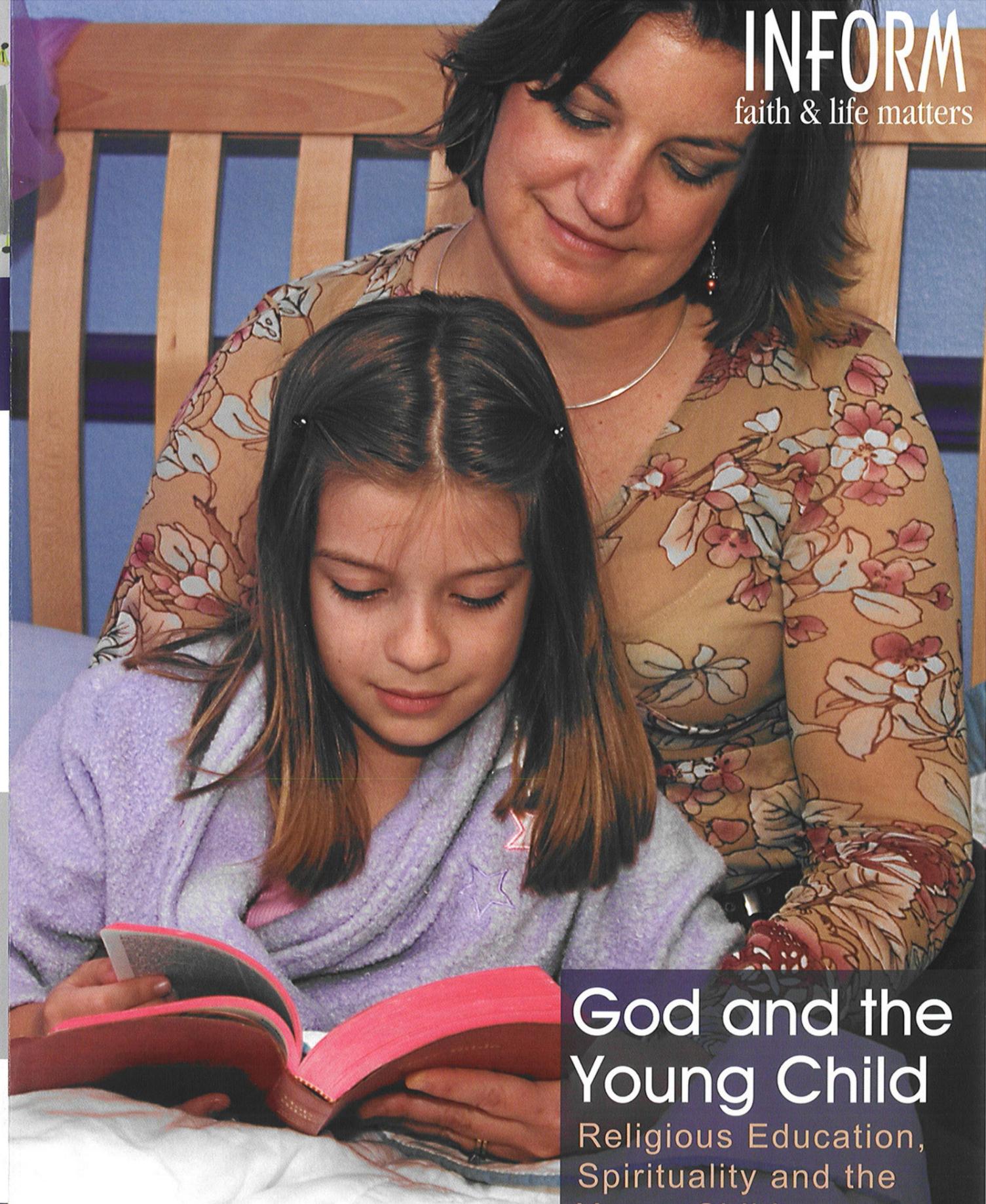
²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p37

Questions for discussion

1. What experiences have you had with young children that reveal their natural spirituality?
2. The "Catechesis of the Good Shepherd" emphasises the need for material and visual aids for the children. How important do you think this is?
3. What is the importance of stories, not only for children but also for adults?
4. How have Scripture stories and other stories of faith impacted on your own life?

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God and the Young Child

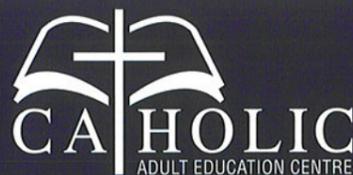
Religious Education, Spirituality and the Young Child

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Recent research has shown that children have an innate awareness of the spiritual. In this article **Anthony Cleary** and **Sue Moffat** show how parents and teachers can tap into children's natural spirituality to help them learn about God.

Published six times a year, **INFORM** is available from:

Catholic Adult Education Centre, Sydney
Locked Bag 888 Silverwater DC NSW 1811
P (02) 9643 3660 F (02) 9643 3669
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INFORM - 50c per copy (minimum order: 10 copies per issue) Single subscription \$10 per year within Australia, 6 issues annually, or with the newsletter of the Catholic Adult Education Centre \$15 per year. Single copy of every back issue of **INFORM** still in print - \$40 per set.

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"Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the Kingdom of God belongs. I tell you solemnly anyone who does not welcome the Kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it" (Mk 10:13-16).

In this passage of Mark's Gospel, we find Jesus taking children seriously so that they enjoy a relationship with him and with the Kingdom. Jesus rebukes the disciples for failing to understand the nature of the Kingdom and of those who are welcome in it. And he presents becoming like little children as a condition for entering the Kingdom.

There is much in the nature of young children from which adults can learn – their openness and receptivity, their imagination, their simplicity and their capacity for joy.

As parents, teachers and catechists we need to recognise, appreciate and nourish these qualities, so that they are not lost as the child grows into adulthood. The poet Wordsworth laments such loss in his *Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*:

Heaven lies about us in our infancy!
Shades of the prison house begin to close
Upon the growing boy,
But he beholds the light and whence it flows,
He sees it in his joy;
The youth, who daily farther from the east
Must travel, still is Nature's Priest,
And by the vision splendid
Is on his way attended;
At length the man perceives it die away,
And fade into the light of common day.

We might pause to reflect on how we perceive little children. Are we open to their particular capacities and gifts? Do we listen to and welcome them? Are we able to receive from them as well as give to them? Does our teaching and nurturing take into consideration the particular ways young children make meaning and learn?

Children's spirituality

In recent decades the spirituality of children has increasingly become a focus of research and theoretical inquiry, particularly in relation to moral and faith development and approaches to Religious Education. Emerging from the research is the discovery that children have an innate awareness of the spiritual realm, and will, when given the opportunity, "explain their perception of God's self-

communication in their lives."¹

The spirituality of children does not seem to be directly dependent upon their cognitive and verbal development. Rather, "religious awareness, the religious imagination, and the experience of the holy or sacred is natural to childhood."² This is made clear in the research of Bradford,³ who explored spirituality amongst the intellectually disabled.

Bradford noted the innate curiosity of young disabled children who, like those of the mainstream, were "spiritual seekers", but without any language by which to express it.

In listening to the stories of young children, Harvard psychiatrist Robert Coles noted that they "try to understand not only what is happening to them but why, and in doing so they call upon the religious life they have experienced and the spiritual life they have received."⁴ Coles' research was undertaken with individuals and small groups, capturing the spiritual experience through personal story, as the young children engaged in a process of meaning-making in which they "struggled to figure out the world ... human nature ... and faith."⁵ Significantly, Coles came to the realisation that it was through their spiritual experience and development that many children found psychological stability and personal fulfilment and meaning.⁶

Robinson (1977, 1982) and Farmer (1988) explored children's spirituality from a different perspective, surveying and interviewing adults for their recollection of spiritual experiences. Both researchers found that the original vision of childhood had never wholly faded. The adults surveyed clearly expressed a connection between imagination and spontaneous moments of wonder, with spiritual awareness.⁷

For many of these people, early spiritual awareness was the beginning of a healthy lifelong development, whereas others complained bitterly that the validity of their spiritual experiences was questioned, and on occasions denied, by an education that stifled rather than stimulated their imagination and creative spirit.⁸

Hay and Nye⁹ express the view that "for many children in primary school, their natural spiritual awareness undergoes a process of becoming orphaned and steadily isolated." This process stems from the fact that many adults merely impose the language and norms of the culture and religion a child has been born into, rather than drawing forth and engaging the child's own inherent spirituality. This relatively recent concern was foreshadowed almost 2000 years ago by the Roman philosopher, Plutarch, who warned that "a child's mind is not a vessel to be filled, but a fire to be kindled."¹⁰

Madeleine Simon argues that "there is a certain capacity for learning which is unique to childhood and these experiences sink deeply into the very core of a child's being in a way that is not possible in later life."¹¹

Perhaps the most notable capacity of young children is their ability to be drawn into the present moment, whereas adults tend to become preoccupied with either the past or the future, which "inhibits them from enjoying the vividness of the here and now."¹²

As people age they are often drawn less into the mystery of God and instead become preoccupied with having the answers and being in control.



By contrast "children are not afraid of questions without answers," and instead are fascinated by a world filled with mystery.¹³

Natural contemplatives

According to Kerrie Hide, "young children are natural contemplatives with great capacity for wonder and awe. They are naturally aware of the small moments in life and see the connectedness with creation."¹⁴ Such a view is strongly supported by Sofia Cavalletti ("Catechesis of the Good Shepherd") and Jerome Berryman ("Godly Play") and underpins their respective approaches to the religious and spiritual development of young children.

Cavalletti suggests that "when we are proclaiming the Christian message it is helpful to give children the opportunity to reflect and meditate on it."¹⁵ She also believes that children have a capacity for stillness and silence. Hence her approach, "The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd", has specific times and ways of engaging children in stillness and reflection.

In their research on the spirituality of children, Hay and Nye identified what they called "relational consciousness" as the most fundamental feature of children's spirituality. This was observed in children's conversations as an unusual level of consciousness or perceptiveness in certain instances, with reference to a specific relationship with either self, others, God or the world.¹⁶

The data gathered and discussed in Hay and Nye's research supports the view that "spirituality in its full range, including religious awareness, is entirely natural."¹⁷ However, it was also noted that most children by the age of ten were shy and embarrassed about their spiritual lives as are many adults in contemporary society. These researchers suggested that the spirituality of children could be nourished by "directing formal attention daily (sometimes several times a day) to those aspects of human experience through which spiritual awareness most easily comes to light (e.g. worship, prayer, silence, contemplation, meditation etc.)" and "the provision of a context of ritual, communal narrative, doctrine and social

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teaching which both focuses attention on and gives concrete expression to spiritual insight. In this way spirituality diffuses through and influences the whole of life in a coherent manner."¹⁸

In the last few years in Australia, teachers and catechists have looked at approaches to Religious Education and Catechesis that recognise and nurture children's innate spirituality. Sofia Cavalletti¹⁹ stresses the importance of ensuring that the *method* of speaking about God with children is compatible with the *religious message*, "one that conveys rather than limits the content, especially as the content we are referring to is the Mystery of the infinite God, revealed as an inexhaustible richness."

Two complementary approaches

The "Catechesis of the Good Shepherd" was developed by Sofia Cavalletti with Gianna Gobbi over the last fifty years in collaboration with catechists and children all over the world. It is based on the work of Maria Montessori. Cavalletti was a biblical scholar in Rome who first discovered the natural religious nature of the child when she agreed to teach a friend's nephew about the Bible. She noticed that her young student displayed great interest and joy as they together pondered God's word. She then sought the help of Gianna Gobbi, an experienced Montessori educator, to work out what particular aspects of God and the Christian Tradition met children's needs at particular stages of their development.

The result, developed over many years was a body of presentations from Scripture and liturgy that seemed to satisfy the deep spiritual needs of children at three different stages of development (aged 3-6, 6-9, 9-12). The key elements of this approach include telling the story, listening and reflecting together, presenting materials that accompany the story, praying together and

a "response time" for children to explore and internalise the story. The teacher's role is that of guide or facilitator, preparing the materials and presenting the stories to "call forth" the child's response rather than "pouring in" information. The adult is a co-wonderer with the child.

A similar approach known as "Godly Play" was developed in the United States by Dr Jerome Berryman, who studied under Cavalletti in Bergamo, Italy, and was a Montessori teacher and headmaster. One of his departures from Cavalletti's approach is his use of a carefully chosen sequence of Old Testament stories, telling of God's saving deeds in history, as well as New Testament stories. "Godly Play" includes the same essential elements as the "Catechesis of the Good Shepherd": telling the story, wondering and responding.

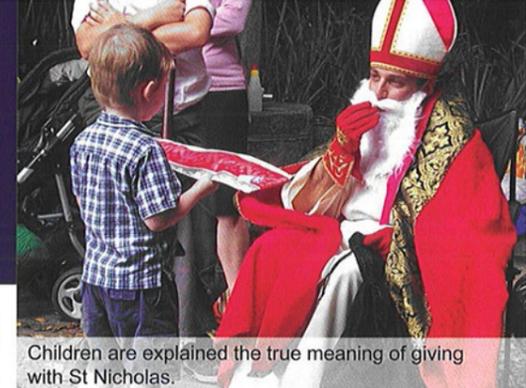
Both these approaches were originally developed for catechesis in the church environment but they have been used and adapted to other environments, including the school. A number of dioceses in Australia have adopted their principles and pedagogy and have incorporated key aspects in their Religious Education curricula for young children.

What do these approaches offer to the teaching of Religious Education and why are they so suited to it?

Telling the story

Story is a key part of our faith tradition. In every age people have sought to relate their own story to the larger story of faith.

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Children are explained the true meaning of giving with St Nicholas.

In telling the stories of faith, adults pass on to children the sacred story of salvation. Catechists and teachers often exhort children to love God and Jesus. But do they firstly help children to *know* God and Jesus? If catechesis is to put people "not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ", as Pope John Paul II explains²⁰, then telling the story offers a method for doing this "that avoids putting ourselves and our experience between God and the child."²¹

The style of biblical stories is particularly suited to young children because it uses only actions and descriptions essential to the story. This engages the imagination and invites the young listeners to relate the stories to their own lives and experience.

In the "Catechesis of the Good Shepherd"/"Godly Play" approach the story is told, not necessarily "by heart" but "from the heart". Well tested scripts are provided that stay close to the biblical texts and include gestures and silence with which children quickly engage.

The stories are accompanied by the use of simple but substantial concrete or visual materials. We know that young children learn through the senses. Concrete materials such as figures and visuals support the telling and re-telling of the biblical stories. Objects, symbols, gestures, movements and words of the liturgy engage children in stories about the liturgy. Concrete and visual materials help the children to picture the story in their minds.

The storyteller is not an actor or entertainer and focuses on the materials and the story, so that the focus for the children becomes the unfolding story rather than the storyteller.

Children who experience the story told in this way not only remember the story but also learn from the teacher's presentation to reverence the story and the materials.



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"When we are proclaiming the Christian message it is helpful to give children the opportunity to reflect and meditate on it. Children have a capacity for stillness and silence".

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²John Westerhoff in Edward Robinson *The Original Vision: A Study of Religious Experience of Childhood* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1985) xxiii.
³John Bradford, *Caring for the Whole Child* (London: The Children's Society, 1995) 122-130.
⁴Robert Coles, *The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989) 100.
⁵Coles, *The Spiritual Life of Children*, 39.
⁶Coles, *The Spiritual Life of Children*, 10-21.
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⁸Hyde, *Religion in Childhood and Adolescence*, 171-179.
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¹⁰Plutarch, cited in Clive and Jane Erickson *The Education of the Whole Child*, 43.
¹¹Madeleine Simon, *Born Contemplative: Introducing Children to Christian Meditation* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1993) 46.
¹²Hay and Nye, *The Spirit of the Child*, 74.
¹³Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, *Children's Spirituality: An Interview*, accessed on <http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/books/features.php?id=15228>, 14 Oct 2007.
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¹⁵Cavalletti S, Couller P, Gobbi G, Montanaro S, *The Good Shepherd and the Child: A Joyful Journey*, (Chicago, 1996), p39
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¹⁷Ibid., 141.
¹⁸Ibid., 145.
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²⁰Apost. Exhort. *On Catechesis in our Time*, no. 5
²¹Cavalletti S, Couller P, Gobbi G, Montanaro S, *The Good Shepherd and the Child: A Joyful Journey*, p38