

***Transcript of  
National Catholic Partnership on Disability  
Symbolic Catechesis and Other Tools in  
Catechetical Ministry  
September 13, 2011***

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## **Participants**

Lee Nagel, Executive Dir. of the National Conference for Catechetical Leadership  
Father Bill Gillum, Director Pastoral Care at McGuire Memorial  
Mary Mirrione, Director, National Assoc. of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd

## **Presentation**

### **Operator**

Greetings and welcome to the Symbolic Catechesis and Other Tools in Catechetical Ministry. At this time all participants are in a listen-only mode. A brief question and answer session will follow the formal presentation. As a reminder, this conference is being recorded. It is now my pleasure to introduce your host, Lee Nagel, Executive Director of the National Conference for Catechetical Leadership. Thank you. Mr. Nagel, you may begin.

### **Lee Nagel**

Good day. Felecia. We apologize for being a few moments late, but we welcome you to the first National Catholic Partnership on Disability webinar of this academic year: Symbolic Catechesis and Other Tools in Catechetical Ministry for People with Disabilities. Partners for the production are the USCCD Secretariat for Evangelization and Catechesis, the National Association for the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd and the National Conference for Catechetical Leadership. This presentation has been prepared in consultation with the National Catholic Office for the Deaf, the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, Justice and Peace, and National Postulate for Inclusion Ministry. My name is Lee Nagel. I'll serve as moderator today. With me are Father Bill Gillum Director of Pastoral Care at McGuire Memorial in New Brighton, Pennsylvania and the author of, *Awakening Spiritual Dimensions I and II*. And Mary Merrione, Director of the National Association of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd and a mentor for the Department of Family Catechesis and the Diocese of Phoenix.

Today's program, while specifically address the catechetical ministry for persons with disabilities, has a much wider application for catechesis as a whole. The guiding principles that will be presented are essential for good catechesis for all persons. During each of the two presentations, you'll be invited to respond to a poll. Please complete the poll as soon as it appears on the screen. And if you're watching this with a group, have the person closest to the computer complete the survey as an individual.

Anyone can type a question at any time in the space provided at the bottom of the screen. Be sure to click "submit." We'll address the questions in the final third of the program.

Now, let us take a moment to remind ourselves that we gather in the holy presence of God. And we begin as we Catholics always do, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Let us pray. Help us, oh, God, to awaken the spiritual dimension in all so that everyone may come to know love and serve you. Amen. Without further delay, let me turn the program to Father Bill.

**Fr. Bill Gillum**

I began my ministry with persons with disabilities back in 1974 when I was here in Washington, D.C. studying theology and preparing for priesthood in the Capuchin Franciscan Order. And it was in 1986 that I went to an Ohio institution, found myself sitting around a table with eight adult men who had severe disabilities. And I realized my degree in special education did not prepare me for any kind prayer or catechetical experience with this particular group. We all sat there in silence. I looked at them and they silently stared back at me. I was stumped. I knew I could not offer a typical catechetical program. That was out of the question. So this small group of men gathered around this table and called me to form a new way of catechesis. I had the mentoring from a good friend and fellow Capuchin Friar and a Sister of Notre Dame who were with me in Washington. They suggested a quiet gentle, prayerful, contemplative approach using symbols that appeal to human senses. That was the key. With this approach, I found that God's life, spirit, and love embedded in the hearts of individuals at baptism become awakened and come to life. I discovered that severe disabilities are no barrier to the grace of God.

And the result, a peaceful body and spirit, the presence of a loving god, the healing of Jesus through gentle voices and touch, learning their faith, and the building up of Christian community. I discovered with this type of prayer and learning, participants, despite their challenging disabilities, may whisper within their hearts, today at this very moment, everything is okay. Today I feel loved by God. Today I feel loved by others. Persons with severe disabilities are often asked to participate in typical prayer, religious education programs, and liturgical services. Sad to say, this approach is seldom compatible with their spiritual dimensions or their short span of attention. So what should we avoid when praying with or teaching individuals with severe cognitive disabilities?

We avoid too many words and a distracting environment. For them, the biggest problem with typical approaches to prayer and catechesis is too many words, too much distraction and too much stimulation. Too many words heard by someone with a severe cognitive disability may result in their hearing only words and sounds with no time or ability to process what has been voiced. Also, too much stimulation and noise can lead to frustration and perhaps unwanted behaviors. And the result of such an approach? Loss of attention. Even a waste of time. Their response? Not to anything that has been voiced, but rather their looking elsewhere in the space for stimulation, potentially leading to behaviors considered as, "acting out."

Today, objections may be raised by pastors, DRE's and others. They are not able to understand. I don't know what to do or how to approach them. They are just there. I get no apparent response. This is often said concerning sacramental preparation for first Eucharist. How do we know when they are ready? Well as our bishops have told us back in 1978, we need to detect a sense of the sacred. They certainly cannot tell us with words, but sometimes their body language or facial expressions say, "I am ready". Each person being prepared for is unique in their readiness. After a time of an appropriate preparation that meets their needs, the catechist, parent, and pastor together make a determination as to readiness. Usually persons with severe disabilities, who have alternate ways of eating, receive the Eucharist by way of the Precious Blood distributed with a small spoon. Children and adults with severe

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cognitive disabilities are not able to understand, as we do, all the elements of our faith, but they do have a right to an appropriate model to help them know about the God who loves them. No matter how severe their disability, they have the right to enjoy God's graces and receive especially from Eucharist and Confirmation. But first and foremost, we must presume that they are able to know! We must presume that they are able to know in their own way.

Persons with severe disabilities need to experience the love of God in a manner that is appropriate to awakening the spirit of GOD residing not just in their limited minds, but also within their bodies, their hearts and their souls. I see on our poll already that 85% receive the Eucharist. That is really very good, very favorable. My method for prayer and catechesis has been the result of many years of experience and observation. Persons with severe disabilities are saying to me, "Don't tell me about God but rather show me the presence of God. Help me to see, hear, touch, taste, and feel within my body, the presence of God. I can come to know God not so much by what you say, but what we can do together within our sacred space."

One way to awaken the presence of God in the hearts of people with severe disabilities is what seems to be tapping their unique ability to intuit and evoke the reality of what is being experienced by way of symbols. Intuition is defined as the immediate knowing of something without the conscious use of reasoning. Evocation is defined as a calling forth, an awakening within. Evoking the presence of the holy can be achieved by a way that is described by many as symbolic catechesis, that is a form of religious education and prayer leading one to evoke an intuitive knowledge of what is being presented. With symbolic catechesis, God is not known by way of typical catechetical models but through an experience of prayer, an experience of learning, while appealing to our five human senses. Symbolic catechesis can be defined as finding the meaning of that which is holy in and through symbols that evoke spiritual dimensions or realities. You know, the medium is the message.

For me, symbolic catechesis -- evoking an intuition of that which is holy -- seems to work. Some examples of symbol which Mary and I will both describe to you are: environment, relationships, peaceful music, color, silence, texture, touch, aroma, simple words and religious images such as a realistic portrait of the face of Jesus. How do we bring about this so-called evocation? How do we allow the possibility of evocation and intuition of the holy? The answer is what I describe as a sacred flow of prayer within a sacred space, with an uninterrupted, structured, and sequential motion of prayer or learning, using symbols, all of which leads the participants into contemplative moments of communing with the holy and each other.

Four years ago I composed the text *Awakening Spiritual Dimensions*. It describes a scriptural model for prayer and learning about the ways of Jesus. The introduction describing the methodology is most important in order for this model to be successful. A quiet space with no clutter or distractions serves as the best setting. With no more than ten participants at a time. Soft, instrumental music sets the mood of the space. I use music without lyrics. For this model lyrical music distracts and excites. For example, the instrumental music of composers David Phillips or Jack Heinzl calms the body so the Spirit can awaken within. This is not a time to excite. This kind of music is an important tool to evoke the presence of God. Hopefully the holy begins to be noticed, evoked, and awakened as this peaceful music brings about a time of settling, contemplation, and attentiveness to the moment and the surroundings. These initial moments are a necessary part for a sacred flow of prayer. Barring any allergic reaction to aromas, soothing sounds mix with a welcoming aroma. Pleasant aromas come from fragranced candles. Pleasant aroma contributes to settling. Now an unvoiced comment among the participants at this time would be, "I'm glad to be

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here. It is good to be here. It sounds nice. It smells good. I am ready to begin."

Aroma and relaxing music help to eliminate distraction and agitation. Focusing can now take place within the sacred space. A peaceful body and soft harmonies lend themselves to dismiss previous noises and distractions. Now, the time of prayer begins. Ten minutes of listening, gazing and setting calms the spirit within and brings about focusing on the environment. Next, the leader moves to the center of the circle to begin the time of prayer. With our music and aroma, participants lighting candles and hearing the sound of bells add to the anticipation of prayer. Next, each participant is welcomed personally by name. With simple, brief, and clear sentences the session begins with a prayer. Before hearing and listening to the Word of God, I use the movement of seeing, touching and weighing the Bible with one's hands and arms. This symbolic gesture of handling the book of scriptures conveys being touched by God's Word and allowing it to rest in one's body, mind and heart. The adapted Scripture reading and lesson are proclaimed slowly, deliberately, with definite pauses. Pauses between sentences while the scripture and lesson are presented are absolutely essential. Hands, mind, ears, eyes, heart, and spirit are now touched by God's Word. The lesson that follows uses the same approach -- clear, concise, and simple words. Action and review now follow the word and lesson with the assistance of hand over hand movement accompanied with the continued flow of gentle background music, the participant in one simple sentence reinforce and put in writing the lesson they have just heard Proclaiming the Word of God, teaching the message of the Word, movement, spelling out the message of the Word, all contribute to learning during these moments of prayer.

Finally, personal blessings send forth all who have gathered. For those who are able, gazing upon a realistic image of Jesus and with the laying on and gentle touch of hands upon one's head and/or face, the Spirit of God is called down to send everyone forth with the strength and comfort of God. As the music is raised, the participants exit the sacred space, back to the sights and sound familiar to their previous home environment and parish community. Now, all that I have described for Awakening Spiritual Dimensions I carries over into Awakening Spiritual Dimensions II - Sacred Articles Used for Prayer and Liturgy, that I have just completed. I feel it is important that persons with limited cognitive abilities, within a prayerful environment, and by means of symbolic catechesis, learn about those articles that are used for prayer and liturgy within our Catholic faith. A side note, this method, symbolic catechesis used in Awakening I and II, can very appropriately be used with children and adults with fewer disabilities and even with those having none.

In Awakening II, the sacred article, and not the scriptures as in Awakening I, are the focus of the learning session. Here the symbols of catechesis and focus are sacred objects, such as: the altar, the tabernacle, bread and wine, chalice, rosary, water, sacred images, and vestment colors. For this prayerful catechesis, the sacred object, for example, a glass carafe of water and glass bowl, are placed and stand alone on a table within the circle of students. The table is covered with a cloth of one bright color. A simple lesson is taught. For example, when we come into this church, this special place, we use water. At this time I slowly pour water into a bowl near each student. Those who cannot see, hear the water being poured. Those who cannot hear, see the water poured. I continue. We put the tips of our fingers into the water. We then make the Sign of the Cross. Water reminds us of the day we were baptized. At that time water was poured over our heads. The priest said, "I baptize you" -- I say each student's name -- "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen." When we were baptized we became children of God the Father. When we were baptized we became brothers and sisters with Jesus. We became brothers and sisters with each other. Next I bless the water. With the bowl of holy water, I facilitate

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making the sign of the cross using hand over hand with each participant. After this I have each student choose from two flash cards. One card will have the correct picture of holy water, the other a picture of another sacred object. By eye gazing I have each student choose the correct card. The following part of the lesson is that I have each student press the BIGmack communicator and hear the following: "We use Holy Water to make the Sign of the Cross." The final part of the lesson is that each student will complete in writing with a fill-in-the-blank exercise taken from the lesson. The Lesson ends by praying the Lord's Prayer and the Blessing of each student saying, "Kind and gentle Jesus bless me with peace of mind, body and spirit." This model of catechesis can take place in a church, a chapel, a small prepared room, or even around a dining room table at home.

Finally, I ask that you enter into this model and dimension of prayer and learning with those whose disabilities are more severe. Help them to connect with the love of God that is experienced by them through your love, your friendship with them, and the Holy Spirit that is awakened within them. Thank you.

### **Lee Nagel**

Thanks, Father Bill, for reminding that symbols have tremendous power. And we can let them speak for themselves. Symbols help us connect to an experience of the divine. Symbols evoke divine realities in all of us and we respond. Don't forget that you can type your questions at the space provided at the bottom of your screen. Be sure to click submit and we'll address the questions in the final third of the program. Those of you familiar with the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd know the catechist facilitates learning as a partner in the learning process, because the only teacher in the catechesis of the Good Shepard Atrium is Christ the teacher. Here is Mary Mirrione to immerse us in this philosophy and their message.

### **Mary Mirrione**

I am so happy to be here today. So much of what Father Bill has shared I have found true in my work with the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. My goal is to illustrate symbolic catechesis as explained by Father Bill, using examples from the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. A further goal is to show how this method can be used with children and adults with a range of disabilities. Father Bill spoke of the need to feel and experience the love of God in a manner that is appropriate to the awakening spirit of God residing not just in the mind of a person but also within their bodies, their hearts, and their souls. This is true for the young child too. Father Bill also said that persons with severe disabilities are saying to him, "Don't tell me about God, but rather show me the presence of God."

I hear the silent plea of the young child in a similar way help me come closer to God by myself. What Father Bill calls intuition; Maria Montessori named the absorbent mind. There is much that we share here today. The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, rooted in the Bible, the liturgy of the church, and the educational principles of Maria Montessori. It is an approach to the religious formation of children where the symbols, signs, colors, gestures, prayers, sacramental elements of liturgy and the scriptures are lifted up for the children. In this way, the children can recognize their significance and more fully participate in the life of the Church. Maria Montessori once said, "Our Mass is the pedagogy of the Church." I find this to be true. There is a deep bond between God and the child which produces in the child the desire to draw near to God. The catechists' role is to prepare an environment and to make presentations that call forth the child's response rather than pouring information.

This is similar to the concept described by Father Bill of evoking an intuitive knowledge of the presence of God. The adult is a co-wonderer with the child as they

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together enjoy meditating on the questions generated by the Scriptures or the celebration of liturgy using a prepared environment as a developmental aid. In this prepared environment, we can approach what St. John says in his first letter: "What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we looked upon and touched with our hands...what we have seen and heard we proclaim now to you." In May we surveyed the members of CGSUSA and discovered that 58% of catechists using the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd which I will refer to as CGS from here forward are working with children with disabilities across the US. 47% of those children are on the autism spectrum. As we examined the practices and methodology employed in the atrium, it became clear that many of the practices used serve a range of these children well. And I am happy to have the opportunity to share with you some of these methods in the belief that they will give support to catechetical ministry for students with disability as well as typical young children.

In a traditional classroom, the primary relationship is thought to be between the teacher and the child. Maria Montessori noted a third and important, but often silent partner in education, the environment. She discovered that the environment doesn't have to remain an invisible partner, but rather can be intentionally shaped to more deeply serve the needs of the child. What type of space do you use for catechesis? And I see many are using an atrium here and have a dedicated space for a religious education. I'm happy to see that.

The prepared environment known as an atrium is one of the elements found in the CGS that helps the relationship between God and the child to flourish. How does the prepared environment help to nourish this relationship? The prepared environment may be compared to a retreat house facilitating recollection and silence. It is a place not just for religious education but for religious life. It is a place for work and study, which become contemplation and prayer. It is essential rather than over-stimulating. We are careful not to decorate the room. Only those things that will serve the child's relationship with God are included are intentionally placed. For the child, the atrium is a place of preparation for involvement in the larger worshiping community. Although there is a well-developed formation course for catechists in GSA that gives many practical guidelines for building an atrium, any catechist can use some of these principles for preparing the religious environment in which they and the children meet and come to know God. Any space, no matter how small or multi-purposed can hold an area where a prayer space may be created. There are detailed suggestions in the toolkit for developing such an area. It is very important to have a peaceful introduction to this religious environment.

Remember that what first brought Moses into conversation with God was the attraction to a small burning bush that though on fire, was not consumed. God waited patiently to have Moses' attention before speaking to him on holy ground. The same is true for our children. We must recognize that for a child to build a relationship with God, the child must be attracted to the religious environment and be at peace. Father Bill gave some excellent advice for helping people enter peacefully into a religious environment. It is important that the space be prepared essentially and beautifully. Distractions must be limited. Greeting the child by name will help child find peace in this environment. This means we explain expectations, so as to help children succeed. We practice and model silence, good manners, and how to behave in specific activities and places. And following our Good Shepherd, we do this every time they come.

When we come to our Easter Celebration with the little ones, we announce the Gospel of John where Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb and does not recognize Jesus at first. We ask the children what Jesus does to help her know that it is him. They

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always respond with great joy: "He calls her by name!" This joy comes from a lived experience for them. Within this space the child needs an education to silence and prayer. Simple exercises to help the child find stillness and silence are important for a life of prayer. And you will find some examples of these exercises in the toolkit. They are quite simple. For example, you can tell the children that they are going to learn a way to be in this place today.

Let's talk about silence. What is silence? How can we be silent? What can we do while we are silent? They may or may not respond, so you continue saying, "When we come to the atrium we come to listen to God's word. We want to learn how to have silence so that we can listen. There is so much noise in our world. Let's see if we can practice silence together." Then go to the opposite end of the room, sit down quietly and say listen, I am going to call each of you by name. Then whisper their names one by one very quietly and motion for them to sit with you. Once everyone is sitting you can discuss what sounds they heard during the silence, both inside and outside the atrium. The children enjoy this practice. They see it as a game and they enjoy entering into silence together. There is great peace when they accomplish this. These lessons integrate the heart, the hand and the mind. Silence should never be imposed by the adult but drawn forth from the abilities of the children. Remember how Father Bill explained the profound benefit for people with significant disabilities including those on the autism spectrum. Finding peace in silence helps everyone more deeply develop their prayer life.

The materials in the atrium are attractively displayed inviting children, including those with disabilities, to explore and deepen their experiences at their own pace and rhythm. Remember that you can create a simple prepared environment using symbols suitable for your lessons and students. It's important that these materials have a close link to the biblical and liturgical sources. The shelves might include maps of Israel and miniature environments representing the elements of the parables and historical events from scripture. The arrangement of the altar and its related furnishings conveys the centrality of the Eucharist. A small baptismal font and other liturgical items initiate the child into the liturgical life of the church. Sophia Cavalletti, one of the founders of CGS said, "The catechetical material consists of concrete 'signs' of a transcendent reality...and is a way of letting the child prolong, alone with the Holy Spirit, the meditation begun together with the adult." There must be a congruency between content and method; we must find a method suitable to convey the rich mysteries of our faith, truths too great for words. When Jesus wanted to speak about these truths, he spoke in parables and worked in signs and wonders to help people to understand what he was getting at. In our shared religious life with children it makes sense for us to also engage this language of Jesus, the language of sign.

How do we approach this with children? Well it depends on their age and ability. The three to six-year-old child, or a person functioning at that level, is particularly capable of receiving and enjoying the most essential element of our faith: the announcement of God's love, in the person of the Good Shepherd. Materials on the life of Christ and his teachings help make the mystery of God accessible to the concrete-operational child. The geography materials establish Jesus as a real person in time and space and Israel as the land through which God realized salvation for all. The infancy narrative dioramas announce the Incarnation with the words of Scripture, moving from the Annunciation, to the Birth of Christ, to the Flight into Egypt. The model of Jerusalem and of the Empty Tomb are the starting points for the Paschal narratives which the child lives in a special way in celebrating the Liturgy of the Light found at the Easter Vigil. Through the arranging and naming of the chalice, paten, and other articles of the altar, the child becomes familiar with what they see at Mass. The three

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to six-year-old level child answers the mystery of Mass through the important gestures such as the preparation of the chalice or the gesture of peace. We isolate these gestures from the Mass showing what they look like to the children and then ponder the meaning of the gesture. This method is especially helpful for students with a wide range of disability. Gesture is a language in its own right, just as we would not speak two languages at the same time, we don't use both gesture and language simultaneously with young children, but rather in separate moments.

For example, when we present the sign of the cross to young children, we first simply, carefully and slowly show them the gesture. We ask them what they thought. We then tell them of their baptism and how the sign was placed on them many times in big or small ways as a gift and like a shield. We then invite them to place the sign on themselves, slowly and reverently. We wish to initiate children not only into our verbal prayers, but our prayers of gesture as well in a slow, reverential conscious manner so they can abide the reverential spirit of these gestures in their own prayer life.

I was working with a group of four and five-year-olds just after Christmas break. We were pondering the visit of the Magi and we noticed that the Magi had brought gifts to the Christ child. I asked how we might respond to the great gift of Jesus. One by one each child stood up and genuflected deeply before the small image of Baby Jesus on the prayer table. We had looked at this gesture many weeks before and I was not expecting this response. We had simply presented the gesture as a way of saying with our bodies "Lord, you are so great, I make myself small in your presence." These small children had no words of response for the gift of the incarnation but they could respond with the whole of themselves in this gesture. The liturgical colors in our prepared environment are represented as small Chasubles made of beautiful cloth. There is also a Liturgical calendar which is actually a puzzle that situates the child in the church year expressing our celebration of the Pascal mystery. A prayer corner reflects the liturgical cycle with appropriate colors, and prayers, and songs, and readings to enhance the rituals and celebrations of the seasons. Every catechetical classroom would benefit from such an environment. While the heart of the catechesis for the child under the functioning level of a six-year-old revolves around the parable of the Good Shepherd, the elementary age child is captured by the image of the True Vine. "I am the vine, you are the branches. Remain in me."

The proclamation responds to a deep need of the older child to know better their relationship with God, family, friends, and the larger community. The child at this level seeks guidelines. The moral parables offer a model for comparing their behavior with that of the Pharisee, the Tax Collector, or the Good Samaritan. The Found Sheep, the Found Coin, and the Prodigal Son can be examined as the children prepare for the sacrament of Reconciliation. The proclamation and meditation stress God's love, which is constantly forgiving, and the joy of living in right relationship.

The elementary children see the parts of the Mass -- the Liturgy of the Word, the Preparation of the Gifts, the Eucharistic Prayer, and the Communion Right-- as one unity. When they were younger we had time to look at each gesture slowly. At this stage of development we can help them put all the gestures of the Mass in the order and see the Mass as a prayer of prayers. In this slide you see a special visitor in a Roman Atrium. As Bishop of Rome, Blessed John Paul the Great made a pastoral visit to a local parish. There he entered an atrium where the children were working. Notice the materials on the floor which lift up the various moments of the Mass and have been placed in proper order. See the delight in the child and the joy of the visitors. As John Paul left that day he told the catechists, it is was the best homily he had ever seen. Children at this stage of development can also prepare a personal missal filled with illustrations and prayers. This is a process, which deepens their love

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and understanding of the Eucharist. For the more severely disabled child, the use of a personalized missal will assist greatly in their introduction to Mass and learning about the Mass. An example can be found in the tool kit.

The imagination of the older child and their agility with the concept of time is powerful stimuli to explore the past and the future. The first timeline we give is a ribbon fifty meters long that focuses on the high points in the history of salvation from Creation through the Redemption to the Parousia. We literally let time pass through our fingers. The child with more limited cognitive ability will not have a developed linear sense of time but can appreciate and respond deeply to the sensory experience of this fifty meter ribbon as time passing through their fingers as part of their community of classmates.

Other presentation focuses on the many gifts we receive from God, rocks, minerals, flowers, fruit, friends, family, culminating in God's gift of his own divine life in the person of Jesus Christ, a gift which will pervade the whole universe at the completion of history. In CGS, a third presentation of the history of salvation is provided for the older, higher functioning child, it focuses on the plan of God in history as a plan of communion, a plan which links all people together. The emphasis is on our response to this unfolding generosity of God and the responsibilities that come with receiving God's great gifts. What is the kingdom of God and what is my place in it? It is a question which begins to lay the foundations for a life's commitment and call to vocation. As a child of God, by virtue of the gift of Baptism, the child is a privileged member in this kingdom. We as catechists and catechetical leaders have a duty continually to nourish the light of Christ in the child. Symbolic catechesis is a profound way of doing so. In closing, I would like to emphasize that the use of a prepared environment, hands-on materials and the practice of silence can be used effectively for catechesis with children and youth with disabilities. There are a number of suggestions in practices in the tool kit for everyone. I hope you will find them useful. Thank you.

### **Lee Nagel**

Thanks Mary, for help seeing the liturgical catechesis with new eyes. This may be especially helpful as we prepare for the reception of the third edition of the Roman missal, as well as reminding us of the importance of allowing the individual students to learn through discovery. It is also encouraging to know how many students with disabilities are being served in the CGS atria. I want to express our apologies. We were under the impression that when we answered an email to all people that the question would appear with the answer, but apparently that didn't happen. So what you received were some answers to questions that you don't know the question to. We're going to do our best. Thirty people have submitted some questions. Don't forget that you too can submit a question in the space provided. Be sure to click submit.

The first question I'm going to ask Father Bill to address is what are some simple preparation practical tips for preparing an autistic child for first reconciliation who has some fear of this sacrament?

### **Fr. Bill Gillum**

I think what's important is that the child develop a relationship with the priest who is going to be involved in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. It's going to take time, I think, for the individual to be comfortable in a setting that is prayerful, quiet, and peaceful. And that the individual feels comfortable with the person who is going to be -- the priest who is going to be there with them.

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**Lee Nagel**

Thanks, Bill. We received another question from our Spanish group that asked you to talk about that believing attention span of people with certain disabilities and how long you would say a session could be with them?

**Fr. Bill Gillum**

That all depends on the participants. Using the method that I used, allowing that very important time of calming and settling with soft background music and so forth, really does work. And once that time of settling takes place, up until about ten minutes, then you can begin. You may have to spend a period of time, maybe a couple of weeks, just sitting and settling with the music before the group becomes comfortable, before you can move on.

**Lee Nagel**

Thanks. I think that's good advice, Bill. We tend to want to get everything done so quickly we don't give people enough time. Mary, we have questions that relate to the atria, some talk -- let's take the two that talk about some people believe the atria is too busy so how do you work decluttering that?

**Mary Mirrione**

Okay and I think that when you observe atria at first; you may see that many of the children are all working in different areas. And what I would invite everyone to really notice, if you can visit an atria, is what concentration looks like in a child, that there are, as Father Bill was talking about, there's a time of settling in to work, a time of gathering the work and entering into it and then you see this peace. There are those moments in the atrium when that's happening for everyone and there is great stillness in the room. But more often that's happening individually around the room. So as far as decluttering, I wouldn't say that that's necessarily something that has to happen with what the children are doing. However, I have also seen atriums where there are maybe those things that don't need to be in the room, as I was speaking earlier about decoration. You know, we have very precise material that you can have developed on the shelves that are important for the child. There are those other things that don't need to be there. I think that's what we have to look at.

**Lee Nagel**

Thanks. Most of us know, there are some people for whom, one is good, 15 are better. That is what we are talking about.

**Mary Mirrione**

That is what we are talking about, yes.

**Lee Nagel**

At the same Mary, we were asked to talk about how does one adapt an atrium with deaf children?

**Mary Mirrione**

For that child it is helpful, what we have done is we have finally had interpreters that come in with us. Children with special needs often have either the ability to have respiration helpers or rehabilitation workers that can come in or sign language translators for them. Our experience has been to work with those people that work with the children and have a specific way of helping with their disability so that we're working in collaboration with them and we're together serving the child well.

**Lee Nagel**

And the last kind of question people talked about three-year-olds, how many you can

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have at a time, should you pair up a verbal, non-verbal child? That kind of question.

**Mary Mirrione**

With the youngest children, I think somewhere between 10 or 12 children is really enough in a room that has two adults. For those little ones, often they're going to be working individually. So pairing up verbal and non-verbal, although it can be good, for the youngest, it may actually not be necessary, because so much of their work is individual.

**Lee Nagel**

Good insight. Thank you. Some of you have questioned that we used the word toolkits and also asked about getting copies of the PowerPoint. The PowerPoint will be available online at NCPD.org for the next 365 days. In addition, there is a toolkit, if you go on the website, which many of the materials we've talked about, with some other references, bibliography, how you can order Father Bill's book is all there. We've got questions for Father Bill. Do you want to do the question first and provide the answer?

**Fr. Bill Gillum**

The question is: Do you have any ideas on hospice care and autistic 17-year-old for first Eucharist who has severe sensory issues? His mom has concerns that when the boy receive the hosts he will not swallow it or keep it in his mouth he is less likely to drink the precious blood. Again, it takes time. It takes time to be with the person, and over a period of time, to become familiar with, perhaps, the reality of the host and the precious blood. I think that's pretty much all I know about it right now. It just takes time to do that. I'm really not that expertise in autism. My expertise, in my ministry, is with people who have severe mental and physical disabilities. I know that the autism spectrum is very common these days, and hopefully we'll be able to give some ideas on how to deal with that and relate with that in the future.

**Lee Nagel**

I think what you said about patience and time is critical. If I can give credit to my second grade teacher, we learned patience is a virtue, virtue is a grace, and both put together make a very pretty face. You may just want to kind of keep that in mind as you work and nothing needs to be as fast and immediate as we try to do.

**Fr. Bill Gillum**

Right, right.

**Nancy Thompson**

This is Nancy Thompson, in response to the inquiry about the preparation of the 17-year-old for first Eucharist; a kit has been produced recently by Loyola Press that is developed for supporting children on the autism spectrum in preparation for first Eucharist. Information about that will be on our bibliography, in the toolkit. You can also go to the website at Loyola Press to get more information about the adaptive curriculum and kit, and to see if that would support the need you're expressing.

**Fr. Bill Gillum**

Thank you, Nancy.

**Lee Nagel**

Thanks a lot. Mary, you have a question. Do you want to state it and offer a response?

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**Mary Mirrione**

Yes, there is a question here: how can a six to 12 atrium provide for needs of a child old enough but having physical skills more suited to the 3 to 6 year old atrium without them feeling like you're giving them baby stuff? I think the answer to that is very simple. That in the level 2 atrium, we have many of the materials that are also in the level 1 atrium. And it's how the children use the materials that make them different. For instance, the gestures of the Mass or the narratives are there and available. For that child, they can work more slowly with the materials that everyone else is also working with, without them in any way feeling somehow held back. Depending on those physical skills, I would also look to see what practicalized materials from level 1 atrium might be of help and service to them. And of course I would simply present that as the need as known in that child.

**Lee Nagel**

Thanks for that. We have an interesting comment from someone about the value of silence. Father Bill.

**Fr. Bill Gillum**

Yes, the question is: the idea of teaching silence is helpful for me as regards inmates in Mass at prisons. Silence is extremely important, I think, for people with disabilities to become attuned to. The idea of coming into an environment where there's no noise, no distractions, sitting together, calming through soft gentle background music with aroma, as I spoke of, it helps us to focus on what's going to happen, whether it's prayer or celebrating the liturgy or whatever. Our world is very noisy today. And I think all people, including people with disabilities, need to learn silence as a form of prayer and preparing for prayer and learning.

**Lee Nagel**

Thanks, Father Bill. Bill, as long as we are taking a moment, would you share the story about the young man who became a Knights of Columbus 4<sup>th</sup> degree?

**Fr. Bill Gillum**

Yes, the photo you saw of a young man named Christopher receiving the Eucharist with a spoon. Christopher is severely disabled -- has severe disabilities. He has a tracheostomy; he also receives nourishment by way of a feeding tube. And members of McGuire Memorial where I am, the young men, no matter how severe their disability, have all joined the Knights of Columbus and they're joined by Knights at a local chapter. And so he is a Knight. And we also have a young man with Down syndrome who is Fourth Degree Knight.

**Lee Nagel**

Thanks, Bill. That's a great story. There seems to be some questions again about placement and appropriate level and guidelines for the appropriate atrium for children with varying abilities. So can you talk about that, Mary?

**Mary Mirrione**

Yeah I think it's important to remember that in the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, we are meeting the children where they are. And so when they enter into that environment, how do we help them use that environment in the best way? There are many, many materials available to them, and with the help of the parents and those that work with the child, maybe at school or in other ways, there can be a conversation, I think, with the adults who are involved, to see how to best use that environment to serve the needs of that particular child.

**Lee Nagel**

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Thanks. One of our co-chairs of the NCPD Council on Mental Illness wrote to say that all the Father and Mary have described is applicable to those with mental illness, schizophrenia, severe bipolar disorder, major depression, including adults. And that ongoing faith through adulthood it's mandated by the Bishop's catechetical documents. And that would include adults who have mental illness. She refers us to a program called Faith and Fellowship which has been very successful and uses principles provided to them in the faith formation information and best practices. You can find this by going to the NCPD website and going to the mental illness and then put in Faith and Fellowship and that will take care of it. Well we're almost out of time. So I want to thank you very much for your involvement. And thanks for participating in the webinar on symbolic catechesis and other tools in catechetical ministry for people with disabilities. Be sure to visit the NCPD website where this program will be archived and can be accessed for the next 365 days. Don't forget that one week from today, September, 20<sup>th</sup> NCPD will host another webinar Directed to the Lives of People with Disabilities part II Physician Assisted Suicide. That program will begin two hours later than we did today. You can still register on the NCPD website. Programs such as this website would not be possible without the generosity of many people. We are particularly grateful for the financial contributions of the Knights of Columbus and the Order of Malta Federal Association. If you personally would care to financially contribute to the work of NCPD, you can go to their website and click on "donate now." Every donation is an investment in the ministry of catechesis. So thanks to all you participating, to NCPD for your leadership, to all the partners and collaborators and especially for the expertise of Father Bill Gillum and Mary Merrione for helping us add more tools that will help us more effective catechists in serving all persons.

You can help all of us now by completing the online evaluation right before you close down and log out. While you are doing that, let me offer you this blessing from Father John O' Donahue. All you have to do is click I believe on that URL and it will take you there. I might be wrong, but give it a try. May your listening be attuned to the deeper silence, where sound is honed to bring distance home. May the fragrance of a breathing meadow refresh your heart and remind you, you are a child of the earth. May your inner eye see through the surfaces and glean the Real Presence of everything that meets you. And may your soul beautify the desire of your eyes that you might glimpse the infinity that hides in the simple sights that seem worn to your eyes. Amen. Thanks for your participation and please complete the evaluation.

**Operator**

Thank you. This concludes today's website. You may disconnect your lines at this time. Thank you for your participation.

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