

ECC Faith Formation

At the ECC, our Faith informs everything we do and is at the heart of every experience here. When one crosses the threshold of the preschool, the presence of Christ can be felt—in the way adults and children alike treat one another with good humor and respect, in the service we give, in the ways we pray and worship. Yet our four- and five-year-old students are very fortunate to also spend one whole hour each week in the Atrium, a special classroom set up to allow our the children not only to learn about their Faith, but also and especially, to give them time and space to express and deepen their love of God.

The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd class, the name given to this beautiful faith formation program, requires a prepared environment called the Atrium. In the Atrium children encounter materials that are models of things used in Church worship—an altar and altar vessels, liturgical vestments, a baptismal font, a representation of the first Eucharistic supper, to name a few. They also find materials related to Scriptural parables, prophecies, the geography of Israel, and events from the life of Christ. For example, the parable of the Good Shepherd, from whom the program gets its name, is represented by figures of a shepherd, sheep and a gated sheepfold.

A trained catechist, our own Ms. Sandy, makes presentations to the children using the materials. The presentations are chosen to convey the essentials of the faith while drawing out a response from the children. The children are more than capable of discovering the profound meaning and truths. So, for example, after hearing the

Scripture passage that describes how the Good Shepherd calls his own sheep by name and leads them so they may have life to the full, even laying down his life for the sheep, the children are asked questions: How do you suppose the shepherd feels about his sheep? Would he ever leave his sheep? How do the sheep feel to be with such a shepherd? Who are these lucky sheep? It is a joyful moment when each child discovers at some point in time—on his own—that he is that very fortunate little sheep.

The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd program is very spiritually moving for the children and the catechist alike. They study the scripture together and ponder what the Holy Spirit calls forth. In the preschool Atrium, what the children learn about the Mass helps them to participate more fully in the liturgy. They learn the colors and meanings of the liturgical seasons in the church year. They learn about the vessels used at Mass (chalice, paten, and ciborium) by setting up a model altar and exploring a model tabernacle. They hear how the sacristan and priest prepare for Mass, and contemplate how they, too, can prepare themselves for worship. They practice preparing the vessels (cruets, chalice) and are taught to read and contemplate the gestures of the Mass—those of the priest (Preparation of the Chalice, Lavabo, Epiclesis, Offering) and those of the congregation (Sign of Peace). They learn the names of the priest's vestments.

The children absorb the true meaning of Christmas as they listen and contemplate, with the help of accompanying figures, Biblical narratives surrounding Christ's birth (Annunciation, Visitation, Adoration of the Shepherd, and Adoration of the Magi). *(cont.)*





Quote from Ms. Sandy

“I am honored to be able to teach the children about God in our specially prepared “children’s atrium”. The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd program assists the child in participating in worship with the larger church community by focusing on the most fundamental and foundational truths and practices of our faith. It is especially moving to listen to and reflect on Scripture with our children and to witness the profound truths the Holy Spirit calls forth in their pure, open hearts. Naturally the children love coming to the Atrium!”

- Ms. Sandy

Geography works and lessons in the Atrium also help the children realize that Jesus was a real person in a real place. As they hear the names of regions, cities, and bodies of water mentioned in the scriptures read at Mass, they are better able to picture these real settings.

Similarly, the children are helped to more deeply understand the great gift of Easter. For example, the children listen to and contemplate the events of Jesus’ Last Supper. In the Last Supper lesson, as the figures of Jesus and his apostles exit the upper room to head for the Garden and Jesus’ eventual crucifixion and death, only the model table with the bread and wine and candles are left. As the children stare at the scene, one or more of them are sure to recognize

that the gift of Jesus’ body and blood that he gave to his friends at his last supper is the same one we are able to receive from the altar in the Eucharistic celebration of the Mass.

Easter is also the time for a Liturgy of Light celebration in the Atrium— much like the beginning of the church’s Easter Vigil Service. In the darkened Atrium, the children receive a lit candle from the model Easter candle. This beautiful candlelit service brings home to them that Jesus didn’t come just to BE the Light, but also to SHARE the light of his risen life with all of us. The children will once again be struck by how much light comes from the one Light in later lessons that illustrate the gifts they received at Baptism and that the Church received at Pentecost.

