

## IHMs in Action



"God and young children are already in a relationship," Nancy (Grace Anne) Ayotte, IHM, comments. "The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd nurtures that relationship."

The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, Sister Nancy's ministry for more than 12 years, is an international method of Christian faith formation for children ages 3-12. It is grounded in scriptural and liturgical study framed by Maria Montessori's philosophy of education - that children comprehend through discovery and are capable of self-directed learning.

"Children come to a specially prepared environment called an 'atrium,'" Sister Nancy says. "Everything in the atrium is hands-on. Presentations are given in ways that appeal to the religious intuition of children."

"In early Christianity, the atrium was where catechumens were prepared to become full members of the church," she continues. "Our children are being prepared for their full life in the worshipping community."

Unlike a traditional classroom, the atrium is a place to foster a child's response to God, rather than to simply provide information. The materials in the atrium may include dioramas representing the historical events from the Bible and maps of ancient Israel, a prayer corner, small vestments with the different liturgical colors, and a child-sized altar, chalice, paten, candles and crucifix which help the child become familiar with the articles of the Mass.

"Lessons are presented in small groups or individually," Sister Nancy says. "Then the children choose how they will work independently with the materials in the atrium. They recognize that the atrium is a special place, and they work silently."

"They learn about the Catholic faith, and they learn life lessons as well. If a child is using an item another child wants, they learn to share and to wait their turn. At the end of the session, they learn personal responsibility because they are responsible for picking up after themselves."

"And they learn to listen for God," she notes. "I remember one little boy came to a session extremely agitated. He went off to the prayer corner and I could see him slowly relax as he went deep within himself and listened for God's peace."

"The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is an amazing experience."

Sister Nancy has established the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd in 25 parishes in the Diocese of Saginaw, Mich., and is working to establish it in Monroe as well.