



## Montessori Catholic Education

### ***What is Montessori Education?***

Montessori education is a child-centered educational approach developed in the early 20th century by Dr. Maria Montessori, an Italian physician, educator, and devout Catholic. The Montessori method emphasizes hands-on, experiential learning and fosters independence, critical thinking, and a lifelong love of learning. Unlike traditional classroom settings where teachers lead direct instruction, Montessori classrooms are designed to allow children to explore and learn at their own pace. "One of the things that makes a Montessori program unique is that children really do come out knowing their strengths and weaknesses and being able to articulate what they need," according to Normile.



The Montessori environment is meticulously prepared with specialized learning materials, categorized into areas such as practical life, sensory development, mathematics, language, and cultural studies. Montessori classrooms are typically multi-age, allowing older students to mentor younger ones and encouraging collaboration rather than competition. The goal is to nurture each child's intrinsic motivation and help them develop intellectual, social, emotional, and physical skills.

### ***What Makes a Catholic Montessori Education?***

Catholic Montessori education integrates the core principles of the Montessori method with the teachings and traditions of the Catholic faith. While maintaining the child-centered and experiential learning approach of Montessori, a Catholic Montessori school also emphasizes spiritual formation as a vital component of education.

In a Catholic Montessori environment, the curriculum includes daily prayer, the celebration of liturgical seasons, and an understanding of Catholic doctrine and values. Religious education is not taught separately but interwoven into the daily life of the classroom. This holistic approach ensures that children grow not only intellectually and socially but also spiritually, with a deep sense of faith and moral responsibility.

The emphasis on respect, care for others, and the environment aligns closely with Catholic social teaching. Moreover, Catholic Montessori schools often have chapels or sacred spaces where children can engage in quiet reflection and prayer, further nurturing their spiritual development.



## ***What is the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd?***

A distinctive feature of Catholic Montessori education is the *Catechesis of the Good Shepherd* ([CGS](#)), a religious education program inspired by Montessori principles. Developed in Rome in the 1950s by Sofia Cavalletti, a biblical scholar, and Gianna Gobbi, a Montessori educator, CGS aims to deepen children's relationship with God through a hands-on, experiential approach to faith. **The CGS approach has a long and rich history in the Diocese of Cleveland**, with well more than a dozen schools and parishes currently utilizing it in some form.

In fact, one of the pioneers of the CGS method in the United States, **Betty Hissong, is from the Diocese of Cleveland**. She recorded a podcast with the United States Association of Catechesis of the Good Shepherd that you can [listen to here](#).



CGS takes place in a specially prepared environment called the *Atrium*, which resembles a sacred space rather than a traditional classroom. The Atrium contains child-sized materials that help children meditate on the mysteries of the Christian faith, such as small models of biblical scenes, liturgical items, and parables. Like most Montessori education, the program is divided into three levels based on the child's age:

- **Level 1 (ages 3-6):** Focuses on the foundational themes of God's love, the Good Shepherd, and the liturgy.
- **Level 2 (ages 6-9):** Deepens the child's understanding of scripture, sacraments, and moral formation.
- **Level 3 (ages 9-12):** Explores salvation history and the child's role in God's plan.



Through this approach, children come to know and love Jesus as their Good Shepherd, fostering a personal and profound relationship with God that forms the basis of a lifelong faith journey.

### ***How are Montessori Teachers Trained?***

One of the major factors she identified is the need for quality educator training. Montessori teacher training is rigorous and specialized, requiring a deep understanding of child “development and mastery of the Montessori philosophy and methods. Training typically involves a combination of academic coursework, hands-on practice with Montessori materials, and a supervised teaching practicum, and can include additional certification in religious education, particularly in the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd.”

Montessori teacher training programs are accredited by organizations such as the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) or the American Montessori Society (AMS). These programs cover Montessori pedagogy and child psychology, the use of Montessori materials for different age groups, and classroom management and observation techniques.

### ***How do Montessori Graduates Succeed?***

Montessori graduates are known for their strong academic performance, problem-solving abilities, and social-emotional skills. Numerous studies have shown that students who attend Montessori schools excel in various areas, including critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration. These skills are highly valued in today’s rapidly changing world.



A common misperception is that the Montessori classroom is unstructured. In reality, it is carefully structured according to the Montessori method’s emphasis on freedom within limits, where children are given choices in their learning, but these choices are

guided by a thoughtfully prepared environment, clear expectations, and developmental principles. As Patty Normile explained, "...it is scientifically based. Maria Montessori was a pediatrician before becoming an educator. And the whole beauty of her program is that she recognized that because of her knowledge of how the body grows, that many traditional education forms are not matching the natural progress that a body goes through and [a] brain grows through."

In a Catholic Montessori setting, graduates not only leave with a solid academic foundation but also with a deep sense of faith, compassion, and moral integrity. They are often well-prepared to navigate complex social environments with empathy and respect for others.

Key traits of Montessori graduates include:

- **Independence:** Montessori students are encouraged to take responsibility for their learning from a young age, fostering self-discipline and autonomy.
- **Confidence:** The supportive and non-competitive atmosphere of Montessori classrooms helps children develop confidence in their abilities.
- **Adaptability:** Montessori graduates are accustomed to working in diverse settings and learning through hands-on experiences, making them adaptable to new situations.
- **Lifelong love of learning:** The Montessori method emphasizes intrinsic motivation and curiosity, traits that persist throughout life.

### ***What are important factors for starting or adapting a school?***

First and foremost one must desire the Montessori philosophy. Principal Normile recommends interested leaders, committees or boards read some of the original works of Dr. Maria Montessori, such as her works on peace education.

Explore the [American Montessori Society](#) and all of their resources, workshops, and annual convention.

Leaders must also plan for the training and development of faculty. Recruitment and professional learning strategies are essential as will be solid financial planning for funding to attract and retain the skilled teachers who are certified beyond traditional classroom teacher training.

Finally, due to the multi-age nature of classrooms, leaders must plan thoughtfully to scale from preschool, to lower elementary, and expect that building to junior high enrollment will take the longest time.

## ***Catholic Montessori education in Cleveland***

The [Keeping the Faith](#) concept of differentiating educational approaches has been undertaken with Montessori approaches in recent decades in this diocese. In 1995, Sr. Marie Veres, H.M., and Sr. Annette Solma, H.M, established Villa Montessori Center, which focused on early childhood education in Cleveland's Slavic Village neighborhood until its closing in 2015. And Peaceful Montessori School in Kirtland, located at Divine Word Parish, [served](#) children from 1999 through 2016. And in Little Italy, following the 1993 closure of Holy Rosary parish school due to [low](#) enrollment, the parish opened Montessori School at Holy Rosary in 1995, beginning with preschool and adding grades each year. By 2016 the school had changed its name to Cleveland Montessori, and by 2016 had changed locations to nearby Alta House in Little Italy. The non-denominational institution that remains is currently celebrating its 30th anniversary, tracing its history back to its founding at the parish, and offers Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, despite not being accredited as a Catholic school.

Perhaps some school or schools in the Diocese of Cleveland, with its rich history and context for Catholic Montessori education, will again offer a P-8 Catholic Montessori school education in its future.

To learn more, listen to the full interview [HERE](#).

### **References For Further Reading:**

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