

Hello, Mater: A Note Especially to Parents with Young Children

6. Children like accomplishments and praise. They respond well to praise for their memorization, and are quite astounded to find that they can recite pages of a book by heart. This is a far worthier accomplishment than getting to level 10 of “Gonzo Goobers from Outer Space,” or whatever the latest video game is.

7. Most importantly, memorizing the Small Catechism means memorizing the Word. (While the Apostles’ Creed is not found in Scripture, it still proclaims Scriptural truth.) God’s Word is a means of grace, and your child’s young age does not prevent the Holy Spirit from working through the Word.

I write these thoughts in a significant week of the school year: As of chapel this Wednesday, the three-year-olds are able to recite the entire Lord’s Prayer and Apostles’ Creed as part of the service. By the end of the school year, they’ll also know the Ten Commandments. Do they understand all the words and nuances? Nope. Neither do I. But the data’s going in. The building blocks are being laid. The Word is being retained, and the Holy Spirit is at work. We won’t wear out the Lord’s Prayer or the Creed. The Lord will use these to our benefit, whatever our age may be.

The Lord be with you!

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Repetitio mater est studiorum. That’s Latin for “repetition is the mother of learning,” a watchword of education. Repetition and memorization go together. You repeat to memorize, and you memorize to learn.

At least, so it’s been in former times. A classical education school would have children memorize huge amounts of data (like Latin word forms) at a very young age, long before they understood the significance or meaning of much of it. It worked, too: As the children grew old enough to understand and process information, the data was already in place. Rather than spend time inputting basic building blocks of information, children could spend time constructing ideas. It’s little wonder why we hear of so many child prodigies in earlier centuries.

Repetition/memorization has fallen out of favor in recent decades in the realm of education, religious and otherwise. For one thing, memorization takes work, and there’s a hesitance to use techniques that children don’t consider “fun.” For another, there’s the temptation to believe that memorized articles of faith are “dead,” whereas a spontaneous statement of belief is living; in other words, it’s “more spiritual” if a child says something unplanned about God instead of the Apostles’ Creed—even if what the child says isn’t quite true.

The Small Catechism was written by Luther with repetition and memorization in mind; in fact, it's no coincidence that you'll find most of the word "echo" in catechism; it's intended to be recited and heard over and over. It inputs the basic building blocks of the Christian faith, giving a foundation on which to build. At the same time, the basic truths are so deep as to be inexhaustible. At the age of 47, Dr. Martin Luther wrote:

I confess this freely as an example to anyone; for here am I, an old doctor of theology and a preacher, and certainly as competent in Scripture as such smart alecks. At least I ought to be. Yet even I must become a child; and early each day I recite aloud to myself the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and whatever lovely psalms and verses I may choose, just as we teach and train children to do. Besides, I must deal with Scripture and fight with the devil every day. I dare not say in my heart: "The Lord's Prayer is worn out; you know the Ten Commandments; you can recite the Creed." I study them daily and remain a pupil of the Catechism (AE 14:7).

We'll speak more of the use of the Catechism by adults next month. I write this now, however, especially to parents of young children: There is no better time to teach your child the Small Catechism than now. Here are a few reasons why...

1. A two-year-old can memorize better than you ever will again. This is why he can hear an irritating jingle on a commercial just once, then sing it back to you for eight hours in the car; and why he can recite to you, word for word, the video he's heard on how a steam locomotive works. He can't tell a piston from a pineapple, but the recitation will be absolutely accurate.

2. One of the toughest times to memorize is adolescence: At that time, youth are struggling with puberty, growing independence, peer pressure and adolescent anxieties. While it's a good time for connecting the dots in confirmation instruction (putting the building blocks together), it's not a good time for memorization (inputting the building blocks). Your children will thank you if they already have the memory work done before confirmation begins. They just may not tell you for twenty years or so.

3. Looking to the future and speaking of confirmation one more time, remember: Early memorization puts the building blocks in place so that the child has the data when he's ready to start building. Early memorization means that confirmation class can be devoted to teaching the faith, not struggling to input the basic building blocks.

4. The greatest goal of small children is to be like their parents; this is why your young daughter always wants to hold the spatula that's in your hand, and why a socket wrench is far more fascinating than an electronic game with lights and sounds. Repeating "grown-up" words with Mom and Dad isn't work; it's getting to act like an adult. Act now! By age five, this is already starting to wear off.

5. These are easy family devotions! Each night at dinner, go around the table and learn three more words. (At that rate, the entire Small Catechism takes less than three years. In reality, it will take longer, but it's still achievable!) Along with a Bible story and prayer, this makes for easy family devotions. (Plus, at only three words a night, you can keep up with your kids!) Make this a part of devotions through the years: review, review, review. Repetition is, after all, the mother of learning.