



**GESTURES  
FOR**

Gestures are an integral part of both catechesis and liturgy.

A sense of the sacred is rooted in gestures of reverence. This is in our very muscles. We learn to act with reverence when we stand erect and attentive, when we place our gestures carefully and slowly, when we bow, raise our heads and eyes. The true catechist leads others into the world of the sacred through liturgical gestures. To lead others into the world of silence means to focus one's gestures...

Being a language in itself, gestures are not to be explained nor commented upon. They are used precisely to help one grasp a reality other than by means of words.\*

In our Spred catechesis for persons with intellectual or developmental disabilities we make an effort to use gestures and bodily postures. Communication is the key. We are dealing with the reality of a limited comprehension of the spoken words in our friends. In our sessions with them, they move around in the preparation phase, choosing activities, dropping into a sphere of quiet concentration, quieting the buzz of the day, at ease in their work with others. In the silence activity, they are called to sit still and wait to hear their name called by the activity catechist.

In the celebration room, the leader catechist frequently moves about in an evocation of a human experience, in the stylized gestures and posture of the liturgy of the word. The leader knows the narrative of the scripture and portrays its meaning in movements prior to reading from the holy book.

In imparting the message, the leader goes to each person, hand meets hand, one by one. And then all respond with personal expression to the music of a psalm. Slow movements are used, not rapid ones. Few gestures are used, not many. Now there are ten or twelve people moving as one in a simple, single motion that comes from within each one's spirit in prayerful homage. We consciously use certain movements of the body, stretching muscles. At times we move our heads, our legs, our arms, our hips, our shoulders, we bend, we walk, we try to *incorporate* the Word of God.

A motion placed with reverence and a modest demeanor is not for display but as a service of the Word. Motion is not static, least of all ego-centered, or self-conscious. Movements are stylized, but not stilted, stiff, formal nor inflexible. From this catechesis we see an easy transfer to the responsorial antiphons and psalms in the liturgy of the Word in the Eucharistic liturgy.

There are no religious experiences that are not rooted in gestures such as the upright or prostrate posture of prayer. In sacramental celebrations, faith is at work in each person's body through gestures, postures, words and silences. The sacramentality of faith requires bodily involvement. We relate to God according to our bodily reality.\*\*

In liturgy Spred's effort is not to meddle with a rite but to find a means of communication in bodily signs that are extended and stretched to perceive and to express the wondrous awe of moving with Christ's great act of sacrifice and in turn to rejoice in His gift returned back to us. A parish Spred family mass is an attempt to know and to celebrate a wondrous act in a way that persons with intellectual disabilities "know" the Mystery.

The regulations in the *Directory for Masses with Children* stress the need for participation through gestures and bodily postures. There must be an opportunity for internal participation and festive, fraternal and meditative celebrations. \*\*\*

Within a Eucharistic celebration gestures are used in the entrance procession, the liturgy of the Word, during the responsorial psalm, the preparation of the altar, the presentation of the gifts, the communion procession, the recession procession.

The gestures and movements are not mime, not dance, not ballet, nor theater but actions choreographed to an audience that knows more quickly by motion than by sound. It is not sign language, as persons with hearing loss use - conveying content by signs that match cognitive material. Rather these movements are meant for the eyes and spirits more than for the ears. Reverent bodily motion can cleanse our windows of perception so as to see the world anew.

Surrendering ourselves to respectful movement requires the selflessness of prayer. Watching a solemn bodily movement, it sinks into us, its rhythm, imagery, its meaning. When we give our attention to a reflective movement that speaks to us, we lose a sense of self and enter what T.S. Eliot describes as "the still center of the wheel of time."

Gesture - not rote nor mechanical - is a movement of the body to express an interior attitude. During the liturgy of the Word, motion can be dynamic, or clashing as a group of persons fuse into a kind of sculpture, becoming as it were one person from many. Motion can be measured, yet open and loose. A movement opens a door to deeper appreciation of inexpressible emotions inherent in words. Motions express a certain jubilation of the heart or the dark shadows of suffering; even grief. However, during the liturgy of the Word, movements have a guide: the scriptural texts. The movements are modified by the tone suggested by adjectives, actions by verbs along with the overall tone of the piece. So in preparation for gestures and movement in the liturgy of the Word, Spred catechists study the verbs, the nouns and the adjectives that lend themselves to movement.

In all these gestures and movements there is an important role played by music. It must enhance the mood, the tone. It must support the gestures. It must give rhythm to movements. In this way the assembly sings in prayer as gestures and movements are expressed for the benefit not only of those with disabilities but for the benefit of all. The music carries the liturgy forward as the assembly becomes one in voice and spirit. The catechists and liturgists who are familiar with the music allow their gestures and movements to move into the realm of the spirit.



**CATECHESIS**

Catechists and liturgists guided by the Word express its content in motion. So they need to both understand the Word and movement. An interpreter of the Word moves interpersonally- as though there is an audience of one: the Father - and yet haunted like the author of Ecclesiastes, "It was beyond me. What exists is far reaching; it is deep, very deep: who can find it?" (Ec.7:23-24)

Repetition is sometimes used, or echoes. The synchronized movement of arms, legs, heads or torsos of a group can be arresting. Practice is essential. Sometimes a dialectical tension, a sense of opposition or interaction, point-counterpoint, hesitation can become an exclamation point. Communication is the beginning, the middle and the end of the effort to enhance and deepen faith through motion.

Motions can swing and glide, be abruptly frozen, or like trees standing or walking or falling, moving back and forth like willow tree branches swaying in the wind. All this is not so much sight seeing as sight absorbing guided by the Word of God.

In both catechesis and liturgy there are leaders who move in and out of both modes of communication to announce the Good News of the Father's love to our friends. The leaders search for ways to proclaim the Word and express it in movement. There is an interior struggle that is resolved by experimenting with dignity and reverence. Word communicates content, relationship. Words can be juridical, formal, impersonal, exterior, flat and boring, while motion, bodily movement can be poetic, imaginative, expressive, even poignant.

There are some of our friends who understand the sounds of words, their emotional tone, the meter and cadence. But there are those who do not understand or realize the content of words. There are those who grasp the language of movement without word. There are those who grasp the inner sentiment of the motion without understanding the word.

During the catechesis there is a time for the liturgical evocation. The catechists draw on the memories that are alive from recent liturgies. Proclaiming the Word in the liturgy is simply to mean what you say. This secure memory is evoked during catechesis to help all to deepen their faith.

At times the liturgical evocation is the remembrance of the movements and gestures that were used in a particular liturgy. The gestures are recalled, recaptured, made present, significant as they move us all into communion with Jesus, the Christ in worship.

Catechists and priests need encouragement to relax and to find faith-filled imagination within. This is strange territory: trying to communicate the Word of God to persons with intellectual disabilities. Worship can become real for the seemingly uncomprehending through studied motions. The bodies of priests and catechists become vessels of the Word of God. Symbiotically, children, adults with intellectual impairments become one with the community - in a sense they lead us- with a simplicity required in catechesis and worship.

Rev. James H. McCarthy  
Director, Spred Chicago

\*Helene Lubienska de Lenval, *L'Education du Sens Religieux*, Spes, Paris 1945 pg. 159 translated, mth

\*\*Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN.1995 pg.146-155

\*\*\**Directory for Masses with Children*, Introduction, National Conference of Bishops, Washington DC 1975

