

Fingers poised on the too familiar keyboard of my computer, I embarked on the habitual trek through my communications from cyberspace. I dutifully steered the cursor to begin the deletions of some nebulous clutter. Gradually the pile dwindled. Open, read, respond...the rhythm of the new millennium has insinuated itself into the ritual of my day. Suddenly I am delightfully snagged by the gracious content of another message:

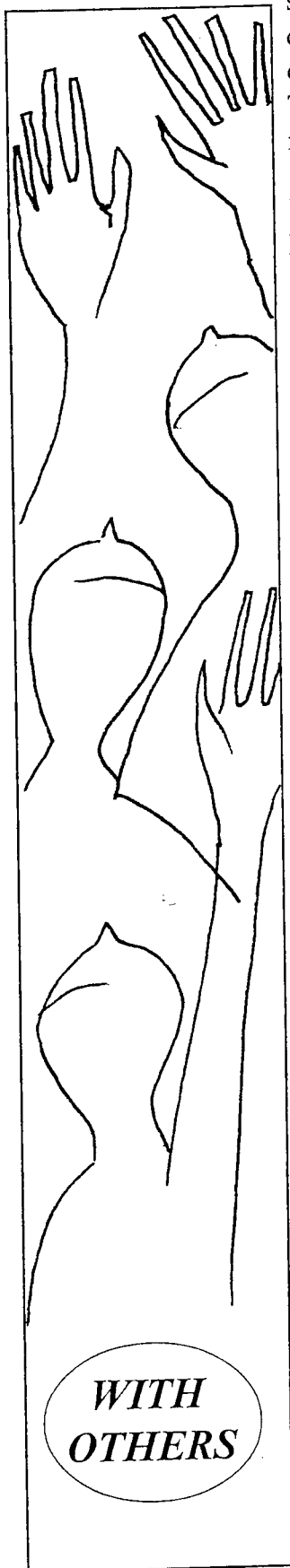
*Dear Julia, Thank you! Thank you! Thank you... for welcoming my son, Andy, into Queen of Angels Spred program. My heart is full of joy having watched my son experience a communion of faith and friendship. Until tonight, I don't believe that I have ever felt or understood that Andy could find this in such a meaningful way. Andy was beaming when he left. He said that he was 'with the angels' tonight. And, of course, the hot chocolate, the gluten free crackers, grapes and cheese were a great ending to an evening full of grace. (You didn't skip a beat, Julia! Thanks) Thank you too, Betty and Megan! Beautiful! Gratefully yours, Rosann*

The march through my mail was suddenly halted. My posture relaxed as I paused to smile at this benevolent outpouring. As I rested in the words, it became obvious to me that this mom had communicated her gratitude before she had retired for the night with the joy of her observation experience still resonating in her heart. Along with her son, Andy, she clung tenaciously to the gift.

Coincidentally, the Scripture passages for the following Sunday Mass focused on gratitude as they recounted two stories of cures from leprosy. The Old Testament passage told of Naaman's deep gratitude and conversion following his miraculous cure in the river Jordan. The Gospel followed with the story of Jesus' cure of the ten lepers. Only one returned to give thanks to God.

The ensuing homily by my pastor focused on the theme of 'resting in the gift'. We were invited to reflect on the notion that, like the nine lepers who never returned to express their gratitude, we are often swept away in the tidal wave of life's busyness to even notice the gifts, much less respond with praise and thanksgiving.

We live in a global village bombarded by negative information. The media world revels in the dark side of life. Bad news sells newspapers and captures the global imagination as television



screens grow to theater proportions. It is difficult to nurture a grateful heart in a dungeon of despair. Yet there is a remedy. The fresh innocence and mindfulness of my young grandchildren coerces me to drink in the fullness of life and hold on tight before the moment steals wantonly by. The Spred process and the pace of my Spred friends remind me to shift gears and slip attentively into the here and now to rest in the gift.

We rush about flitting from one experience to the next forging ahead on the tread mill of life. Emotions rise and fall leaving a vague imprint on our lives as we continue our quest for satisfaction and fulfillment. The gift is obscured by the dust we stir in our relentless conquest. When we finally pause *to smell the roses*, we unleash a wealth of sensation and appreciation that has been dormant far too long. We rest in the gift.

I recently indulged in a visit to the arboretum with two very close friends of mine. We ambled through the spectacle of a glorious autumn day. We talked, we laughed, we ate and drank in the life around us and luxuriated in the close bond we share. Preparing to indulge in a culinary dinner delight, we paused, grasped hands and in singlemindedness rested joyfully, gratefully in the gift.

As I reflect on the unfolding of the Spred catechetical process, I am drawn to the transition from the evocation of the human experience to the liturgical evocation. I realize the delicacy of the endeavor. It is crucial for the leader catechist to allow each person ample time to settle into the heart of the life experience. Symbol lures tenderly. Evocation is a balancing act which relies on patience and intuition. It is not easy to know when the group is settled together on the same emotional plane, yet this is a decisive moment that opens the door to mystery. If the transition is abrupt, all may be lost. The interiorization - the statement of universal feeling - must be clear and simple. Repetition massages the words into the heart of each person. A generous pause allows silence to anchor the group in oneness. Spirits rest together in the gift of felt communion.

The soil is now fertile for a new awareness. The liturgical evocation draws the group more fully into the deep of life. Life emerges a sacramental. The gift becomes sacred. The tonality and prayerful pace of the leader catechist; the reverent attentiveness of the helper catechists situates the Spred partners in a new dimension of reality. We become aware of the presence of Jesus - the mystery of God with us. My life, our life is permeated with the Gift. Life is Baptismal and Eucharistic. It is reconciling and healing. It is enkindled by the Spirit. Life is precious. We rest together in awareness of the Gift.

The liturgical evocation is a reverie in the Gift. It is felt more than it is known. It is at once past and present. It is remembered and lived. It may resonate with an experience of Church or sacrament and at the same time is dependent on the affect of the moment. We gather in our Holy Room just as we gather for Mass with the priest. The ritual intent of one is echod in the other. There is a comingling of liturgy and catechesis. The liturgical evocation embodies the same life dynamic as the human experience and evokes the same emotion. We feel the Presence and relish the moment that we share. Graced silence births a profound awareness of God with us. We rest in the Gift.

When we gather for Mass, the priest invites us to give praise and thanksgiving - to lift our hearts to the Lord. To express gratitude implies relationship. The Eucharistic Prayer affirms God's

unconditional love for us and reminds us of our own faithful response and commitment to one another. Spred communities embody this love exchange. Catechesis draws us to Liturgy. Liturgy returns us to Catechesis. This love cycle should find no conclusion. The destiny is eternal.

As in catechesis, life needs blessed stillness. The feast of Thanksgiving, the season of Advent calls us to nurture a gracious heart. The gift of Spred is all about people who continue to transform the life of the Church.

Our Spred friends alter our lives challenging us into a new way of being. They call us to conversion through their simplicity, honesty, fidelity, vulnerability, trust and pure sense of God. They are the cornerstone of each Spred community. The gift of their faith is immeasurable and inspirational.

The parents, the ambassadors for Spred, instill us with overwhelming appreciation. Juggling hectic schedules and extraordinary hurdles, parents recognize the precious seed of faith which longs for nourishment within the soul of the child. Without their persistence and spirit of righteousness, Spred would lose its voice. Many a parent has birthed a Spred community. The patience, insight and passion are a gift.

The catechists bond as family to form the spiritual leaven and haven of catechesis for their Spred partners. The covenant is serious and the responsibility precious. It involves a new mindset and a conversion of spirit. It is both exciting and overwhelming. Spred catechists agree to a rigorous formation and training process that fuels their passion and bolsters their commitment. They often find themselves positioned as advocates to the parish and deanery. They clear meeting spaces, move furniture, procure funds. Some have surpassed 25 or 30 years of dedication. A special salute goes to those with the insight to groom disciples to insure the longevity of Spred in their parish and breathe promise into the future. And there are also the special forces of catechists who compound their dedication as trainers, animators, retreat coordinators, hosts for observers and visionaries. The families of these faithful volunteers make sacrifices as well to uphold and support the commitment. They too deserve a special place in the litany of treasures.

Distinct recognition must extend to those courageous leaders who took the risk to travel to Chicago to learn the skills to yeild strong Spred programs in new frontiers both across the United States as well as countries far beyond our borders. They embody the gift of vision and fortitude.

A debt of gratitude is due to the Archdiocese of Chicago for the ongoing endorsement and sustenance of the Spred Agency fo more than 40 years. And to Queen of Angels parish and St. Francis de Sales Parish in Lake Zurich for upholding regional Spred centers which bring resources closer to our families and catechists. We must highlight the gift of priests, deacons, and directors of religious education who understand and support this most necessary endeavor to 'be Church' for all in a respectful and compassionate way. As we enter into the season of giving and receiving, I invite all to seek out a nook of solitude; relive the graced moments of your life; and attune your soul to the miracle of the Gift. Jesus says to all of us today,

*Withdraw to a quiet place, rest in the Gift, rest in me.*

Julia Hess

Chicago Spred Community Religious Worker

