

There are many Spred Centers in the Archdiocese of Chicago and many in other dioceses and countries serving persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Persons are gathered by communities of catechists in four age groupings, 6-10, 11-16, 17-21, 22+.

Each Spred Center experiences the same method of catechesis. Each has the same goal: to grow in faith, to experience communion with Jesus who leads us in praise to the Father through the Holy Spirit. Each is prepared to participate in the liturgical life of the parish.

Wouldn't it be a powerful experience to catch the spirit of each group, to observe each with its own uniqueness and yet, its similarity to every other group, all seeking to enter the mystery of God's love.

Sharing the same method and mentality makes it possible for us to be one in spirit. Our faith friends with disabilities can move from one age grouping to another and find a new home to continue growing in faith because we are all on the same path.

Many prospective catechists come to observe Spred sessions. They come to experience the way of knowing and growing in faith that is Spred. Many catch the mentality of Spred and decide to belong to a catechist community in their parish.

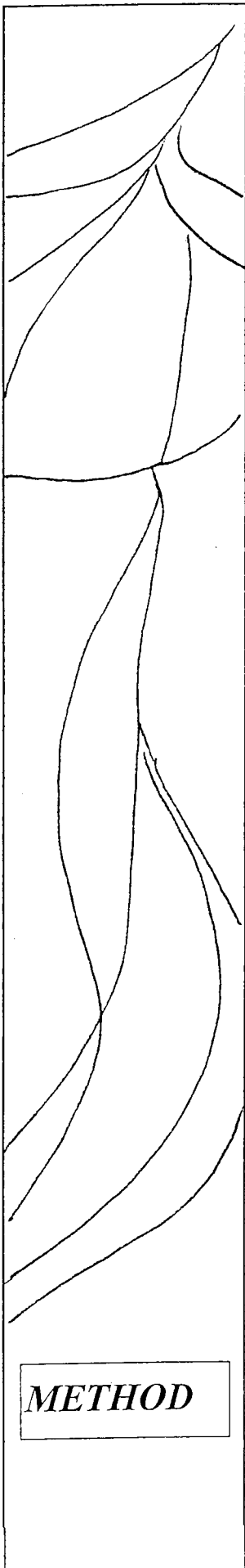
When we were introduced to the symbolic method of catechesis we were helped to realize the need to understand the importance of a catechetical mentality.¹

It is a faith mentality, a kind of fire, an interior light that penetrates, invigorates and brings growth. It is a spirit that is given to us but when it is expressed, it is manifested as our own spirit, our own fire, our own light.

It is a witnessing mentality. The catechist is not a teacher, rather the catechist gives witness to this vital spirit of faith. Such a catechist is in a state of personal friendship with God and has a fire to give, to extend to others.

It is an explicit ecclesial mentality. A catechetical group is witness to the faith by its very way of being.

It is a prophetical mentality. The catechist is one who announces the Good News, one who celebrates the Word. The message is the word of God, the person of Christ.



A catechetical mentality is a missionary mentality. The catechist has an official mission in the Church: he or she is sent by the church to gather together the catechetical community and to guide the christian people. To carry out this mission each must be penetrated with something like fire. One must have the spirit of one who is relating in love with God in Christ and with his brothers and sisters. A catechetical mentality is essentially a spirit of personal friendship.

A catechetical mentality is an existential mentality. The difficulty is that we cannot explain a mentality; we live a mentality. We can try to describe the way of being of one who catches the mentality. Symbolic catechesis is a spirit to be lived more than it is something to be explained.

Spred catechists are helped to experience the spirit of Spred beginning with their first gathering with other interested persons in their parish. As they choose a role they are helped to understand with their minds and hearts the what, the why and the how of symbolic catechesis. They are strongly encouraged to observe sessions during the time of their training experiences. Those who animate and train others and those in groups that are observed, are catechists who have grasped the mentality and can communicate the spirit of personal friendship, the spirit of faith to others.

The catechist preparation session situates the members of each group in the method. From within this experience a kind of fire develops so that our spirit of faith, our fire, our light, is revealed to those we serve. We want to be consciously living the mystery that will be the core of our experience each time we gather others to be with us. Having such an experience prior to each session with our friends strengthens the community to be a sign of God's love.

In our catechist community we are guided through the reading of a literary selection which helps us to become present to a personal experience. We seek to be in communion with what is fundamental in our lived reality. When such communing takes place each person's human experience becomes symbolic. In the sacred space of the celebration room, with the Book of the Word as the focus, surrounded by a candle and fresh flowers each catechist in the community shares his and her evocation. The fundamental dynamism of each lived experience is received in silence. Our personal sharing creates a bond among us, a spirit of personal friendship, and readies each of us to discover the presence of God within our experience as it unfolds symbolically.

Following our sharing the leader catechist directly and explicitly evokes the faith of the Church where the priest gathers all around the altar to hear the word of God. We become aware of Christ present in our lived experience. We gain deeper awareness of our life in the Church where we are gathered in Jesus who prays to the Father.

We experience being the people of God. Our human experience is illumined with presence. We listen to the Word of God, proclaimed by the leader and hear God speaking to us. We live together in communion with the Father in Christ. We are ready to receive the message of Jesus given to each by the leader catechist; Jesus says to you today, We sing a song of praise and then rest in silence together.

We look forward with joy and anticipation to greet our friends with disabilities, wanting to live with them the mystery of God's love.

METHOD

As we experience symbolic catechesis year after year we come to realize that the Word of God is rooted in our life experience. I remember Fr. Mesny saying that nothing in our lives needs to be a stranger to Revelation. I also remember him saying that "sometimes those we catechize are better than we are in grasping the significance of community which is the immediate welcoming place among us and in us for the presence of God."

With that in mind it is of value to reflect on the environment in which we welcome our friends for catechesis. Everything that happens in the gathering of the community carries meaning that supports the experience of faith.

We look for signs from our friends that they are happy to gather with us. They come running down the hallway to our meeting room with parents following and trying to keep up. They look into the room smiling when they see the members of the community.

Each catechist tries to be seated at a table, engaged in the work they have chosen before their friend arrives. A place for their friend is always available next to them.

The environment has soft lamp lighting, the kind found in a place of welcome, inviting quiet conversation. Tables and chairs are of good quality and there is room for four persons to gather at each table. Cabinets surround the room and are filled with attractive materials. As we prepare the environment we ask ourselves, "Does this dwelling place radiate who we are and what we wish to communicate? Does it foster an awakening of something interior?"

The goal during our time of preparation is to be together in friendship. We focus on the task of becoming still within, so that we can be aware and live the reality of belonging to a community of faith. As we become concentrated with work that opens us to beauty, peace and harmony, we lose the busy quality of our life and become aware of our being in friendship. We want to be together. We look forward to the time when we will be called to form a circle and express our desire to be together in the sacred space of the celebration room. Some of us have little or no spoken language but all are able to communicate. We learn to hear what each has to say and we support the desire of each to belong.

The way of being of the catechist community is best communicated to others by observation. Observation has been part of the Spred model from the beginning because we knew that words are inadequate when one wants to invite another to experience the symbolic approach or mentality. It is something to be lived. Observers see the effort of the leader catechist to draw each member of the community into a lived event and connect with its energy so as to discover the mystery of life. Observers have the opportunity to live the reality and to join the community in spirit, welcoming the presence of God through what they have lived. They are drawn into the experience by the community they are observing. All become missionaries toward the observer, witnessing the fire within, responding to the Word of God, radiating a light that penetrates, invigorates and enables growth. As one observer said recently, "I want to be a catechist to befriend another and to grow in faith together in a community."

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