

One of my favorite sculptures is called **Circle of Friends**. It is a composition of six figures gathered together in a circle. In the middle of the circle is a place for a candle. When the candle is lit, the figures look welded to one another in the soft glow of the light.

I think of this sculpture when I think of my own Spred community of faith. However, we did not all make it into the circle easily. Only one by one was the decision lived out to move into the circle. Only little by little did the egocentricity that goes with a developmental disability such as mental retardation and autism along with various forms of learning problems give way to the desire to belong to the circle.

The first night Bobby showed up, he said in a low voice “I don’t have friends.” He wanted to belong to the circle but he had few skills to know how to make entry. Ironically, it was when he just relaxed and smiled that the sense of belonging seemed to dawn on him.

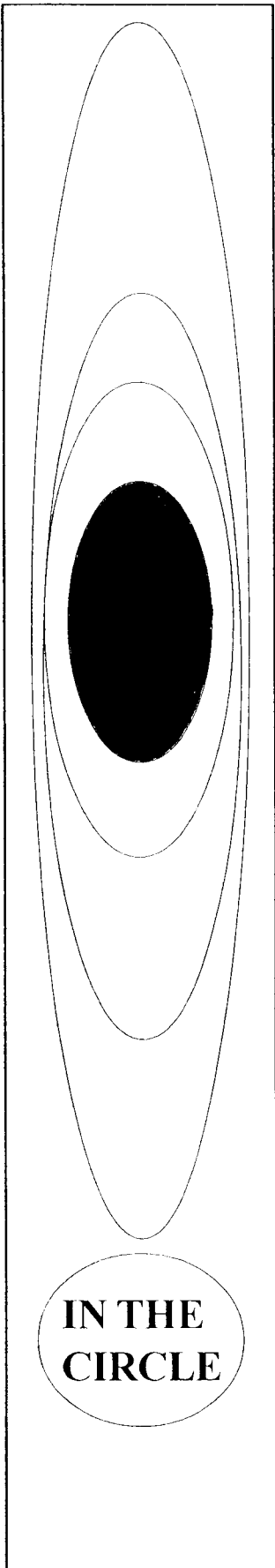
So often I sense that our friends with disabilities are consumed with worry, anxiety and a lack of equilibrium. They seem caught up not only in outside noise but also with inside noise. They try to compete with others but it comes across as a rather feeble effort as their lack of inner security makes their effort seem less than successful. Then fatigue sets in and sullenness replaces their anxious efforts.

Only little by little do they begin to relax in the preparation space that is the way station to the space for catechesis. They need this milieu, as do the catechists, to relax into who they really are. Life on the run gives way to life shifting into focus.

To make this transition, we all need one another. In a strange way, we enter the door into ourselves through the support offered by all the others. Then little by little we are able to be in relationship and offer our own support to the others.

Our basic bond with one another is through our Baptism and Baptism is not self-administered. Others welcome us into a community of faith that is already built up before we arrive on the scene. And so in Spred, the community of adult catechists forms the milieu into which each of our friends is welcomed.

From the early days of Spred, we have avoided referring to the members of Spred as anything



other than **our friends**. Our mission is to build the conditions needed for becoming and remaining friends. Once we are friends, we can reflect the light in the center of our circle. We know that the cultivation of our friendships is the condition for growing in faith - as faith at its core requires the desire and ability for multiple relationships. The core competency for being in Spred is to develop the ability to be friends according to each one's limitations and each one's capacity. To enter into the circle of friends is the first step to being a member of the church. A gathering is the major characteristic of church.

Within the gathering that is the church, each one joins the circle but does not lose their identity. On the contrary, they discover their identity precisely by belonging to the larger body of the church.

When parents present their children for the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Communion, they are trying to make sure that their children can assume the identity of Catholic Christians. They join the circle that lasts forever. That is why the blow is mortal to a family when one member is denied sacramental access because of personal limitations related to a disability. The whole family feels wounded in its identity.

But when a fragile member of the family belongs to the gathering, the whole family is affirmed in its identity within the People of God. They know that our encounter with God goes through our being friends with one another.

In any Spred community of faith there is apt to be tension after the first glow of belonging fades. Subtle alienation can set in. There can be moments of jealousy, anger and aggression. These can be severe even though they seem to erupt from nowhere. Catechists and our friends can be hard pressed to form a reconciling circle that includes the offender who can gradually become aware of the mess and be sorry.

Every year the Sacrament of Reconciliation is built into the Spred calendar. This can be a surprise to those outside the Spred circle. On the one hand, the outsiders can consider our friends to be harmless and angelic. With this sentimental view, they are apt to be in for a surprise if they get close to the Spred community of faith. On the other hand, they can be afraid of our friends because they expect the worst possible behavior. They can be pleasantly surprised when they get close. In any case, those within the community of faith know that they need to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation if they are to stay together and if they are to grow in faith.

When my Spred community of faith celebrates the Sacrament of Reconciliation there are many paradoxes. In general, the usual population recalls past experiences of 'trouble.' But with most of my friends, past and future do not rise to the surface of their awareness. The event is **now**. If we evoke or recall a past event it is to totally relive it. So if we evoke or recall 'trouble' we need to deal with it immediately through reconciliation.

In the general population, the one in 'trouble' does the talking, describing the event and some motivation. But if our friend does not talk, or write, what then? Is he or she less likely to be involved in 'trouble'? Is he or she less a person? Are they less in need of celebrating the merciful love of the Father who makes all things new again?

Reconciliation is not a question of climbing up to God by one's wits but of welcoming the risen Christ into our hearts, our lives, our circle. The reconciled circle, living in the light and having returned to its Baptismal identity fulfills its nature of being the fundamental sacrament, the church.

The function of the sacrament is to restore unity within the person and within the circle of friends. When we celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation, we follow the gathering in the church with a party. As we share food and drink, the atmosphere is quietly and gently peaceful.

What I have learned from celebrating the sacraments and the Eucharistic liturgy with our friends is a new perspective for which I am very grateful. I have learned a whole new appreciation for the reality of the assembly. We are not a gathering of heads. Rational language more or less bounces off this assembly. It is not an assembly that follows the clock either. It has its own rhythm of pacing and attentiveness. It is not an assembly that is content to observe without participating.

It is an assembly compelled to use gestures, not just words. It does well when there is space for silence and time for the slowest one to attend or move. It is an assembly that needs to participate not just watch or listen. If these needs are not respected, parents will be flying out the doors with their children and catechists will be trying to hold off the older ones from countless trips to the washrooms. When the needs of even the slowest one is respected, a new gentleness settles over the gathering.

As the community of faith matures, the fruits of the spirit become manifest. The circle of friends grows in peace. It becomes open to admiration. The friends become generous with one another and with visitors. They are grateful and happy to be together. Little by little a sense of interiority develops within each one. It is a springtime garden that has been cultivated and bears fruit.

After we have celebrated the Sacrament of Reconciliation, we recall the experience of the sacramental celebration in our catechesis during the liturgical evocation. So often, the sacramental celebration is entered into whole heartedly, but our friends do not immediately have the language to talk about the sacrament. They must have the experience before they can develop the language because their language is concrete and refers to what is known in fact before it can be described. Only after a long progression can language in reference to the sacrament take place. This happens in catechesis.

We refer to the catechesis used in Spred as a liturgical catechesis. It not only refers back to an actual experience of liturgy but it gradually develops the aptitude for liturgy. A liturgical catechesis involves a pedagogical use of space, gesture, posture, voice, desire and prayer. Not only does a liturgical catechesis prepare our friends to enter into sacred space and sacred gesture. Each one learns to be attentive to God within the calm of the circle of friends.

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#### References

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