

When we describe the ministry of Spred, we say that everything depends on the mentality of the catechist and the mentality of the community of catechists. Our mentor, Fr. Eucharist Paulhus, helped us to grasp the importance of a symbolic mentality. However, while we know that our friends with disabilities are educable in faith, we still can be left with some anxiety as to what is taking place during our times of catechesis. Here are some notes from his sessions with the Spred staff.

+++

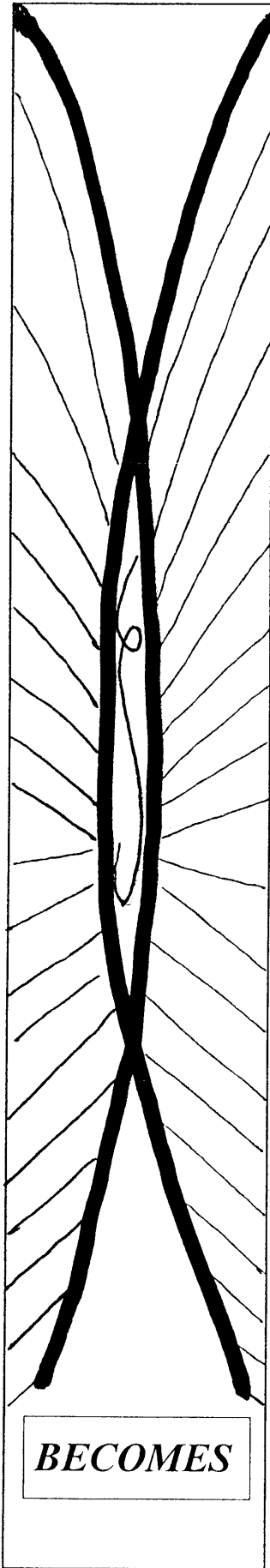
We live in a world of signs. Signs are always in relation to a thing signified. The sign evokes another reality. We need signs to go further and deeper into reality. Still, many signs in the world are only conventional - socially accepted meanings for certain representations - arbitrarily assigned meanings. This means that.

Symbol is the fundamental dynamism of a sign. The sign is full of possibilities, of significance. We call this the intentionality of the sign. With an intentionality in focus, the sign becomes truly a symbol. It explodes with meanings. It makes us live simultaneously on different levels, material, and spiritual. By light, we are really enlightened and at the same time, we can penetrate into spiritual reality. Think of poets. In faith, we can be penetrated by the light of God and we can respond to this light. Light is something dynamic, full of possibilities. Light can take us away and make us live in another dimension, according to our capacity for living and loving. It is possible to find other connections to life and love with all the signs of creation.

If we can affirm that a catechetical mentality is founded upon the possibility to enter into the dynamism of the symbol, then presumedly we can understand the person with intellectual disabilities. There, in the dynamism of the symbol, we meet. So the catechetical mentality is a friendship mentality, a symbolic mentality.

If we have this spirit of friendship, if we are a friend of God and a friend of the person with disabilities, and we are able to go within this dynamism, the symbolic intentionality, then we possess the fundamental disposition to be a catechist. We will find a way to transmit the message of the Gospel, according to the different capacities of children or adults. But, remember, if we are a true friend, we must know our friend well, not in the sense of a kind of superficial knowledge, but we must try to understand the person, to comprehend the person's profound feelings.

The symbolic progression is probably the only means for a person with disabilities to



adhere to the message of faith. Is this person able to go within the dynamism of the symbol? One has to know the person in friendship. Abstract knowledge is not necessary to go within the dynamic of a symbol. Persons with intellectual disabilities can live fully the signs in their dynamism. Values are conveyed not by telling those with disabilities that they are honest, or work well, or are respectful; rather they understand through the signs of actually attaining certain goals. The symbolic function for those of us who can reason about the phenomenon can be helpful, but not necessary.

When we prepare a session for catechesis, alone or with others, we try to see how a person with intellectual disabilities can live a sign in everyday life. When we look for the intentionality of this sign, and when we finally find how the sign can lead a person to the message of God, then we can live the symbolic dynamism - and at the same time, be involved in a reasoning process about the dynamism of the symbol which is now fused with our own dynamism.

Remember, we do not explain a symbol, but we can reason, and discuss on an abstract level the symbol's intentionality. However, we have to stay anchored in everyday life.

Children and adults with disabilities can go within the dynamism of the symbol. They are not involved in abstract or operational thought. And they need not be at the same level - they enter into the process according to each one's capacity. They live through signs, without elaborate reasoning. So the whole being of the persons at different levels of development is activated.

The symbolic function can be understood as the bond that exists between the sign and what is signified. The child does not realize the bond between the sign and the thing signified, but he lives the bond on a dynamic level, according to the intentionality of the sign.

The child lives the reality, plays the reality in a symbiotic way. If the mother smiles, the child smiles. If the mother looks sad, the child looks sad. The child is in union with the mother.

When the child says, "The bird is singing 'Alleluia'". It is his way of being in communion with the spiritual dynamism of the sign. It is a way to talk about praise of God. The world reflects God to whom he adheres. Many people with intellectual disabilities will not be able to develop intellectually beyond this phase. They are fashioned to live really and authentically at a spiritual level, without ever knowing exactly why.

We are talking about a fundamental attitude. The child does not analyze his attitude. He lives as we do when, for example, we are before the Eucharist.

Reasoning will be of great help for our spiritual life - if we are prepared to abandon it to live. The richness of our thought will help us to understand even the symbolic progression but we must, at a certain moment, be willing to sacrifice our intellectual process to live, according to a symbolic mentality, a state of being, a state of living and fundamental attitude.

A child or adult without a reasoning process can live, that is take an attitude according to the dynamism of the sign. He is happy, he is loved, he wants to be a saint, he promises

to live with Jesus forever. The person with intellectual disabilities is organized to live for God, through Christ, under the action of the Holy Spirit, because he is baptized and also, because he can be catechized. He is able to use in a certain way, at a certain point, the symbolic function.

It is not enough to explain the symbolic function. At the highest level of intellectual development, the person is able to see the objective intentionality of a sign, a symbol. This is what St. John of the Cross called, "the fundamental aptitude to signify a thing." This aptitude is reserved to the sign considered only from a symbolic point of view. For example, we can reason about the potentialities of significance of water in relation to life (growing up, passage from death to life) or fire in relation to life. But to grasp the objective intentionality, i.e. the call of the sign, to one's own living dynamism, does not mean that a person must explain a symbol. If he does, the symbol is no more than a thing to be analyzed as a table to be constructed of four legs. The symbolic function, at this level, leads a person only to understand what is the symbol's own dynamism. But when this dynamism is in communion with one's own dynamism, there is nothing to be explained because at this point, a person takes on an attitude, a behavior, a stance.

The person with intellectual disabilities is illuminated by faith according to his capacity, by way of the symbolic function.

The signs will guide him to find God through his Son, under the action of the Holy Spirit according to his charism.

With the traditional catechetical method, persons with intellectual disabilities are not educable in the religious field because religious education becomes a question of learning and not living. The spiritual is confused with the abstract. Learning will be essential for those with intellectual disabilities, but the person learns in living. Even if he cannot play with abstractions he can live a loving relationship with God.

The person with intellectual disabilities is very close emotionally to the little child who needs his mother. Emotional dependency of many children with emotional problems is a question of functioning. The catechist needs to take care. The danger is to love the person in order to love one's own self. This is an immature affection.

Many things are lived by children, as it were, by a kind of osmosis. They absorb the sign of God's love found through the affection of the adult, mature, catechist. A catechetical unfolding or progression is based upon a relationship founded upon symbol.

There are no magic means to help a person with intellectual disabilities to mature in faith. The catechist must attend to the person of each child. "Every infant, child, adult, is first of all a person" said Fr. Henri Bissonnier (the mentor of Fr. Paulhus). The faith of a person with intellectual disabilities can grow, but it depends on the growth of the catechist's faith through the human and symbolic means adequate to feed it.



Rev. James H. McCarthy
Director, Spred Chicago