

During the summer holidays I spent ten days in a little house on the east coast of Scotland with three other sisters. It was a delightful experience. We shared meals, prayers, walks along the lovely coast, the Wimbledon tennis finals on TV and even the World football. It was amazing how the enthusiasm of one captured the others. Yet, there was space for each one to explore her own interest or go off by herself. Altogether, it was such a refreshing and enjoyable time. It made me think a lot about how we were present to one another. There was a closeness and yet a freedom.

This made me think about how we are present to one another, to our friends and to the Other at our Spred sessions. This presence has many characteristics such as fidelity, prayerfulness, a kind of silence, attentiveness and a special listening quality. Let's explore these more carefully.

Faithful Presence

One thing about God we know for sure is that God is faithful. We have the words of Jesus: "I am with you. I am with you always." As we reflect on our own lives, we know that in all the good times and the bad times, God has always been there.

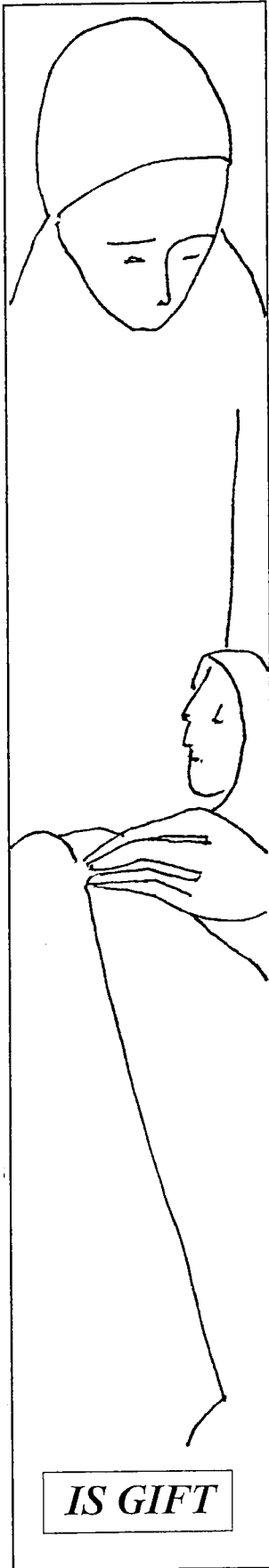
In Spred we make a commitment, a promise to be there at the Catechist Preparation Session and the integrated session, a commitment to a person and a commitment to a small community of faith. We try to be faithfully there setting up sacred space and clearing up. This fidelity in little things as well as the big, creates a happy community supporting one another in love.

In Spred we are faithful above all to our friends. St. Augustine says of friendship: "We do not instigate our friendships: God does. They are gifts of God's grace, workings of God's providential, infinitely creative and sometimes very surprising love in our lives." "Friendships," he continues, "are not something we run after, they are graces to unwrap." 1 In Spred we are aware of the amazing results of these friendships. They draw something out of us that keeps us from being too self-centered: they teach us lessons in trust, caring and openness and they educate us in those mysteries of love, suffering, loss and hope. Our faithfulness reaps much fruit.

Welcoming Presence

The friendships we form within a Spred group are often forged simply because of our being there week after week. Our friends show their appreciation most strongly in the welcome they give. The Activity Catechist has the privilege of being the first person to welcome, usually the other

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catechists and then the friends. This welcome speaks heart to heart. It sets the tone for the evening. It is quiet, warm, gentle, and sincere. It communicates a deep respect and a warm feeling of delight in the fact that the other person is simply there. We all know that uncomfortable feeling of being ignored or not noticed at a function, an experience which highlights the importance of being there before our friends to greet them. Doing this we express our readiness and serenity, our contentment and at-home-ness with the place of preparation. Gradually this welcoming presence dissolves into a community-shared experience of nurture for the inner self.

Attentive Presence

The goal of every Spred session is to encounter Jesus. As helper catechists we must therefore be attentive to the particular needs of our friends so that we can support them, especially in the celebration room at the evocation of the human experience. It means gradually becoming aware of gestures, eye movements, and body language that indicate how our friends are responding. It also means being attentive to myself and to the way I encourage, hold back or guide a response. One of our friends who is very articulate has a special skill going off at a tangent when it comes to sharing in the celebration room. Her catechist has become so attentive and sensitive to this trait that she now excels in the skill of guiding Molly to share appropriately.

Again this attentiveness is exercised very much around the agape table as we become aware of the needs of others, making our sharing so symbolic of the Eucharistic gathering. When we look at that Last Supper Table, it is Jesus we see being attentive to others, washing their feet and sharing Himself totally.

In our attentiveness we will discover that we receive the gift of presence from our friends and catechists and this in turn will transform us.

Prayerful Presence

Our presence at Spred should be prayerful. "Prayer", said the poet "is watching for the kingfisher. All you can do is be there where he is likely to appear and wait." 2 Our presence at Spred is a bit like that. It is prayerful expectation.

At enrichment for activity catechists this year we talked about the prayerfulness of the preparation phase: how our working with activities is not childish because it is not about an end product. It is an act of contemplation; a nourishing of the inner self. If we are chatting, we are distracted; there is not inner peace, no prayerfulness.

In the celebration room my body language reveals this inner self in my prayerful entering into the gestures for the song. Our friends are very good at reading this. They understand gestures better than words, a fact that is born out in our Spred Family Masses when a group leads the responsorial Psalm with prayerful gestures. The whole assembly is caught up, transported, drawn together in praise of God. A similar experience happens in the celebration room after the song when we rest in quiet music. We invite our friends through our sensitivity into a place of sanctuary. The author Michael Downey writes beautifully about gesture: "We speak through our body language, our gesture, our clothing. We speak through the glance of an eye that comforts or condemns, through dance, ritual, celebration. Throughout our lives, from infancy to old age, we are 'speechifying', expressing. God too communicates, 'speechifies', expresses Himself

directly in Jesus, the Christ. The Word of God Incarnate.”³ In our prayerful presence to one another our senses are sensitized. We SMELL the fragrance of being. We FEEL the touch of silence. We REJOICE in the chorus of silence. We BEHOLD the beauty of each other. We TASTE the infinite in life’s glow.

Listening Presence

At each catechist preparation session we enter into the goal by listening to an extract from literature which in turn leads us to listen to our own story. “Share a time when you received support from another: share an experience of friendship that nourished you in some way: share a way in which you share your gifts with others.” Such promptings lead us to re-member, to spend time listening to ourselves and re-capturing moments when we know there have been people there when we needed them, aware of deep companionship, and of how blessed we have been in life. This is a great skill which is honed session after session and which causes deep gratitude to arise within. It is a discovery of God’s love in the common events of everyday life, in the preciousness of the ordinary. “The true God can reveal His true self only in the human and this means in the very warp and weft of our unique humanness and day to day lives.” The author Ruth Burrows continues, “The treasure of divine love is all around us.”⁴ To recognize and discern this we need to reflect and listen.

Then there is the privilege of listening to other catechists, receiving their sharing into our hearts without comment or judgement. This listening is so nourishing. It “opens our eyes to see and our ears to hear,” in a very different way. We are deeply moved by the courage, faith, and strength of others.

At our integrated session, the circle widens and we hear the sharing our friends offer. Recently I heard a beautiful story. A friend shared that her catechist was the best friend she had ever had in her whole life. How moving and how deep the insights we receive.

There are so many opportunities in Spred to cultivate the art of listening to silence - at the preparation, around the Holy Book, in the quiet after the song. We grow to feel at home there and gradually appreciate what a famous author once said: “In silence God is heard; in silence worshipped best.” We learn slowly to nurture this silence not only of the lips and of the heart but more urgently the mind. The skill of finding the right activity that will help both me and my friend achieve this silence of the mind is well worth cultivating because silence is not absence but presence. Like Elijah in the cave, we will find that God is here in the sound of sheer silence.

Our presence cannot be all these things all the time but we do begin to realize that simply being there at Spred - welcoming, attentive, listening and prayerful - brings us into the real Presence. What a gift to give one another and to our friends.

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1. Paul J. Wadell, Becoming Friends, Brazos Press, 2002
2. Esther de Waal, Lost in Wonder, Canterbury Press, 2003
3. Michael Downey, Altogether Gift, Orbis Books, 2000
4. Ruth Burrows, Essence of Prayer, Burn & Oates, 2006

