



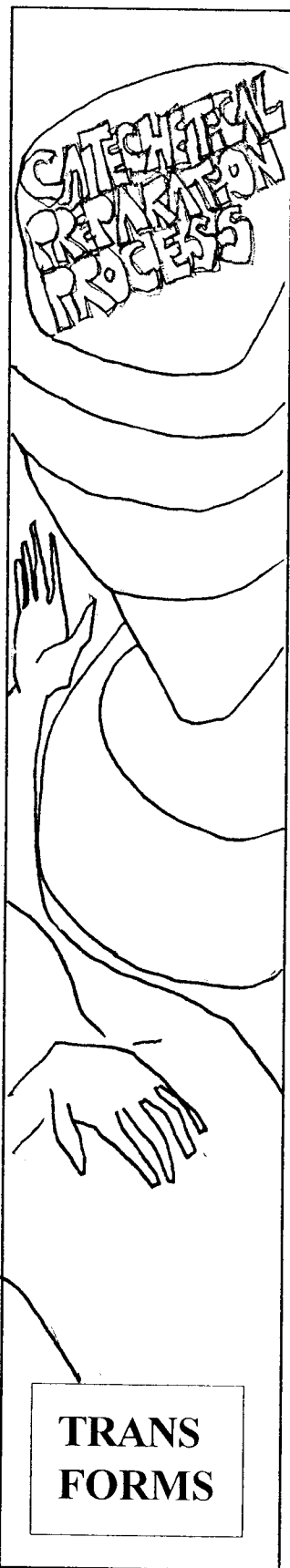
The feast of the Epiphany and the closing of the Christmas season finds me hoping and praying that the mystery we have celebrated will continually be the transforming energy that helps us to discover the manifestation of God’s mercy and love in all of creation, in the life we share each day.

For many Spred communities of faith the year is half over. The core team and helper catechist training courses have been completed. Enrichment seminars, liturgy workshops, reflection weekends lie ahead as a means of supporting the work and extending the insight of Spred catechists into the method of symbolic catechesis and its relationship to liturgy with persons who have special needs.

To observe Spred catechesis is probably the finest way to grasp the significance of what is meant by the experience of the mystery of faith. Observation for a new Spred catechist is essential so that all that has been heard in training sessions can take root and become a natural way of being in one’s community of faith. Observation gives one confidence and courage to be a catechist and want to work with other catechists to develop and sustain a community of faith. One sees, but more important, one senses in the community a transforming energy that attracts and guides friends with special needs.

Every Spred community of catechists who welcomes a new person is in a state of transition. It takes time to form relationships, to trust, to be able to share oneself, to be able to know by observing and guiding a new friend with disabilities. Role training gives one the opportunity to understand the goal of the catechesis and the means used to reach the goal. Each catechist is invited to enter a process that calls for trust and selflessness in view of the need to be transparent. The desire to be a faith friend through the simple witness of one’s life is foremost among the qualifications of the catechist. When all are able to say, “yes” to the process, the experience of sessions becomes fruitful, revelatory.

The call to reflect and share life experience as a necessary component of one’s role comes as a surprise to some who have thought of faith education as ‘learning about’ what we believe. For many years there was no possibility for persons with developmental disabilities to participate in faith formation. There was no understanding that there needed to be different models for the variety of stages of development among persons and that everyone is educable in faith depending on one’s approach to faith.



The energy that transforms us and gives us the courage to be a sign of presence for others develops in the catechist preparation session. Spred catechists agree to participate in a preparation session the week prior to meeting with their friends who have special needs. Each person takes responsibility to become personally invested in the goal of the session. "The goal of this session is to become aware..." is the usual script of a session and is followed by a naming of the particular aspect of the mystery which is the focus of the session. The goal expresses the theological core of the session, the intentionality. What follows the reading of the goal as catechists sit together in a circle, leads to *the experience of the goal and the intentionality*.

A short literary reading initiates us into the sign of the mystery. The spirit of the reading is in harmony with the goal of the session. Since a story often holds many avenues for exploration the author of the session presents a brief summary that capsulizes a particular direction. A question is posed. Each catechist is asked to enter the solitude of his own being. The task is to settle into and re-visit an experience, re-remembering it, re-living the affect that it holds. Time is needed and given to this very important and sometimes very challenging work.

Following the period of reflection which lasts at least twenty minutes, catechists gather together in a sacred space around the Book of the Word. Each articulates the fruit of their reflection, a personal experience. One's personal story is shared as a gift and is received in sacred silence. Since the sharing is a response to the question posed there exists a common thread that connects every story. Sharing from one's inner space creates an atmosphere of reverence that bonds us together as a community.

The sharing resembles poetry or a visual work of art. It reveals the mystery of the person, the mystery of life. It prepares us to discover the epiphanus presence of God as the session unfolds with the liturgical and biblical evocations leading to the summit of the experience, the proclamation of the message of Jesus.

There is sometimes a struggle with the call to journey inward. Since the journey is so essential to the Spred community's ability to catechize, to grow and endure we continually try to be aware of factors that can sabotage the efforts of a community to experience the process of interiorization.

The literary selection in the catechist preparation session and the preparation process that precedes the catechesis with the total community provide motivation and guidance for the members of the community to enter the process of interiorization. Everything that encompasses these two invitations is important and either supports or hinders the movement toward an experience of the goal. Everything matters. The prepared environment is essential. It includes the arrangement of the furniture and essential materials, the lighting, the temperature, sights, sounds, and silences, movement, a spirit of welcome and every word spoken. All are charged with the possibility of helping us toward a new way of seeing life. All are potentially able to lead us to discover the ongoing revelation of God's love in our midst.

The temptation is to avoid or short circuit the personal work that prepares us to experience the mystery of God. Some would try to rely on the spoken word alone and discount the power of witness, that intangible sense of the sacred embodied in those who are alive with the sense of God's presence. Some would discount the ability of our friends with developmental disabilities to connect to mystery through what they live. Experience proves that in an environment of welcome the spirit of the catechist community is the sanctuary toward which friends with disabilities gravitate. There they are able to enter the process of interiorization and grow in faith.

We prepare an environment for preparation when we meet with our special friends. We gather materials that will help us to concentrate and attend, ones that have the power to awaken our spirit. After a warm greeting with each person in the community we settle into work without much conversation since we need to attend to our self preparation. Music that has a sense of interiority supports our work. Socialization and play would entertain but not help us to be present to the spirit within. As we work and enjoy being together we sense our belonging and our ability to participate.

I liken the process of preparation and interiorization to the experience of reading or writing poetry because poetry calls one to connect with one's spirit and to gain new insight from living beneath the surface. Entering into a poem or writing poetry requires discipline and often results in pure delight and a sense of transformation.

Robert Waldron, delineates the relationship between the poem and the reader. He says, "the poet and the reader become one in an act of attention... After reading a poem... we allow it to sink into us.... Epiphany is an ever present possibility."1

Waldron speaks of the reader and the poem becoming a hermitage where God has the opportunity to speak to us through the lectio divina of the poet's experience and art. 2

The literary selection in the catechist preparation session creates the opportunity for each catechist to enter the work of interiorization in view of belonging to the community whose mission is to be a sign of the manifestation of God with us.

The preparation process with our friends who have special needs relies on the presence of a prepared environment. The essential component of this environment is the spirit of the catechist community witnessing its desire to become ready through concentrated activity to move to the sacred space for catechesis where all can discover the presence of God together.

Sr. Susanne Gallagher sp
Spred Staff, Chicago

1. "The Spiritual Eye of Attention: Poetry and The Spiritual Life", by Robert Waldron, Spiritual Life Vol. 44 #2 , 1997

2. Ibid

