



**THROUGH
GESTURE**

Recently I was reminded of the importance of gesture. It was at a funeral Mass for a twenty-seven year old man with Down Syndrome. He had been part of his parish Spred group for many years. He had lost his battle of several years with leukemia. The church was full - with parishioners, all his friends from St. Rose workshop, El Valor, and Special Olympics, not to mention his many friends from Spred. He was a big man. His pastor called him his 'bodyguard'. The bishop of the vicariate was present along with four priests who concelebrated with the pastor.

After the first reading, the musician played and sang "El Senor es mi Pastor", Psalm 23. All his friends, his mother, catechists - about twenty - arose with a certain spontaneity and created a circle around his sacred remains in the casket. Slowly they began to move. They made simple gestures in harmony with the tempo of the music. Arms outstretched, they accompanied the psalm. They brought their arms down acknowledging that he had come from the Father and then moved their arms up as far as they could lifting him up, returning him to the Father, led by the Good Shepherd.

Everyone in the church, the assembly, the family and the celebrants were absorbing a different kind of language, the language of gesture.

This was a riveting scene. The impact of this young man's life, its summation in this memorable scene runs deep and lingers. It was a searing experience of belonging for the whole parish.

In this moment, liturgy and catechesis were one. It was not strange for this is what happens in our Spred catechetical gatherings, in our liturgical catechesis using the Method Vivre.

The Method Vivre requires the use of gestures, the use of motions of the body or limbs as a means of expression and cognition. Gestures are an integral if not an essential part of this catechesis. Gestures express or emphasize an idea, a sentiment, an attitude. They make us aware that everything is in motion. The earth circles around the sun, marking our days and nights and seasons. Nothing is static. Everything is movement. The inner and outer solar systems spin through space and we with them.

There is more than meets the eye when our friends with disabilities do gestures in catechesis. In the preparation phase of Spred, there are many gestures. When the friend arrives, the activity



catechist guides the person to every other person in the group to extend a greeting. Catechists have been settling into an activity prior to the friends arrival. Now hands are clasped, eyes meet. To relate to another is a conscious activity. Then as all sit quietly working on an activity, all are beginning to focus. Quietly working on an activity is a quiet gesture, but it can lead to a full moment of abundance. It says that one is becoming involved with the work at hand, losing oneself in an activity. The helper catechist sends out a message of attending behavior, modeling the way a material is used.

In the second phase of catechesis, the leader catechist evokes a human experience. Evocation demands work by the leader accompanied by each helper catechist. What transpires is that the momentum of an object (consciousness or concentration) can change only if an outside action influences it; the amount and direction of that change are directly proportional to the outside force. Evocation - the force - is not instruction. Rather evocation elicits a response in the memory of each one in the group. There is a paucity of vocabulary for many of our friends. That being the case, it appears as a special kind of poverty in comprehending words and phrases that we use in common speech, let alone the language used in scripture. Concrete operational thought narrows everything down to how everything that is said applies to oneself. This is why a picture, gestures, or acting out by the leader catechist is so helpful in conveying meaning, especially during the biblical and liturgical evocations. During the process, our friends see themselves involved as though looking in a mirror. Everything comes back to them.

The law of reaction is at play - for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. This phenomenon cannot always be controlled. We do not know what is being triggered by evocation in the memory of the other person. If it is truly a symbolic reaction, it could be a movement in the opposite direction from where the leader is trying to lead the group. The leader catechist is leading everyone on a journey, a story of personal import but still easily identifiable and recognized by everyone gathered. In the Method Vivre, the leader catechist uses a skill, like gravity, the pull, the acceleration of movement, the attraction of minutiae within the evocation of human experience toward the goal, the message of a given session.

Aristotle in the fourth century B.C. wrote in "De Anima" that there are five human senses: sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch. A recent author, Scott McCredie, ¹ disputes this position and would elevate **balance** into this canon. It is an hypothesis but one not easily dismissed.

Balance is necessary for well-being and survival. It has a surprising relationship to human cognition. McCredie argues that balance "may prove to be the most primary - as in primordial, life-sustaining, essential - of all the senses." To keep track of our bodies in space and counteract the substantial force of gravity, the central nervous system is constantly gathering, integrating and coordinating information from three separate sensory inputs:

- specialized cells in the joints and alongside the muscles that tell us how our limbs are positioned
- the cavity organs of the inner ear that tell us how our head is moving
- and, of course, our eyes.

This three-part scheme is necessary because two legged creatures are rather awkwardly engineered. McCredie says, "The act of balancing a mass as large as a human body over a base as small as

two human feet is exceptionally demanding. It's roughly equivalent to trying to balance a triangular object on one of its points; the natural tendency is for gravity to push it over." After citing several examples of "extreme equilibrium" such as Karl Wallenda and his high wire skills, he forewarns that the rest of us could be mowed down with falls. He suggests balance training.

There are many instances of children and adults with intellectual disabilities who are troubled with poor balance - those with motor difficulties, those in wheel chairs, those with cerebral palsy, Parkinson's disease as well as elderly friends and catechists. In the three phases of the Spred session, the preparation phase, the catechesis itself and the celebration concluding the session, cognition and expression by way of gesture and balance are at work in embedding the gospel message in us.

In the group personal expression, following the delivery of the message, "Jesus says to you today" by the catechist, it is a challenge for many to catch the rhythm and tempo of the music. This is where the leader catechist or someone musically skilled can help a great deal by establishing leadership. In my group the leader catechist frequently adds to the arm movements. While holding hands, we -twelve people- walk slowly in a circle. Legs are exercised. This effort at mobility is not a small feat for many. Balance is in play along with expressing and reinforcing meanings. Gestures can be abundantly variable but they are all pulled together by the jubilation of the message. The goal, the intentionality, the magnetic draw of the session dictates the quality, the intent and extent of the gestures.

In the Agape, the sharing of food, following the catechesis, coordinating the tasks to prepare the table can seem so matter of fact, yet can be a real achievement for some. Extending their arms with various objects, table mats, glassware, silverware, while moving legs around in order to set the table can take a great deal of concentration and balance. It is the activity catechist who structures the materials, organizes the delivery system of pairing friends and catechists with given tasks to beat off chaos. In our departure circle, the twelve of us join hands again and sing "Shalom, Oh My Friends". We swing our arms and bodies, we bond.

The movements to the Sunday lectionary readings by parish adult catechists are an extension of the work of catechesis. There is a kind of muscle and skin memory that catechists speak of in remembering how they participated in certain scriptural readings by using gestures. Emphasizing again that in the very expression there is cognition.

In deductive learning we first learn the principles and then apply those principles in action. In inductive learning (Method Vivre) we learn from actions placed and then remembered. Action first and then realization.

The experience of the funeral Mass of the Resurrection for Moises Medina, the gestures of catechists and friends was a moment of validation of the work of catechesis. It had an intentionality of somber joy for a full assembly, held together by the gospel message. He who is risen draws all things to Himself.

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I Balance, In Search of the Lost Sense, by Scott McCredie, Little Brown and Company, as reviewed in the New York Times Book Review by Daniel B. Smith, August 19, 2007

