



Years ago, there was an eleven year old boy, named Carlos, in my little Spred community of faith. Carlos had autism. His disability manifested itself in his inability to connect with anyone in the room. He would wander from place to place in the environment. On his way, he would bump into people and chairs with the same frozen look. After trying everything we could think of to connect with him, we were frustrated.

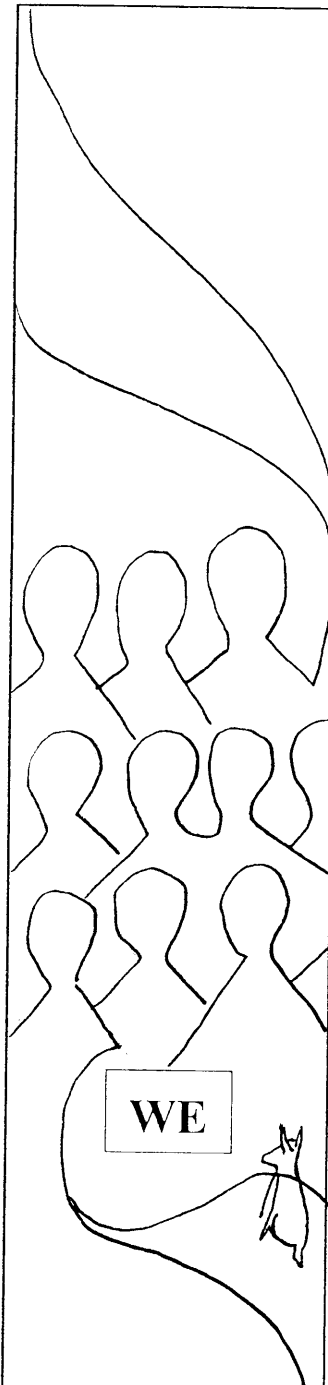
Then one day, I was walking along a path near Lake Michigan and I saw a Dominican priest who was walking his dog. The dog, a Collie, was beautiful with her coat shining in the sun. She was elegant in her looks and in her manner. After some discussion, it was agreed that Heather, my new dog friend, could belong to my Spred group.

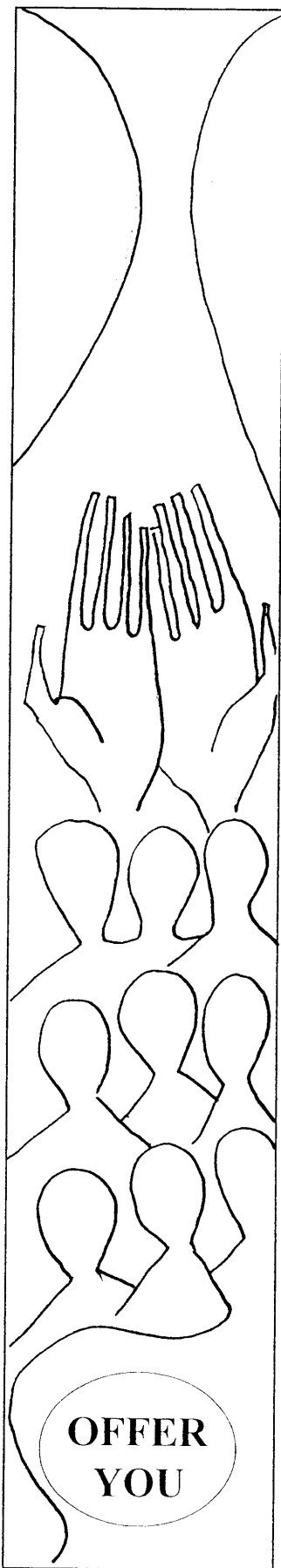
So on Tuesday night, I went in the car to pick up Heather. She sat up next to me on the front seat, curious about all the sights flying by the window as we drove down Lake Shore Drive. When we arrived at the center, she stopped at the door. She sensed immediately that there were fragile children in the room and she became very gentle. After she greeted or attempted to greet everyone, she went to her blanket in the corner. There was a little box with a soft brush to groom her. Little by little, Carlos approached Heather and began to stroke her back. Heather remained absolutely still and a new relationship began. Carlos never left Heather's side, so when it was time to go to the celebration room, Heather came too. She sat up, alert, next to Carlos. When I gave Carlos the message, Heather too received a blessing.

During the sharing of food, Heather had her bowl of treats. When the session was ended, Heather climbed back on to the front seat, put her head in my lap and slept all the way home. Her coat was damp from her hard work and she had achieved a breakthrough none of us could have managed.

Heather called forth Carlos who seemed locked away in some foggy swamp. To call Carlos into the here and now was wonderful to see. The relationship a person can have with a dog or other pets, gives the the person focus. The pet calls for attention and bit by bit trust and tenderness are born. This is an immense gift for the person who is frail.

Great stories are told about puppies who are given to prisoners to tame and to prepare to be guide dogs, service dogs or explosive detection canines. 1 Each prisoner works to tame his or her puppy but at the same time the puppy is taming the prisoner. Their mutual relationship awakens trust, kindness and tenderness. Hardened criminals are in tears when they give up their dogs after two years so that they can go to their new homes. Yet they are more than ready





to begin again with a new puppy. It is not just frail or suffering people who are called forth by pets to be more human, but everyone has to be called forth by another creature. We are not totally self-generating personalities. We depend on others and in turn, they depend on us.

We get nowhere in a Spred community of faith, unless we are all helping one another to brush away cobwebs and step further and further into the light. The pathway to relationships is so terribly hard for some, that every effort has to be made and when there is even the slightest breakthrough, it is to be celebrated.

While each of us has our physical body of flesh and bone, we also have a social and cultural body to which we belong.² This wider circle calls us into our own identities. Where and how we live and among whom we live sets multiple stamps on our being. We are not self-constructed. It is stunning that when we enter the sacramental community, our whole being begins to be modified.³

If we look at the Eucharistic Liturgy and focus on the Eucharistic Prayer II, we see that Jesus offers this command "Do this in memory of me." Then following the acclamation, the prayer continues, "we offer you this life-giving bread, this saving cup." There is a transition from "you do this in memory of me" addressed first of all to the disciples at the last supper, to the here and now of "we offer you."⁴ We see here the structure of the gift given and the gift returned.

In our own experience of gift-giving, we know that when we choose to give a gift to another, and if the gift comes from the heart, it is a step toward communion. If a sign of gratitude is given or if the relationship is acknowledged, affection and trust develop. If however, there is no sign of gratitude, or a return of acknowledgement, the gesture dies. The hope is always that in the exchange of gifts, a communion, a we is expanded.

In a Spred catechesis, an effort is made to awaken each one so that they become more capable of relating, even if the relationships are so very fragile. Bit by bit, each one becomes aware of everyday experience in life, in the neighborhood, the school, the park and in church. Then one begins to see self in the story of the others. The leader catechist is then able to say, no longer you and you and you, but we.

In the process of saying when we are happy...or when we are grateful, ...or when we trust others, etc., the action moves into the here and now of this community of faith. We become the community of faith in our total reality and we form an identity in the process.

We have been called into this identity by following a slow and gentle pathway into relationships.

Fr. Yves Marie-Joseph Congar, O.P. was one of the great French Catholic theologians of the last century. He began to formulate significant ideas when he was a prisoner of war in 1943. He was concerned about the liturgy being real and about preaching being real.

In sacramental life, we speak of the sign of the sacrament, the sign in itself such as eating and drinking. Then there is the sign and with it what it signifies, such as eating and drinking at the Eucharistic banquet. Finally, there is the purpose of it all, the meaning of it, the mystery, (the res). This is what the whole sacramental experience is pressing toward. So for example, the

goal of the Eucharistic banquet is love, a sense of communion. The sacrament is a sacrament when it strikes the heart of the believer. It is thus real - in the believer.⁵ One would hate to go through all the work involved if the liturgy or the preaching as a whole did not hit its mark. To hit its mark, something has to change or be modified within the believer.

This is also true of catechesis. Catechesis is not just word play or a power struggle. It is a process of forming a network of relationships that hit the mark in the sense of involving communion. This sense may be vague, but something has changed in the hearts of the participants. This is what makes the catechesis real.

From the very beginning the catechesis has to be real. Our relationships with animals and people has to be real. The stories evoked have to be real. Our passage into the we of our community has to be real. Our evocation of our liturgies have to be real. Our proclamation of scripture has to hit the mark so the message can penetrate and change us.

In Spred, we speak of having four goals. To develop:

- A sense of the sacred
- A sense of church
- A sense of the Christ
- A theological sense.

Having a sense of something, means a global awakening, an initiation into a communion. It is not precise or highly verbal or highly conceptual. It is a way of being.

As we develop a sense of the sacred, we work to build an ambiance of beauty, silence, music and gesture. We behave differently in a space set aside for fellowship and prayer. The space and the people change us

As we develop a sense of the church, we have our little circle of friendly relationships. Little by little the circle develops and the significant people in the life of the church come into focus. This happens even if the person is quite limited, as long as experiences are structured for a movement from egocentricity to communion.

When we develop a sense of Christ, we focus on Jesus present with us now. It is difficult for a person with intellectual disabilities to relate to the distant past or future. But "when we are happy to be together, Jesus is with us" is a global awareness of real presence.

We develop a theological sense, when we relate in faith, hope and love. The goal of each catechesis is to awaken faith, hope, and love. We are not so much helping our friends to describe faith, hope and love as we are helping them to do faith, do hope and do love. This they can do and do very well. We also realize that by helping them we open ourselves to them helping us catechists.

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1. Christopher Makos and Paul Solberg, Puppies Behind Bars, Training Puppies to Change Lives, Glitterati, New York, New York 2007.
2. Louis-Marie Chauvet, Symbol and Sacrament, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, 1995, p. 149
3. Ibid. 164
4. Timothy Brunk, "Consumer Culture and the Body, Chauvet's Perspective," Worship, Vol. 82, No. 4. p. 300
5. Yves Marie-Jospeh, O.P., "Real" Liturgy, "Real" Preaching, Worship, Vol. 82, No. 4. p. 310

