



From June 15 to June 19, 2009, there was a gathering in Northern Ireland for fifty Spred diocesan leaders from nine countries. We met at Drumalis, near Belfast, close to the Irish Sea to work together on the method Spred uses for catechesis with those who have intellectual disabilities. We also enjoyed liturgies in Spanish, Irish, Maltese and English of the sort used in Australia, South Africa, Scotland, England, Ireland and the United States.

Our gathering is called Project Peer Support and every three years this group focuses on some aspect of catechesis to refresh, deepen and sharpen our awareness of the skills of the craft.

As a background to this year's work, there were two experiences that begged for reflection. One involved the super-abundance of richness in our human experiences that are evoked at the beginning of each catechesis. What does one do with the many possible paths one can take on the journey of a catechesis? The other involved reflecting on a process used for the adult preparation session as catechists prepare as a community for the following session with those who have intellectual disabilities. If a story is the starting point used to awaken an awareness of a human experience of the catechist, how does one zero in to the root of the story to move the reflections one way or another in order to have a sense of completion and wholeness at the end of a catechesis?

There is a need for a kind of 'tool'.

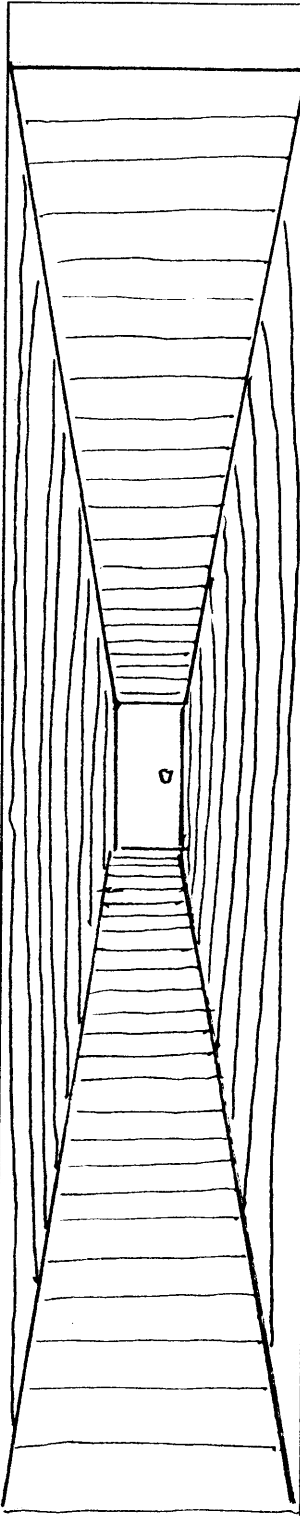
The Irish poet, Sean Heaney, has a great poem on a tool called 'The Pitchfork'. He says, "I loved handling the fork and the rake, their lightness and rightness in the hand, their perfect suitedness to the jobs they had to do....Using the pitchfork was like playing an instrument."<sup>1</sup>

#### The Pitchfork

Of all implements, the pitchfork was the one  
That came near to an imagined perfection:  
When he tightened his raised hand and aimed with it,  
It felt like a javelin, accurate and light.

So whether he played the warrior or the athlete  
Or worked in earnest in the chaff and sweat,  
He loved its grain of tapering, dark-fleshed ash  
Grown satiny from its own natural polish.

**FOCUS**



Riveted steel, turned timber, burnish, grain,  
Smoothness, straightness, roundness, length and sheen.  
Sweat-cured, sharpened, balanced, tested, fitted.  
The springness, the clip and dart of it.

And then when he thought of probes that reached the farthest,  
He would see the shaft of the pitchfork sailing past  
Evenly, imperturbably through space,  
Its prongs starlit and absolutely soundless-

But he learned at last to follow that simple lead  
Past its own aim, out to an other side  
Where perfection-or nearness to it-is imagined  
Not in the aiming but the opening hand.

So the question at Drumalis at our gathering was, what tool would help us to leap from the evocation of one's human experience into the depth of mystery without being blunted or falling to the ground?

To evoke a rich human experience and then out of some desperate lunge attach a doctrinal notion stuck on the outside as 'meaning' betrays a fear of discovering the mystery of God at work in life. The evocation of the human experience then becomes only a kind of excuse to teach a truth. For some this might pass as catechesis but it will not go anywhere with people who have intellectual disabilities. No, the mystery is disclosed in the process of working with the stuff of life. Otherwise one risks being stagnant, staying outside one's experience, on the surface. In 'The Menu Is Not The Meal' Seamus O'Connell, Professor of Scripture at St. Patrick's College, Ireland, refers to people in a restaurant who refuse to put down the menu and do not get around to eating.<sup>2</sup> Out of fear of letting go of the menu, they cannot taste or be nourished. For want of a 'tool' a catechist can remain on the outside of catechesis and miss the 'meal.'

If we begin with the assumptions that through the Incarnation our lives are holy and that our work as catechists is to uncover the sacred dimension in life where God reveals his love and care, we can approach with confidence to the places of grace in our own lives.

But because we are frail, we cannot bear the whole burden of revelation in life, we need to drink in little sips to nourish our faith. To reach the nectar in our human experiences there is a tool we can use to do this in symbolic catechesis. It is called the intentionality of a session.

Intentionality is a clear notion of what aspect, what path to follow to come to a symbolic awareness. Awareness cannot be taught or forced. It can only be awakened through a gentle invitation. But the invitation needs to be clear and focused.

Intentionality is a thread that one discovers in a lived experience. Suppose we sit before a beautiful tulip. We are so enthralled by the color, and the shape. In a catechesis, we start to talk about this flower with a Spred group. In short order, each one is talking about a flower in the yard, the park, the street, the garden. Now suppose the catechist begins to focus on the little bulb that is peeking out of the dirt. Everyone now starts to focus on the bulb, what it looks like, how it feels, what it does. Everyone agrees that the bulb has to be buried in the dirt before a beautiful flower emerges. In a way the bulb has to die before there is a flower. Sometimes we

**LEADS**

hesitate to bury the bulb. What will happen to it? But we know it will give us a beautiful flower. At first we are sad, but then we are happy. In holy week, we are sad when we remember that Jesus died, but on Easter we are happy. There is new life everywhere. We know that Jesus says to us today, "I am alive. I am with you." We sing, "Jesus Christ is Risen Today, Alleluia!"

Now suppose we have Spred friends in the group who have many health issues, who have been close to death, who sense death around the corner. This session has a resonance that cannot be articulated.

The intentionality, the focus, is both a negative and a positive aspect of a narrative that links together all the elements of a catechesis. It is a principle of unity for the catechist in order to keep a clear directionality to the process. In this case "The goal of this session is to become aware that we pass through death to life."

In the Adult Preparation session, when we begin with a story to evoke our lived experience, we become aware that a good story has many faces. We can only manage one aspect of the story at a time in a group, so we have to choose one. As the adult preparation session is to ready the catechists for the next session with our friends, we choose the same intentionality as we will use in that session. However, the story is on the level of adult cognitive awareness to respect the totality of their lives.

The goals of Project Peer Support 2009 were:

1. to become more at ease in recognizing how the intentionality manifests itself in the interiorization of a session.
2. to be at ease at crafting the tool of the intentionality in a session of catechesis.
3. to be at ease leading sessions of catechesis with a clear intentionality/focus.

The process used at Drumalis was to take a new story each day, read it in private, pull out one's own intentionality and craft the three elements that show up in Adult Preparation Sessions.

1. summary of the facts of a story.
2. a universal statement that shows that some aspect of the story has a universal quality (such as when we pass from darkness to light, we are exhilarated.)
3. a question for personal reflection (such as when have you experienced moving through darkness to light?)

The big surprise was that each day although we started with a new story, the 50 participants ended up with 50 unique intentionalities - that led to 50 different sessions - each day!! These we shared in our small groups. We were able to have several English-Spanish groups because we had so many excellent translators.

The warm and gracious hospitality of the diocese of Down and Connor (Belfast) refreshed our spirits and our commitment to our work as catechists. Sr. Mary Therese Harrington  
Spred, Chicago

1. Dennis O'Driscoll, Stepping Stones, Interviews with Seamus Heaney, Faber and Faber 2008 pg.336  
Seamus Heaney, Opened Ground, Selected Poems 1966-1996, Farrer, Straus, Giroux, 1999, pg. 320
2. Daniel O'Leary, Begin With The Heart, Recovering a Sacramental Vision, The Columba Press, 55A Spruce Ave. Stillorgan Industrial Park, Co. Dublin, 2008, pg. 100.

