

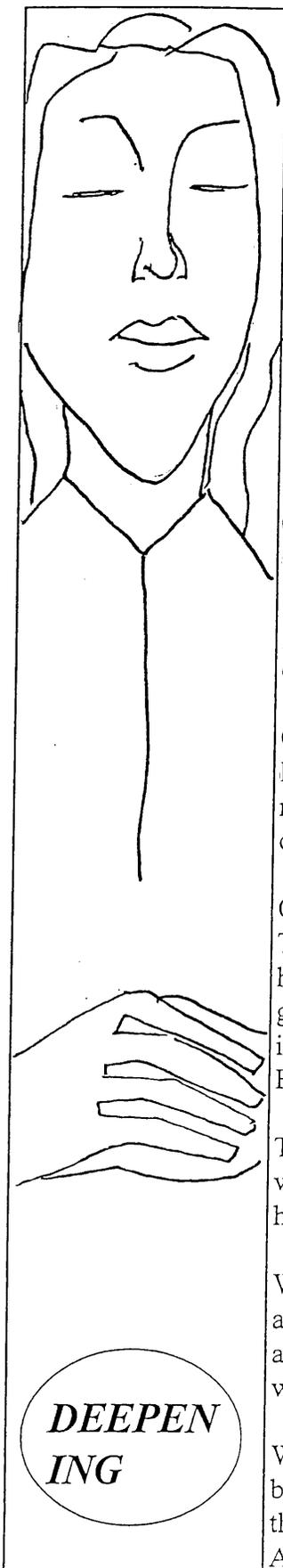
Over the years I have found that there are phases in the development of faith in our friends with intellectual disabilities. These phases cut across the person's experiences of the community of faith, catechesis and liturgical life.

The first phase can be called **initiation**, a beginning of relationships. This involves a movement out toward others. This development does not progress in a straight line. The process can be tentative with moments of failure and frustration as the person struggles with self and others. Some of our friends slide easily into relationships and others are paralyzed as they try to leave their own space. Initiation requires the person to grow into openness to others and bit by bit to the Other. This effort is renewed again and again. "By using the term initiation, which is a process of entering into relationships, we neither understand a kind of apprenticeship, nor a simple approach to any kind of mysterious reality, but the access and process of advancing into a more interpersonal relationship which by its very intimacy is in some measure mysterious....When God speaks to us it is to establish a life of communion." 1

Another phase can be called **deepening**. The person is more comfortable and at ease in relationships, according to each one's capacity. There is now a certain flexibility and resilience. On the surface it may seem that the person is at a standstill but it is not the case. During this phase, the person is apt to develop a sense of the sacred, a global sense of symbol and comfort in silence. At times of stress the person may slip back into feelings of isolation.

A third and final phase can be called **precision**. It is in this phase that language is most important. The person can catch the connection between words and their significance. They can reflect back on their experiences and name them. They can apply principles and reason to a set of principles. This is basically the work that the catechists do for themselves in Spred, as our friends with intellectual disabilities have difficulty with the relationships between cause and effect and reversibility of ideas. Not only may it be difficult for them to recall and explain something, but it may also be difficult to plan for the future.

What is important for adults who enter into a small community of faith as catechists, is that they find that they may have to do the work of initiation and deepening for themselves. They may be able to articulate with precision various ideas, but to be effective catechists they need to be able to relate to others on a non-verbal level.



When it comes to catechesis, these three phases of initiation, deepening and precision help the catechist to be aware of how each person is relating to others most of the time and adjust their own mode of being to fit the situation.

In the initiation phase, the preparation process for catechesis takes more time than the session in the celebration room. The person needs to calm down, to relax, to focus according to each one's ability. It is too hard to enter into catechesis when a person is agitated. To smooth the way, the catechist speaks and moves gently. The catechist avoids giving criticism and sharp rebukes. They accent the positive and yet provide boundaries. During the catechesis, they watch their pace to keep it measured and clear. They leave spaces for silence. They use deliberate gestures and at times, if they can, they sing a phrase or two. They make sure to call each person by name, often. They basically give witness to presence, the Someone who is with us. When we are happy to be together, Jesus is with us.

In the deepening phase, the person is more comfortable with the evocation process used in the catechesis. They can evoke recent events in their lives, sometimes with a little prodding from the helper catechist. They can follow a brief narrative and be curious during the session. They can become more and more at ease with gesture, silence and music. In the group they are more aware of one another and are able to collaborate according to their capacity.

On the level of precision in catechesis, the term is relative. Most of the people with intellectual disabilities have difficulty with precise language that may actually match what they mean. If a person is gifted in this way, they may be more at ease in a group for regular catechesis, only if however, they can handle the social requirements of such a group.

Operating on the level of initiation and deepening is still a process of faith development. The Christian God is more than an abstract concept. The person of Jesus is simple and humble. Now empowered by the Spirit, He lives his resurrection and calls us to share his glory. The person with intellectual disabilities is introduced to this Presence and advances in the way of faith which is focused on communion with Jesus who opens the way to the Father and binds us together in the Holy Spirit.

The principle role of the catechist is to give witness to this mystery and to know that those with intellectual disabilities respond in a way that is global, non-verbal and silent. They have a growing awareness of something beyond the horizon of every day life.

When we achieve something beautiful, we step back in awe and are silent. When we achieve a beautiful catechesis as a community, we step back and are silent with awe, appreciation and gratitude. What has happened? On a very basic level, each one is no longer the center within the self. Each one has an opening out to the other Center.

When it comes to liturgy, the catechesis has prepared the way for a global attitude of openness, bodily self-management, and a sense of the sacred. Depending on the parish style of liturgy, the local culture, language and quality of relationships, our friends are more or less at ease. A periodic Spred family liturgy assists in the development of liturgical competence.

In the Method *Vivre*, used by *Spred* communities of faith, the catechesis begins with an evocation of some personal, familial or community event. Once the group has this focus, they go on to become gently aware of how they feel about the totality of what has been shared. The group has to take its time so that each one is participating as far as possible. Even though the individual sharing may bring up disparate events, when the group grasps a common feeling, there is a great sense of unity in the community. It is only then that the catechesis can go on to the liturgical evocation with any hope of success.

The liturgical evocation also has the elements of initiation, deepening and precision. The new catechist who has been leading the group steadily along on the level of initiation and deepening runs the risk of starting to talk about liturgy on the level of precise language and oops, there goes the group. The catechesis dies in mid-stream.

How can one avoid this? One way - maybe too often - the catechist just skips this evocation. It may help to realize that there are many elements that build up to the liturgical evocation. The first major element is the adult community of catechists. As they faithfully grow together in faith, they develop an ecclesial unit, a small church into which those with intellectual disabilities are gathered. This provides the basic part of the liturgical or ecclesial evocation - who is involved, the people. At the time of the interiorization, the whole group is oriented in one direction. The ecclesial/liturgical evocation places that orientation into an explicitly sacred dimension and most often the key point is - who is present, who is there. Here we begin to be aware of the assembly, and the celebrant.

The people are all gathered together around the Book of God's Word. Everyone is aware of the Holy Book in the celebration room. Then we can focus on the Holy Book that is present in the liturgy. When we are all gathered around the Book, Jesus is with us. When we are gathered around the priest, Jesus is with us. When we share the Holy Bread, Jesus is with us. When we share the Holy Wine, Jesus is with us. When the priest says, "The Lord be with you." Jesus is with us.

The Holy Bread is broken to be swallowed. The Book of the Word is broken open to be grasped. The liturgical evocation is broken into small bits to be savored. The evocation of the liturgy involves calling to mind one or more element at play in liturgy. We do so to remember and to taste the sweetness of the mystery.

With the liturgical evocation in place, the community is ready to hear the proclamation of the Word of God and to receive the message for today. Jesus says to you today... . All of this is experienced according to the capacity of each one and according to their phase of faith development.

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1. Van Caster, S.J., "Teaching, Formation and Initiation," *Lumen Vita*, Vol. XVI, 1961, pg. 613

