

Life of the Catechist:

The Necessity of Friendship for the Catechist

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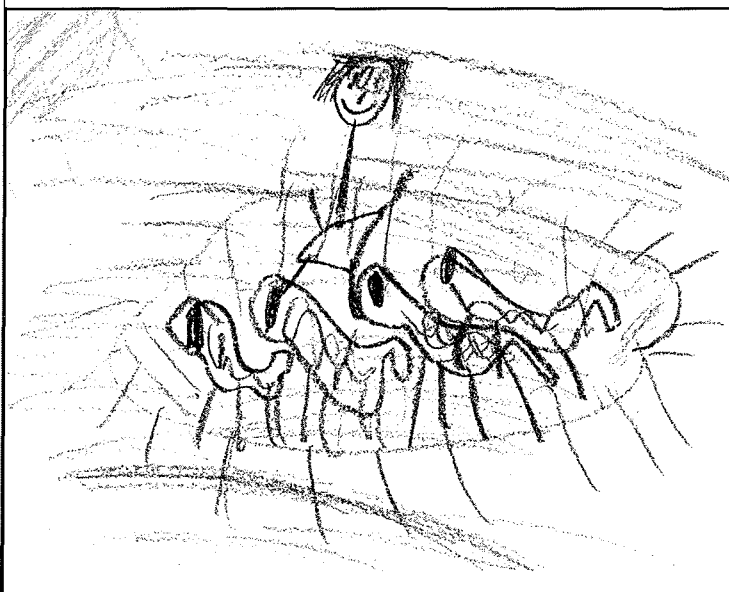
I think it is significant that on the first morning of an international *convegno* in Rome in October 1993, Sofia Cavalletti's opening words were about friendship. Her listeners, 46 of us, sat close together in a small room. Sofia spoke in the three languages of those present: Italian, Spanish and English. She began by describing the unique friendship we have as catechists. She noted that when we come together, we feel we have already met, and even that we have been friends forever. She continued by saying that this deep friendship applies not only to those of us who were in the room; it includes those who are far from us, with whom we are deeply linked. Distance doesn't affect this friendship.

Sofia was speaking about friendship as something given, something mysterious, and something that breaks through the limits of time and space. Some time later I thought about Sofia's words when I took a course on friendship and the moral life taught by Paul Wadell, who wrote a book on the subject. He argues that friendship is a crucial practice in the moral life and that we cannot have a moral life in a complete and full sense without certain kinds of friendships.

Wadell spoke of friendship as the beginning of the moral life. It reminded me so much of what we say about the moral formation of children: that relationship is fundamental to the moral life. The partner we help the young child fall in love with, be in relationship with, is Jesus, the Good Shepherd. In my course, friendship was presented as the beginning of the moral life and also as its goal. The reign of God, in the parousia, will be a community of perfect friendship, all of us together with God. To see morality in terms of friendship is to recognize that there are certain people who call us to be our best self, to be in relationship with God. A statement by Wadell about morality made me think of my catechist friends: "Morality is a shared life with people who share our hopes, our loves, our dreams, our desires."

I think we know quite well that our friendships in the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd are not always easy. Friendship itself is fragile and vulnerable. We have to be emotionally

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capable of friendship, and it has to be available to us, offered to us. Then we have the geographical distance between us. Also, the work that brings us together is a great one. Our life and our health must allow it. And we know our ministry is a big personal investment. It is costly in terms of time and study and work. So hurt, which pulls us away from each other, is possible.

But the reverse is also true. Friendship enables us to do this amazing work. In the world of religious education, we have a unique vision, both of the child and of the child's religious capacity. For many years I thought the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd would never catch on, especially in the Roman Catholic church. I felt it would exist in a small way—perhaps just as a sign. But time and God's plan are proving me wrong. It is our friendships that permit us to take the path that is the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. While the textbooks for

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children in religious education seem to make the catechist's preparation easier, we choose to saw, sand, paint, draw, write, laminate, sculpt, sharpen pencils, cut collage pieces, sew and sweep to prepare the environment for the children. We make visible for the child the Bible and the liturgy, and we are deeply enriched ourselves.

I sometimes wonder if we would have been able to continue our wonderful work with the children without our catechist friendships. I know I am inspired by friends who love to make the materials. In the days before email, many of us ran up large telephone bills exchanging stories about what the children were doing and saying in the atrium. As the catechists came to know each other more deeply, we saw many characteristics in one another: humility, love of God, new ways of being essential, diligence, hope,

enthusiasm, sensitivity, and most of all, joy. Just to be together was always an encouragement to virtue.

In the United States, there are some of us who have been in this work for over 20 years. So perhaps a few have experienced those moments that require a decision about whether or in what way to continue as a catechist. This is when I most appreciate our friendships. Sometimes the moment comes when we have spent 30 hours making the blue Unity Strip and find there is an even longer timeline to make for the 9–12 material. Or it comes with a health crisis or with the death of a spouse. This is when we need someone who not only knows the work but who also knows us and cares about us.

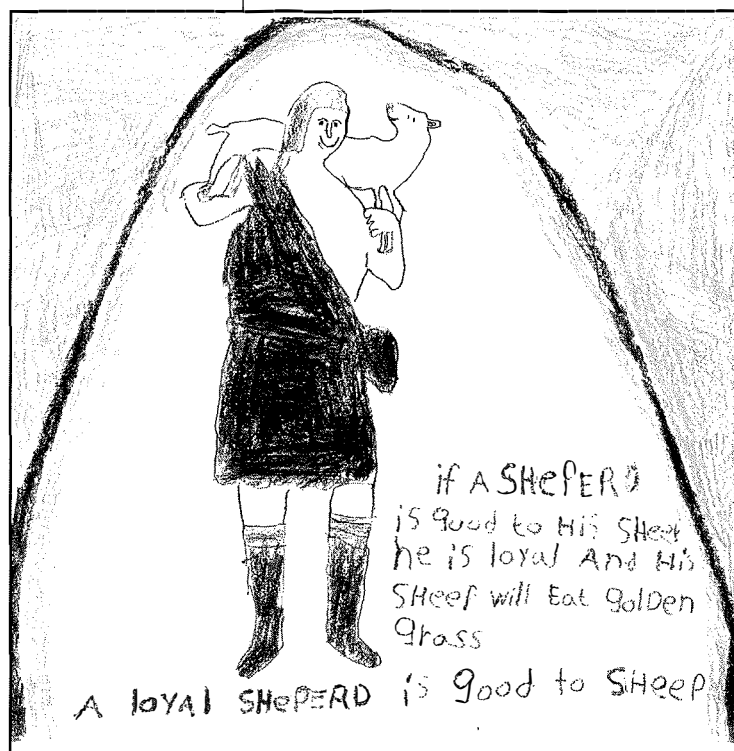
Thomas Aquinas viewed benevolence as the first mark of friendship. It means we are loved for our own sake, and our

friend wants what is best for us. It is well-wishing, a willing of what is good for the other. I think we need to be attentive to this in our catechist friendships. With the growth of the work and the overwhelming demand for formation courses, our care for one another has become very important.

How do our catechist friendships begin? Sofia spoke about these friendships as discovered: "We feel we have already met." For Augustine, friendships are gifts given to us by God. We do not really initiate them, God does. They are going to change our lives, and we cannot control them or prevent their fragility. Through friendship God touches us and works redemptively in our lives.

The "away courses," the national courses to which we had to travel in the early years, were an excellent environment for the beginning of friendships. We lived, ate and prayed in community for three or four or five weeks. There were no televisions, radios, laptops or cell phones, and during the course we rarely went to restaurants or stores (only to buy rulers and colored pencils). There was time for long walks and dorm tea parties late into the night. A catechist friend and I always took a walk the day before the course ended, just to figure out how we were going to adjust to being back home. We used to advise each other not to "hit the ground running," knowing deep down that neither of us could take the advice.

These experiences have sharpened my awareness of what is a good environment for friendship. Friendship needs time, so the pace of our hurried lives works against it. So does consumerism and radical individualism.



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Spiritual Friendship (SF). He begins Book One with this statement to a friend: “Here we are, you and I, and I hope a third, Christ, is in our midst.” When we find this is true between friends, we are holding something precious. It is important to try to be good. Aelred said spiritual friendship “assails vices by its own virtue” (SF 2:10). But the effort is still ours. Aelred names four qualities needed for spiritual friendship: loyalty, the right intention, discretion and patience (with the imperfections of the friends). Such are good qualities for a catechist as well! They are difficult, sometimes, but “[e]ffort in great things is itself great” (SF 1:26).

Part of our work might be to encourage others in the catechesis, particularly those in our own regions, to discover these friendships. This is a help for the children we serve and for the work. As the catechists grow in virtue and

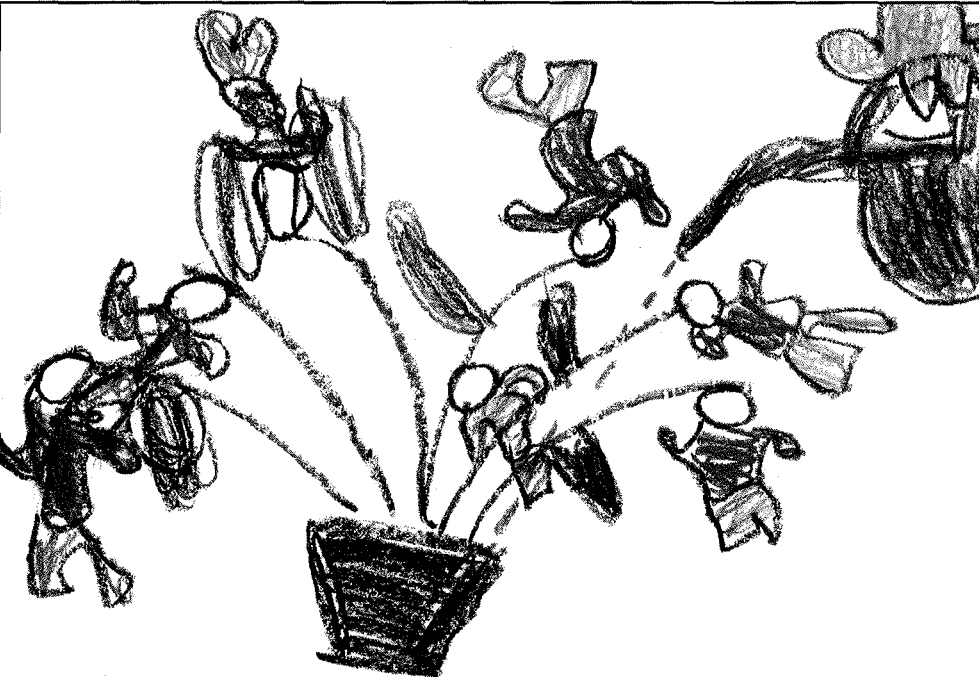
prayer—because it is God that connects the friends—they will be available to the children and to many others. Spiritual friendship, which seeks the ways of God, always seeks a larger community.

I have watched many catechist friendships form easily. Those in this work seem to agree on what is important. Our commitment to the children in the atrium is a thrilling one. There is nothing like the moment when you learn that there is something you were born to do. Many of us know the power of that moment. I believe it is friendship that supports and sustains our call, and keeps alive our longing for that perfect friendship of the parousia.

Another thought-provoking idea presented in my friendship course was that in our culture, power means domination or mastery over others. But what we find in the catechesis, where the adult is an equal listener with the child, is power in terms of service, justice, enablement and love. This countercultural view creates the environment for friendship.

The national and international catechist friendships are certainly precious, but we still need the deep friendships that are part of daily life. Our ministry and our life in Christ is an everyday project, and we need to share it deeply with others. Our marriages, our families, our religious communities, our atrium communities, our local churches are where we discover these friendships. We may find we are gifted with spiritual friendships that are truly centered in Christ.

In the twelfth century, Aelred of Rievaulx wrote a treatise entitled



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