

# *Nurturing the Social Environment*

*by Bea Cunningham*

The relationship between the catechist and the learner is at the heart of the catechetical process. The social environment that catechists create in their catechetical settings can make growth in faith a real possibility.

In attending to this environment the catechist creates an atmosphere of sacred space. Whether your setting is a home, a church basement, or a school classroom, your learners should sense that they have entered a space that is different from an ordinary learning setting. Placing religious objects in that space will not be enough. It is your modeling of Jesus' quality of presence, your attentiveness, and your affirmation of each person that will create that sacred space.

Creating a positive social environment also means attention to the affective, or emotional, dimension of your learners. It is the whole person who responds to God's call. Therefore it is just as important to draw out of people their insights about what they have experienced in the session and in life as it is for them to understand on a cognitive level what you have

taught. For it is both knowledge and insight that will lead to new Christian behaviors.

In modeling the way of Jesus, the catechist creates a climate of mutual respect in which the learners are challenged to honor one another's ideas and insights, and to be particularly respectful of cultural and physical differences. The learners are invited by the catechist to be enriched by the diversity that exists among the members of the group, and challenged to carry these attitudes into their daily lives.

You may feel that you do not know enough about the traditions and customs of some of the members of your group to work well with them. It is important to read and learn more about the ethnic and cultural identities of your learners. But you can learn much of what you need to know by simply asking the members of your group to tell you about their traditions. Ask them to share with you how your "ways" may seem different to them. By listening respectfully and then honoring some of their

**Bea Cunningham** is a longtime leader in the catechetical community. She taught in the Catholic school system of the Diocese of Galveston-Houston and served as a parish DRE for ten years. In Houston she also served as Associate Director of the Office of Continuing Christian Education as an advocate to pastors on behalf of parish catechetical leaders, especially African-American leaders. She holds a certificate in spiritual direction from the Cenacle in Houston. She also serves on the board of the USCCB Commission on Certification and Accreditation of ministry formation programs.

**If parishes welcome and respect children, creating an atmosphere of trust, then children will listen.**

**Judith Dunlap,  
*Practical Catechesis***

traditions within your setting, you affirm your learners and help them appreciate how special each of them is in God's eyes.

You reinforce this respectful climate by providing opportunities for the learners to interact with one another, to share their beliefs and ideas, and to engage in activities and problem solving related to the doctrines and values you are teaching. Allow the learners to work together in small groups. Ask open-ended questions and invite them to discuss answers

among themselves. As long as you offer clear directions and expectations, learners of all ages will respond well to group work.

You can never "cause" faith in another person. Faith is a gift from God. The time you spend with a particular learner is only a small moment in his or her faith journey, but it can be a significant moment. When you create a positive climate in which the seeds of faith can grow, you truly participate in the ministry of Jesus.



### *For Reflection*

- What challenges do you face in responding in a positive way to the ethnic diversity in your classroom and parish?
- What can you do to make your catechetical setting a truly sacred space?



The article on "Creating Sacred Space for Prayer" on pages 42 and 43 will assist you in making your setting a more hospitable space for prayer and reflection.