

# *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

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