

## The Grace of Faith and Sharing

The Faith and Sharing way of life is based on the belief that each person no matter how limited or gifted has a unique and undeniable value, and reveals something of the infinite mystery of God. At the heart of this way of life is the revelation that God has a predilection for the poor and in a mysterious way is closest to us as individuals and as a people when we are most poor and vulnerable. "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God". (Lk 6:20). "The Lord is close to the broken-hearted". (Ps. 34:18) "I was hungry and you gave me food". (Mt. 25)

To share the Good News of the poor is a service of evangelization which is an essential dimension of the Church's mission.

Faith and Sharing is a gift given in the Church and for the Church. It is a call to deepen and extend the experience of Christian community, the experience of Church. It is rooted in the profound longing in our hearts for oneness, the radical need we have to share our one another and with God. This basic human longing and need can be moved towards true fulfillment only by the power of the Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus who took upon Himself this longing and need when He took upon himself our mortal flesh. Jesus gave his life to create community: "that they may be one; even as you, Father, are in me, and I in you. (Jn 18:21)

Faith and Sharing is not for a particular segment of the Church but rather for all the people of God. Those who carry their woundedness in a more visible way will hopefully find a special welcome in Faith and Sharing; for we believe that those who are most deeply wounded are closest to the heart of Jesus and so are at the heart of the Church. We know from faith and experience that we need others to help us face our own poverty and to help us find God, both in our weakness and in our strength. It is the sharing of weakness and strength, of gifts and limitations, and of various ministries and vocations that Faith and Sharing communities grow and reflect something of the mystery of the Church, the Body of Christ. It is in calling together the wealth of different peoples with their different personal gifts and acquired skills and roles in society and Church that Faith and Sharing is at the service of the Church in her mission to labour for and be a sign of the Kingdom of justice, Truth and Love taking shape in our world.

The principal means by which this way of life and work of evangelization is initiated and fostered is the Faith and Sharing retreat. In these retreats we try to be faithful to the gift that was given by God when Jean Vanier animated the first Faith and Sharing retreat at Marylake, just north of Toronto, Ontario in 1968. That retreat, at Jean Vanier's insistence, brought together a cross-section of the people of God. It has remained an essential element of the Faith and Sharing retreat that it tries to bring together as wide as possible a cross-section of the diocese, parish or region in which it is held; people of various gifts and handicaps, young, old, single, married, laity, religious, priests and bishops. There is a special effort to reach out to those who are marginalized and have less opportunity for this kind of experience.

1. The Word of God : The Word of God is presented by one or more animators who speak simply and from personal experience of the Gospel in a way that leads to a discovery of God more deeply in our lives. We discover the power of God's Word to heal, strengthen, transform and mission us more deeply in service of others.
2. Prayer : A spirit of stillness is created in the retreat to allow people to deepen their reception of the Word of God through personal prayer and through various moments of prayer in common.
3. The Eucharist : Meeting Jesus more deeply as the Bread of Life as well as the Word of Life calling us to be one Body is at the heart of the retreat experience. We deepen our union with God and with each other through celebration and adoration. When retreats are organized ecumenically, worship and adoration are done in a manner that respects ecclesial differences yet moves us authentically towards deeper communion.
4. Sharing Groups : Small groups that reflect the variety of gifts and calls of the people meet regularly during the course of the retreat. It is here often that people, through the sharing of themselves and their faith carrying each other in prayer are able to touch more deeply their own woundedness and experience the healing touch of Jesus through His people, His Body.
5. Celebration : Although a prayerful atmosphere is essential to the retreat, this is not incompatible with the spirit of joy and celebration. The high points of this spirit are the moments of worship, the celebration of reconciliation, the celebration of thanksgiving for the graces of the retreat, and the meals shared in common throughout the retreat.

There is then a two-fold movement in Faith and Sharing: an inward movement towards God hidden in the depths of our own vulnerability, and an outward movement towards our brothers and sisters, especially those who are more poor and in need. Faith and Sharing calls us to a deeper sharing in the life of Jesus through prayer and through our reaching out in service and self-gift. In Faith and Sharing we talk together as Communities of believers in God and God's creation, with one hand in the hand of Jesus and the other in the hand of the poor.

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