

# LEARNING AND PARTICIPATION OF PEOPLE WITH MULTIPLE DISABILITIES THROUGH RITE AND RHYTHM: DESCRIPTION OF THE CATECHETICAL AND LITURGICAL EXPERIENCE OF THE SERAFICO INSTITUTE OF ASSISI

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## SUMMARY

*Through the description of the catechetical and liturgical experience of persons with multiple disabilities at the Serafico Institute of Assisi, we intend to initiate a discussion on the specific value that Rite and Rhythm have for learning and social participation of persons with severe physical, Psychic and sensory disabilities, from an integral educational and rehabilitative prospective.*

*In summary, our attempt is to focus on elements such as the enhancement of non-verbal language within the Eucharistic liturgy, the ritual (in its characteristic of repetition) as an opportunity for learning, rhythm as an opportunity for spatial-temporal and social-relational movement.*

**Key words:** multiple disabilities – learning and participation – liturgical experience

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## INTRODUCTION

The Serafico Institute of Assisi has always proposed, within its mission, the integral educational and rehabilitative care of the person with severe physical, psychic and sensory disabilities.

From this point of view, through the description of the catechetical and liturgical experience of persons with multiple disabilities at the Institute, we intend to initiate a reflection on the specific value that the Rite and Rhythm present for learning and social participation of persons with multiple disabilities.

Over the years, the prevailing practice at the Serafico Institute in Assisi has been for children with disabilities to participate in the Eucharistic liturgy in the traditional way, both with the celebration of the weekly Eucharist in the oratory and with participation in the realities of the territory, driven by the principle of encouraging socializing and inclusive experiences for the young guests of the Center.

The feedback of these experiences on the side of liturgical participation was complex:

- -for the celebrant who failed to create an adequate setting of involvement;
- -for the children with disabilities themselves who, after initial curiosity, tended to show clear signs of impatience;
- -for the accompanying persons who struggled to manage the situation.

Over time, precisely because of the increasing difficulty of making these moments a usable experience for our children, the occasions for their participation in the liturgy tended to decrease. This phenomenon became

more accentuated with the arrival at the Center of children with increasingly serious disabilities.

After a period of reflection and interdisciplinary confrontation (theological, medical, psychological, pedagogical), in 2005 the Institutional project of special liturgical animation was started in an experimental way.

This project was essentially based on the passage from a "suffered" liturgy (or frontal) with a clear unbalance on the conceptual dimension, to a "participated" liturgy (or circular, in the sense of paying attention not only to what is given to be received, but also to the positive or negative stimuli offered by the young people). With this choice, therefore, we wanted to deepen, through a path of vital involvement of all the people with disabilities, the concept of participation expressed by the Second Vatican Council in the document *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. Obviously, to achieve this result, a direct participation of the people with disabilities in the Liturgy is required and, consequently, an appropriate training of all participants.

Stated general objective: to guide the people with disabilities well in a path that allows for a deeper encounter with God in the celebration of the Eucharist.

## RITE

The work first of all focused on the value of the senses as closely connected to the rite and therefore necessary for a "full, conscious, active and fruitful" participation of the severely people with disabilities person in the Eucharistic celebration. Starting from this, we paid attention first of all in trying to elaborate in different languages the ritual structure of the Eucharistic celebration (which has become stable) and the good news of the day (an element of novelty).

Starting from the question "how to make people feel?", we went through the whole Eucharistic celebration trying to put in good order the visible, audible, touchable, odorable elements that make up the celebration, taking care of all the aspect that concerns movements, attitudes and postures, words and gestures, readings and songs. At the same time it was necessary to pay attention to how to intervene in the structuring of adequate time and space, in the tone and gestures of communication, trying to create simple and easily perceivable links between what precedes and what follows, correspondences between what is done and what is said: everything, therefore, that could promote sensory integration (Ayres 2012) giving "sense to the senses" and "senses to the sense": «without the senses the party is empty, without the sense the party is blind» (Tomatis 2010).

Every rite is made up of a repeated action whose features of "authoritative tradition" and "novelty in acting" are capable of creating a "movement of the whole person". The rite of the Eucharistic celebration with children and young people with serious multiple disabilities determines a path of growth in the faith, passing from the body to the language to arrive at the symbol. Hence the importance of taking care of relationships, spaces and times of ritual actions as ordinary and main ways for the faith journey and the neuropsychomotor evolution of the person.

Finally, ritual becomes an important opportunity for orientation to reality (Gava 2007) and a useful tool to promote the development of personal and relational awareness.

## RHYTHM

In this type of experience, it emerges strongly how ritual and music, movement and dance, word and song, become crucial elements in promoting learning and recognition of contexts; in our practice we have indeed tried to characterize specific moments of the liturgical celebration and to give emphasis to each of them.

Franz Boas, one of the fathers of American cultural anthropology, describes dancing as the first mode of ritual: «ritual is to the rhythm of dance, there is no ritual without dance» (Boas 2014). Dance, understood as a set of acts and gestures performed to the rhythm of music, is the most complex element of rhythm as movement, but also one of the most communicative and effective languages, particularly in the world of disability.

As far as music is concerned, among the various instruments available, the one that our children prefer to approach is undoubtedly the drum (and then other types of percussion instruments); in fact, the drum succeeds more easily than other instruments in conveying and marking the rhythm, even during the moment of singing.

It is known that, in order to realize the "connection" between music and liturgical action, liturgical chant must present particular characteristics and, above all, must combine the principle of pleasure with respect for the rite: it must accompany an activity and fulfill a community function. In choosing liturgical singing, we moved therefore not only urged by the positive mood of our children, but also by its specific function which is to allow the assembly to enter the celebration, to make possible a real rhythmic interaction between all members of the community taking part in the assembly (Tagliaferri 2014); but this is possible with children with severe cognitive delay and multi-disability only if we are careful to activate and accompany auditory paths and paths of vocal participation (maturity of faith).

The possibility of becoming aware of these different types of action/interaction is constantly monitored at a time other than the celebration of the Eucharist, also on a regular basis (every Wednesday afternoon).

In 2009 we made a global verification of the experience by analyzing the following points (Marchionni et al. 2009):

- The differential pedagogy of catechesis.
- The religious experience in the individual rehabilitation plan.
- The development of the sense of religion in the individual with disabilities.
- The active participation of the person with disabilities in the liturgy.
- The following emerged from the review:
- The effectiveness of the educational intervention for the purpose of the discovery of faith as an enrichment of the educational-rehabilitation function inherent in the help relationship with the person with disabilities.
- The need to introduce religious experience among the rehabilitation/educational objectives as a "right-duty" of the baptized person to participate (Sacrosanctum Concilium). This aspect is confirmed by an approach that takes into account the ICF (International Classification of Functioning, Disability & Health 2012).
- Maturity in faith occurs by activating processes and paths of participation, sharing, imitation and exchange.
- The participation of the person with multiple disabilities in the liturgy will be all the more active and complete, the more educators, family members, volunteers and priests will be able to favor, mediate and guide the experience empathically, that is, by embracing their path of spirituality.
- It is the community that will be able to include the person with a disability and make him or her perceive that abstract part that would be unattainable to him or her only with his or her deficient tools.

Today, compared to the past, our children's participation in the weekly liturgy is constant and joyful. Even in external environments it appears more serene and adequately favored by the main actors (priest, educators, family members).

The constancy of the proposal seems to have favored, in most cases, the learning and contextual generalization of gestures, verbal anticipations or behaviors even in environments other than church (example: Easter blessing of families, meeting with a priest or a religious, collective moments of prayer...). Even after the long interruption of participation in the weekly liturgical action due to the pandemic emergency, when the normal liturgical activity resumed, we observed that after an initial moment of discomfort, the various boys and girls started to respond in a contextual and appropriate way according to what they had learned over time.

## CONCLUSIONS

The experience conducted so far, in reflecting on the significance of the value of catechesis for people with severe multiple disabilities as an extraordinary path in which to "act out" the encounter with God, has led us to focus in particular on the elements of rite and rhythm in the Eucharistic liturgy through a more decisive enhancement of non-verbal language:

- The rite (in its characteristic of repetitiveness) as an occasion of learning
- Rhythm as an opportunity for spatial-temporal and relational-social movement.

The path, although structured and therefore mediator to encourage new learning and movements of the people with disabilities person (from the senses to the sense), leaves space for spontaneous expression: it can hardly respect the liturgical schedule in every detail, but it favors an active and fruitful participation; it requires a synergistic commitment of different subjects for a full and conscious participation, but it favors the inclusion of the "little ones", through movements of learning and socialization, truth of the liturgy itself.

We are therefore convinced that through this modality the participants, in the progression of a gradual

awareness, can have renewed experiences and live significant and unique emotions proper to the joy of the encounter.

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All Authors have worked together and contributed equally to this manuscript.

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