

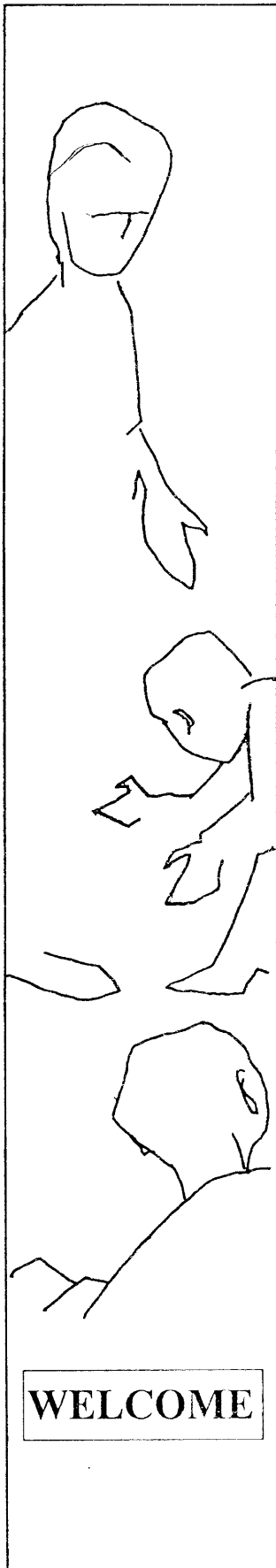
**ACTIVITY
CATECHISTS**

The Spred community of faith depends on the activity catechist to help them to be prepared for catechesis. This is an important role in Spred. It is a role that I enjoyed. Once I worked in a group that welcomed teens who had significant disabilities. Being a welcoming presence is a big part of being an activity catechist and I was challenged week after week to be welcoming. One of the friends would come into the meeting room and hide under the coat rack during the entire preparation process. He did this session after session. And session after session I would go over and invite him to come out to look around the room. I spoke of all the beautiful material that he could choose to work on. Despite this, it was a long time before he became comfortable enough to venture forth into the meeting room.

For someone who chooses to be the activity catechist, the first step following training is to find an appropriate environment in the parish buildings so that one can create space that is truly welcoming. In this space are wooden cabinets which contain beautifully structured materials in the areas of art, sensorial, and everyday life that are engaging to both catechists and friends. Cabinets that are made of wood call to be polished. They add beauty to the room and give a sense of warmth to the space. Carpeting or an area rug soften sound as one enters the room. Living plants that can be watered and polished as well as living flowers that can be arranged in vases enhance the beauty of the place. These activities draw one into concentration. Finally, there needs to be chairs, tables, and other furniture appropriate to the age group one is welcoming. Each parish is invited to choose the age group that best meets their needs and the needs of the area parishes.

The activity catechist shops for materials as well as orders from various catalogues while keeping in touch with the parish chairperson for the money needed to purchase what is necessary. Shopping with a parish tax exempt letter saves money. It is important to buy items of quality as they will stand up over time. The care that is taken in the preparation of the environment has an impact on everyone, even the parishioners who happen to pass by the room. They admire what they see and begin to ask questions as to what happens in this space. This is a way to give witness to the parish. Having a welcoming environment is important for each catechesis as well as for special events, such as an open house for the families and parish members.

Once the environment is prepared, which takes time, the activity catechist is ready for the first catechesis with our friends. As people arrive, the meeting room calls to them by the beauty



of the furniture and the structured materials arranged on trays or in baskets which invite people to pause, to touch, to admire, and then to choose as their first activity for the evening.

Maria Montessori speaks of the directress in this type of educational environment as being a part of the environment. She refers to this person as “the most living part.” In Spred, the activity catechist really takes on this role. Montessori says that this person should always make herself “attractive in appearance and full of quiet dignity.” (1) This person is the first person one meets and who has to have a presence. Montessori also states that “neglecting the environment - such as furniture that is covered with dust or materials muddled and in disorder reflects negatively on this person. It is important to take sufficient time to clean the environment well. From time to time a fresh coat of paint is needed and the carpet must be cleaned. It is up to the activity catechist to make sure that the paints and art materials are fresh as well as the warm water for hand and dish washing.

The preparation phase that the activity catechist is responsible for takes from forty-five minutes minimum to an hour. At the beginning the activity catechist greets each one with an embrace, a handshake or a word of welcome and then helps the person to choose a work. As people become familiar with the environment, they feel free to walk around and choose their own work. The other catechists become role models by being the first to arrive so that they are working on an activity before their friends arrive.

As I reread material on Maria Montessori, I have become fascinated by some of her advice. She says the “directress should avoid being too energetic or angular in her movements. She should have interest and enthusiasm in what she is doing...but this should not prevent her from expressing it calmly and delicately.” (2) To her it means speaking softly. It means moving around a room slowly, never dashing or shouting. The greatest amount of time for an activity catechist should be spent simply observing even if everyone is settled in their work and even if the activity catechist has chosen a work when the room becomes peaceful. What one observes is who is doing what and how one might intervene if needed. However, she cautions that when intervention is required, it is by minimizing words and saying no more than is absolutely necessary. To me this is where the art of the role comes in and needs to be mastered. This takes practice. Observation also helps. Spred provides observation opportunities as part of catechist training. Taking advantage of this as often as possible helps one to grow in the art form and begin to own the role.

Maria Montessori states that the “general rule for intervention is that the directress should not intervene when she finds a person engaged in some spontaneous activity which is orderly and creative. She must respect what is called the work of the person...on the other hand she needs no qualms whatever about disturbing someone if they are not doing anything in particular....or disturbing others, it is her duty to intervene at once.” (3)

An activity catechist does not choose a work for someone be it catechist or friend. The person needs the freedom to walk around the room, look at various materials, and touch them in their efforts to find something that will be engaging to them.

I remember taking a course from a Montessori directress named Celma Pinho at her school to

learn about my role as an activity catechist. Celma would say that if a person was not showing interest in anything, you would offer them a choice between two activities in an area that would interest them using the words, "Would you like to do this or that?" If the person was interested in the work that someone else was involved in, you could give them their own set - such as paints, or they may be required to wait until the material was back on the shelf. The activity catechist then helps the person to find another material while they are waiting.

Celma also would demonstrate the steps necessary to work with various materials in the room, such as the ten steps for handwashing. It begins with taking hold of the pitcher to draw warm water from the warm water basin to finally wiping the bowl, pitcher and countertop before leaving this work.

We were taught to have great respect for everything in the room. We practiced this by how we picked up a chair to move it to the silence circle or how we moved an activity from one location to another. We learned that when we moved carefully in the environment there was seldom anything broken.

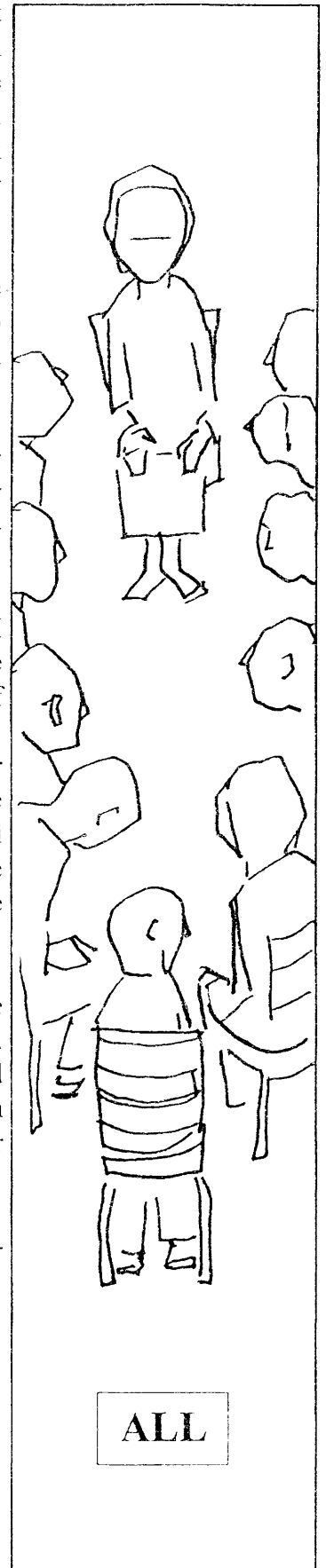
For us in Spred, every catechist needs to be a model of how to use the materials. I remember a session where one of our adult friends was sitting in the rocking chair. He often begins the preparation process in this way. I was nearby working on a collage of pictures with paste and a small brush. I was very intent and focused on what I was doing. Suddenly he came to the table, sat down and wanted to do what I was doing. Donna, our activity catechist, saw this and immediately involved him in his own material. It was the first time in many sessions that he became so involved in a work. If you are truly focused and involved in your own work, you never know who is learning from you. As the preparation process develops, silence pervades the room bringing the process to a close through the silence activity.

When those with developmental disabilities are given freedom of choice, they become comfortable in their environment. They freely move around and begin to feel at home. They notice that everything has a place and is in place. They become more peaceful and less anxious. Belonging helps them feel good and prepares them to go into the celebration room for the catechesis. Belonging helps them feel good about coming back year after year.

Hopefull, at every catechist session, the activity catechist can give feedback that will animate the group to grow in their freedom to choose a work and become focused.

Elizabeth Sivek
Chicago Spred Community Religious Worker

(1) E.M. Standing, Maria Montessori: Her Life and Work. A Mentor Book from New American Library of World Literature, Inc. 1962. pg. 306
(2) Ibid p. 306
(3) Ibid pp 311-312



Spred Calendar

CORE TEAM TRAINING 2006

2-1 Introduction to Special Religious Education in English and Spanish

for parish chairpersons, leader and activity
catechists, Saturdays from 1-6

February 11, 18, 25

3-1 Role Orientation in English and Spanish

for parish chairpersons, leader and activity
catechists, Saturdays from 1 to 6,

March 11, 18

Location: Spred Center 312-842-1039

2956 South Lowe, Chicago

Third floor, Spred chapel building

OBSERVATION 2006

6-10	Mondays 6:00 pm	Feb. 6, 20, Mar. 6
11-16	Tuesdays 7:00 pm	Feb. 7, 21, Mar. 7
17-21	Tuesdays 7:00 pm	Feb. 7, 21, Mar. 7
22+	Mondays 7:00 pm	Feb. 6, 20, Mar. 6

SPRED FAMILY LITURGIES

Feb. 5, Mar. 5, April 2, May 7

MAMRE DINNER DANCE

Drury Lane, Oakbrook Terrace

Sunday, April 23, 2006

Spred

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