

SPRED

  SPECIAL RELIGIOUS DEVELOPMENT

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When I first read the new Directory for Catechesis published in March 2020, I thought it had been written only for us at Spred. Right from the beginning, it is clear that the path offered by the new directory is one that we have been trying to walk on, even as we stumble along.

 “The ultimate goal of catechesis is intimate communion with Christ and

 **this is only brought about through the process of accompaniment.**”

(#3 Directory)

To accompany our friends with special needs is built into Spred. Each Spred community of faith has a catechist to accompany our friends through a one to one relationship. In different parts of the world we call that catechist a helper catechist, a sponsor, a faith friend, a God parent, etc. It means that each child, teen, young adult or adult has one person dedicated to accompany them in their faith development. On the surface it could just mean to keep our friends company. But from all the reflections of Pope Francis, accompaniment implies levels and levels within the mystery of relationships. For sure the accompaniment model is not built on a teacher-pupil relationship, nor on the model of instruction in a graded program. Accompaniment rather involves a personal bond that is carefully built, one step at a time, within a community of faith. Accompaniment can be a many-splendored experience!

Pope Francis refers to **time** as a basic element in the process of Accompaniment. (#171, Joy of the Gospel) All of us catechists struggle with our experience of time. It seems as if there is never enough of it. And yet our sessions are two hours long. Once we enter our space, we realize that time is a gift we give to one another. It takes time to focus, to really see and hear our friends. Time is required for the first baby step to accompany one another. Once we adjust to keeping our friend company, we realize that our pace really slows down. We simply have to take time to be present. Even if our Spred friend is hyper-active, we both know that it is useless to continue to be all wound up. It will ruin our time together. So we pause, reset our mentality, and make a conscious decision to alter our pace when we speak, and when we move. Bit by bit we start to accommodate to the reality that our friend occupies.

To accommodate, to welcome another into our own space, and to be willing to enter into the space of another is not so simple but it is essential to the process of faith development. Someone could think that the process of faith development means first of all to develop one’s own faith in total self-absorption. But to be with another in the process of faith development is something else. But what?

If we sense that God is revealed in the concrete realities of everyday life, then we back up to

focus on what is concrete, right before our own noses. What does the person in front of us look like? How does this person sound? How does this person move? How does this person relate to others? How does this person relate to me? Does my friend seem to like me? Does my friend even notice me? Maybe it seems as though my friend has no time for me, no use for me? We may feel a bit negative ourselves. We may need to work on our basic attitude toward our friend, especially if we find our friend to be difficult to look at, difficult to interact with, difficult to cope with. We may be embarrassed in the group because of the behavior of our friend which leaves us flustered. Where do we begin to adjust our own attitude?

The Catechetical Directory (#5), The Joy of the Gospel (#167) and Fratelli Tutti (#94) point out the reality that beauty plays in the accompaniment of faith. Sometimes the reference is to the beauty of creation, cathedrals, music, paintings, liturgies, etc. But before all this, the Spred catechist looks into the eye of a friend with special needs and discovers the beauty manifest there. This sense of beauty pushes into the background all the deformities and miseries that matter less. They then take their place in the background. What is now in the foreground?

 “Love is more than a series of benevolent actions. Those actions

 have their source in a union increasingly directed toward others,

 considering them of value, worthy, pleasing and beautiful apart from

 their physical or moral appearances. Our love for others, for who

 they **are** moves us to seek the best for their lives.” (#94 Fratelli Tutti)

When there are moments of struggle in the process of accompaniment, the Spred catechist is never alone. Each catechist and the friend with special needs belongs to a community of six other catechists and six special friends as well as the core group of catechists. Everyone carefully moves out to accompany one another. We all reach the moment when we realize we are all building a community of faith together.

From the very beginning of the accompaniment process, the Spred catechist and the friend with special needs find themselves in a sacred space. Far from the catechist grasping for affection from a friend or a friend desperately trying to manipulate a catechist, both find their reason for being together in this sacred space. This space has been prepared for them as the celebration room, or sacred room. In this space the struggle of accompaniment bears fruit.

Some may see accompaniment as going hand in hand down the path of faith on a sunny day and then eventually going down a beautiful path with all the People of God to catch a glimmer of the glory of God. This is our goal but the reality is that accompaniment is often very hard. Yet when we support one another, there is growth, even if it is little by little. Then there comes that magic moment when we can say, “when we are happy to be together, Jesus is with us!”

 “When we live out a spirituality of drawing nearer to others and

 seeking their welfare, our hearts are opened wide to the Lord’s

 greatest and most beautiful gifts. ... Whenever our eyes are opened

 to acknowledge the other, we grow in the light of faith and knowledge

 of God. ... This openness of the heart is a source of joy. We do not

 live better when we flee, hide, refuse to share, stop giving and lock

 ourselves up in our own comforts. ...If we share our lives with others

 and generously give of ourselves, we have to realize that every person

is worthy of our giving. Not for their physical appearance, their abilities, their language, their way of thinking, or for any satisfaction that we might receive but rather because they are God’s handiwork, God’s creation. God created this person in the image of God and so reflects God’s glory. Every person is the object of God’s infinite tenderness.” (#272-274 Joy of the Gospel)

The Directory for Catechesis is very clear that accompaniment for faith development is to lead our friends with special needs into a sense of belonging in the People of God. This sense of belonging is celebrated in the sacraments of initiation (Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Communion.) These sacraments are steps along the journey of faith development but they are not to be the focus of all catechesis. The focus is faith development, before, during and after the sacraments. The sacraments themselves open the door to a more profound belonging in the liturgical assembly.

 “Catechesis cannot be thought of merely as preparation for the sacraments

 but must be understood in relationship to liturgical experience.” (#96 Directory)

It is quite understandable that families would focus on sacramental inclusion for their loved one because for so long this was an issue on every level of church life. A parent declares their deathbed desire for one of their children with special needs to receive Communion, parents show up asking for Communion for a son or daughter with tears running down their faces. While respecting their profound desires, the catechist assures sacramental inclusion while beginning the process of accompaniment with the family itself. Bit by bit, we reach a sacramental goal on our way, but our path opens out further into the future - our greater belonging to the People of God in faith.

“Persons with disabilities are called to the fullness of sacramental life, even in the presence of severe disorders. The sacraments are gifts from God, and the liturgy even before being rationally understood, needs to be lived: therefore no one can refuse the sacraments to persons with disabilities. The community that is able to discover the beauty and joy of faith of which they are capable becomes richer. Pastoral inclusion and involvement in liturgical action, especially on Sundays, is therefore important. Persons with disabilities can become adept in the lofty dimensions of faith that include sacramental life, prayer and the proclamation of the Word.” (#372 Directory)

We ourselves are aware that it is only because Jesus, the Alpha and Omega, accompanies us that we are able to live a life of faith and be able to accept the role and mission of being a Spred catechist. We are only too aware that this is a time of transition within the life of the Church. Parishes are being merged and closed. Spred communities of faith are being moved around in the process and all the sacred spaces so lovingly set up are being taken down and rebuilt in new settings. On top of that we are at a distance from those we have agreed to accompany. Until the virus fades, we have to discover new ways of belonging together. We are not letting go of one another! Some day we will be happy to be together again. We wait, we pray, we hope.

 Sr. Mary Therese Harrington

 Archdiocese of Chicago Spred Staff

1.Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization, Directory for Catechesis, US Conference of Bishops, Washington DC, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City, 2020.

2. Evangelii Gaudium, The Joy of the Gospel, US Conference of Bishops Washington DC Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013.

3. Fratelli Tutti, On Fraternity and Social Friendship, US Conference of Bishops, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020.

SPRED TEAM MEMBER RETIRES

Recently, Mary Ann Newman announced her intention to retire from Spred. In her written announcement she wrote, “I would like to take this opportunity to thank the SPRED staff and all SPRED catechists throughout the Archdiocese of Chicago for all your support during my 28 years with SPRED. It has been a privilege to be part of the Spred mission for nearly three decades of my life. I have met many wonderful people working for SPRED. Thank you for your kindness to me. I wish everyone who is involved in Spred ministry the best!”

And we, members of the Spred team, say, “THANK YOU Mary Ann! You have been such a vital member, especially in keeping accurate records of all Spred participants. We are able to connect with one another and support one another thanks to your unfailing effort. Please pray that someone with your skill and dedication will respond to our need to continue your service to Spred members throughout the Archdiocese. We will miss you.

