



SPRED

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Fr. James H. McCarthy has been a diocesan priest of the Archdiocese of Chicago. He has been the director of SPRED Chicago since 1960. On August 5, 2022, he passed away. In May, 2019, he agreed to share his thoughts in this interview reprinted from that month. May he rest in peace, good and faithful servant.

Fr. Jim, what are your favorite moments in SPRED at this time?

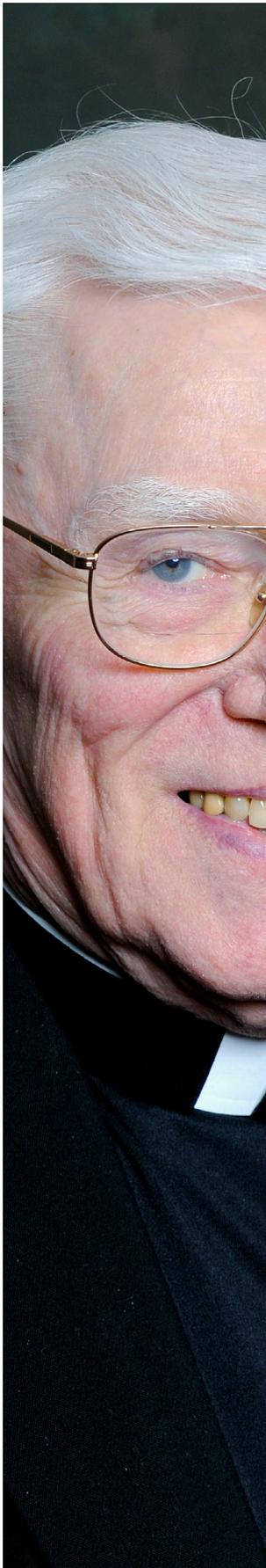
I greatly enjoy our moments of silence together in our SPRED celebrations. I cannot look at our friends with intellectual disabilities without seeing my brother Jerry who was very silent. I think of all our heartbreak over Jerry and all our friends. They live in shadows. I want my life to bring joy to them and to their families and friends. They need joy to live. They need light-hearted moments in communities. When they are together with those who love them, you can see the sun rising. I want anything that can bring light and lessen their burdens. A parent recently told me that the one time she is sure to see her daughter happy is in her SPRED group. This meant so much to me.

Why do you think these moments are important?

Actually the anxiety of parents was at the root of the development of SPRED. I found so many letters in a file asking why their son or daughter could not celebrate First Communion. I was surprised that this issue does not have priority. Fifty years ago, I wanted to have this issue confronted in parishes. It seems everyone has issues, but when the needs of our friends with intellectual disabilities is presented, the question is always, “who cares?” You can be sure parents and friends care. Our goal from the beginning was to widen the circle of those who care.

Religion has been identified with ideas. There is a lot more going on in faith than ideas. Ideas in themselves just don't cut it with our friends with intellectual and developmental disabilities. So often the ideas are rooted in an “essentialist” mentality; “What is a sacrament?” “Who is God?” “What is salvation?” “What is faith?”

With our friends, we need to go beyond the ‘essentialist’ to a more ‘existentialist’ mentality. We have to ask “what is happening now? Right in front of us? With this person?” This leads us into a friendship mentality. Relationships color everything in the here and now. We build a network of relationships in SPRED. Within this network, the ultimate response to the stress, anxiety, despair, confusion, conflict, suffering is found in the Eucharist. When we gather everyone for the Eucharist, there is a deep silence after the Liturgy of the Word, and the Communion. In this deep, deep silence, everything falls into the abyss of God's mercy and love. A deeper unity takes place in the assembly. This is how it should be for all of us, and all of those with issues who are at one with us.



How do these moments come about?

Last night we had a gathering of SPRED catechists to prepare for this Sunday SPRED Family Liturgy. I am the happiest about these family gatherings within the parish community liturgies. Our SPRED Center chapel provides a setting to work out what could be helpful during these liturgies. We needed to be some kind of model. Now there are SPRED Family Liturgies all over the Archdiocese of Chicago and in other dioceses that use the SPRED model of catechesis. There is such a natural connection between our catechesis and liturgy. When those with disabilities have been in SPRED communities of faith for catechesis, they bring a distinct quality to liturgy. They may have short attention spans, but in the moments that they are present, they are all there. They have developed the capacity to focus. They are curious. They really want to be in friendship with everyone. In the Eucharist prayer, we ask that we may all be gathered into one, and we experience being gathered into one.

My deepest joy has been to have a catechesis that brings life and to have that life celebrated in liturgy. This catechesis and liturgy is devoid of judging one another, being negative toward one another. It is rooted in respect, care and love.

I suspect this is also why people, catechists and friends stay in SPRED. They linger after gathering. They linger in their memories also. Remembering is a call for presence. So often, long after someone has had to leave a SPRED group, we hear from them about how much it meant to them to have been in SPRED.

I am always in awe at the quality of presence in both catechesis and liturgy. Presence changes everything.

From the beginning, we wanted everyone to be blessed with the grace of presence. We knew that the environment was most important to develop friendships. We have developed a place and helped others to develop such places where people are not stressed. They can move around and interact peacefully.

This helped us with people who cannot talk or comprehend much. When we really went to our friends on the margins, we discovered their need for a secure and familiar place. We discovered how important it was to be at peace. Thomas Merton talked about the difference between knowledge and realization. We know we cannot work with our friends only with elements of knowledge but we certainly can work with elements of realization. We can build bonds even without talking. We can live within these bonds and be happy to be together. We can sense a deep assent internally in our friends. We see change before our eyes. Something is happening.

We know in a deep way ourselves that an experience is real and that this is a kind of 'knowing' that is deeper than the verbal exchanges that lead to essential knowing. Our friends may not be able to recite answers in reply to our questions, but we know that they live a life that is more important. We can reflect back on what has happened; they only experience 'something' that leaves them at peace and full of joy.

Our catechesis is a catechesis of remembering. We remember a kind of summons from Someone to be present ourselves to the Someone who is present to us.

How does one get to the inside of things? This happens through evocation, remembering, calling to mind, swimming around in a memory until it becomes alive, pleasant. This breaks down walls of resistance, distraction, anxiety. When there is contentment, both catechesis and liturgy are possible.

I really question the emphasis on knowing the faith, when one can live faith and be nourished and supported in life. It is more important to move from talking about something to living something. To move comprehension aside to be blasted by the existence of Someone does not require gimmicks and toys. It requires a way of being in the world. The head of someone may be damaged but the heart is most often open to being friends, to being in relationship. This changes everything. It is the Christ who makes all things new.

On the surface, there are many wounded people in SPRED. The cross is more than apparent. But the wounded people can become people who are cherished. Then the cross has become a tree of life. The thirst for love is slated in these relationships. There is joy and moments of peace. Our friends want to come to this space, so do catechists, so do families. What is it? It is grace in action. This taste of the beyond is at work in our Eucharistic liturgies. It is inexpressible. An ignored person can become someone. This experience of ministry makes me very happy. This is my work and my life. This is my meaning. I cherish it.

Who have been the people who influenced you?

I am so very grateful to three priests who opened this way forward for me, Fr. Eucharist Paulhus from Quebec, Fr. Jean Mesny from Lyons, France and their professor Fr. Henri Bissionnier from Paris, France. They developed the Method Vivre. We are extending their work in the Archdiocese of Chicago and in the dioceses that we have helped to use this method. These communities are in Australia, South Africa, Malta, Scotland, Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland, Mexico and many dioceses in the United States.

I believe that the implications for other dioceses and parishes are profound. Each culture and each country will take the Method Vivre and make it their own, but they will always discover that the key is to take everyday stuff to a new awareness that everything is alive with Presence. Our work is to develop our capacity to become aware. When we celebrate this, those who are marginalized pass through something and are, as a result, more alive.

I began my priestly ministry with a pastor in Lake County, Msgr. Peter Meegan, who had been the secretary to Bishop Bernard Sheil. Both men were totally engaged with those in need. They prepared me to be totally present to those on the margins of society. Yet they both knew how to work with leaders in public life. They taught me to work in such a way that everyone I met would be drawn into ministry in one way or another. When I was brought into the Office for Religious Education, in those days the CCD office, I worked with the students in the city public high schools. This helped me to become familiar with all the parishes in the Archdiocese of Chicago. At this time, I became aware of the families with members having special needs. So I began the first groups at St. Mary in Evanston, St. Paul of the Cross in Park Ridge, St. Francis Xavier in La Grange and St. John Fisher on the South Side. Everything grew from these first beginnings.

Sr. Mary Therese Harrington
SPRED Chicago



CHICAGO SPRED CALENDAR**Distribution of Material**

SPRED Center, Contact: 312-842-1039
 Sept. 10, 2022, 10 a.m. to Noon

Training (Orientations) 2022

SPRED Center, Contact: 312-842-1039
 General Orientation (2-1)
 Sept. 17, 24, Oct. 1, 1 – 6 p.m.
 Role Orientation (3-1)
 Oct. 15, 22, 1 – 6 p.m.

Helper Catechist Role Orientation

SPRED Center, Contact: 312.842.1039
 Spanish: Oct. 8, 1 – 6 p.m.
 English: Nov. 5, 1 – 6 p.m.

SPRED Center: 2956 South Lowe Avenue

Observation, SPRED Center, 312.842.1039
 6–10 Group, Oct. 17, Nov. 7, 21, Dec. 5 at 6 p.m.
 11–16 Group, Oct. 18, Nov. 8, 22, Dec. 6 at 7 p.m.
 17/21 Group, Oct. 18, Nov. 8, 22, Dec. 6 at 7 p.m.
 22+ Group, Oct. 17, Nov. 7, 21, Dec. 5 at 7 p.m.

Observation, Queen of Angels

4412 North Western Avenue, Chicago, IL 60625

17–21 Group, Oct. 5, 19, Nov. 2, 16, Dec. 7
 22+ Group, Oct. 4, 6, 8, 18, 20, 22,
 Nov. 1, 3, 5, 15, 17, 19 and Dec. 6, 8, 10
 Reservations: Julia Hess, jchqofa3@gmail.com

SPRED Family Liturgy, SPRED Center
 11 a.m., Oct. 2, Nov. 6, Dec. 4

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