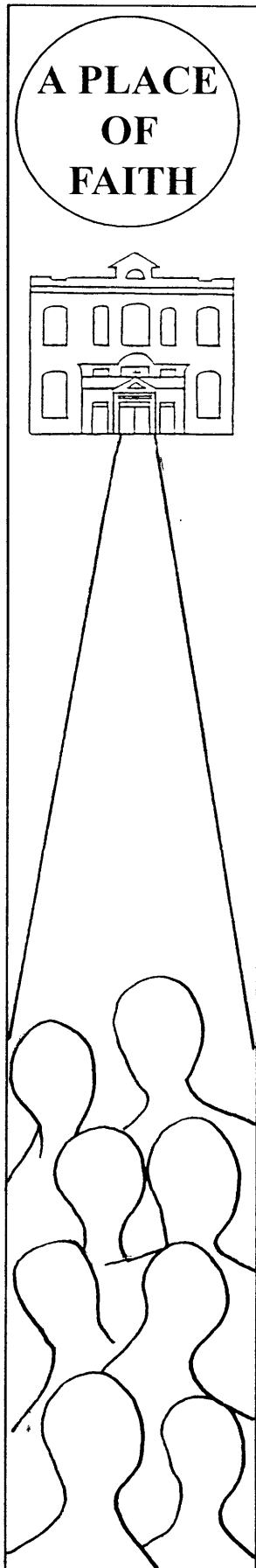


Every Tuesday night - since 1968. The Spred staff is completing 30 years of 12 catechetical sessions annually. In the Bridgeport area, four different age groups of persons with developmental disabilities are open and available for public viewing by parish leaders. Since 1968, 1,440 total community sessions have been observable. Has this enterprise been worth the time and effort?

“Catechetical models” are where catechists can come and watch other artisans at work. On the other hand administrative offices tend to turn over content and method to book publishers who hire experts to write and conduct workshops. With an eye to the market place, such texts are reedited and repackaged every few years. Our experience told us such a strategy was a forfeiture of our diocesan responsibility. Moreover as we were working with persons who have attention disorders, who cannot read, who have sensory motor difficulties, who, socially, experience daily rejections - we could not adopt the old adage, “If you can’t do, teach”. Nor could we relate to volunteers as though we were able to teach art history but not able to paint a picture. We had to be able to do both, to do and to teach others how to do. This required observation studios where volunteers who wanted to be catechists could watch catechetical artisans work their craft.

The drive to establish observation booths attached to the catechetical model environments came from the insights of Sr. Mary Therese Harrington, S.H. Sr. Susanne Gallagher, S.P., certified as a Montessori directress by the AMS, created and worked out the preparation environment and the preparation process, especially appropriate for different age levels. The whole endeavor was an alternative to training catechists by funneling doctrine and methods courses in academic settings. These observation booths were to be in a pastoral setting, not in a university lab, and for ordinary parish lay people volunteering after working hours. Seeing would be believing.

In 1968, two mobile classrooms were placed next to the CCD office on Fry Street. Contacting local pastors, children from the ages of 6 to 10 and from ages 11 to 16 were gathered together into two groups. The staff became a community of catechists. Over the next few years, two additional groups for 17 to 21 year olds and those 22 years and older were gathered. In 1973, Fr. James McCarthy was assigned as pastor to St. John Nepomucene parish which had closed a school several years prior. Classrooms were refashioned into catechetical environments while old cloakrooms became the observation booths with one way viewing mirrors. For five years, both the mobile classrooms (north side of the city)



and St. John's environment (south side of the city) ran concurrently. After ten years, budgetary pressure and different perspectives on priorities forced the closure of the mobile classrooms. Spred Administration moved out of the Archdiocesan CCD Office to the parochial setting of St. John which was chosen because of its geographical centrality and easy access to every major expressway. Even after the parish of St. John closed in 1990, the Spred Center remained on Lowe Avenue with its booths open to other parish Spred catechists to observe four different age groups.

As a staff we know from our experience what the model catechetical groups can offer an observer -

A Place of Credibility

Credibility does not mean perfection. It means rather that pastoral catechesis with persons of all ages with developmental disabilities is not just an altruistic dream but that there is no discrepancy between the professed ideals and what is actually practiced. We felt this was an authentic way to resource parish Spred catechists. Does the material strike the mark? If not, what is wrong with it? Can it be edited? Above all, the grasp of recognition must be true. What do catechists find difficult? Do our friends give evidence - and what kind - of an illumination, a sense - an awareness - of the sacred, a sense of a Personal God, a sense of Christ, and a sense of His Church that is actually lived? This is an easy assertion which can be just as easily denied. However, when one actually sees a catechetical session, and experiences its quality and power then it is hard to challenge the convinced.

A Place of Accountability

The demonstration models open to observation are touchstones for other parish catechists, for parents. Is something genuine happening? A touchstone is a test by which to try a thing's qualities: a black siliceous stone allied to flint was used to test the purity of gold or silver by the streak left on the stone when rubbed by the metal. Frequently seasoned catechists come with the adult catechists to observe. The models become points of comparison. They are existential standards, criteria, gauges, yardsticks, means of determining what a thing could be. People leave remarking, "We can do that;" or "That's the way we do it!" The Spred staff hangs itself out to be seen; in this way, it makes itself answerable to families, pastoral leaders and fellow catechists.

A Breakthrough Place

How often over these years, parents, with great trepidation, have observed a session. There is great anxiety especially for their children, young adults or adults who require more pervasive parental care. "I am not sure how my child would relate to a group." The social demand that a community presents - by its very existence - can be very threatening for a protective parent. It has been refreshing to see the surprise when parents see their son or daughter push out from shore in their own boat. What feels like separation can quickly be transformed into a moment of enlightenment.

A Place Of Learning By Heart

A different kind of catechesis is what is seen. It is not precision material, abstract, something available only to formal operational thought. It is initiation into Mystery. It is learning by heart - not repetition, nor memorization but participation in a quasi-liturgy of the Word within a community. Within a ritual-like exercise of evocation, vivid remembering

from life, an energy draws the participants horizontally together while simultaneously directs them vertically into the Lord's presence. This format continuously massages hospitality, liberty, and self-expression. It is Good News.

A Place Of Entry

Parish leaders who are just beginning Spred are apprehensive - unsure about how to convey information to new volunteers. People follow hesitantly. We would urge like Jesus in the gospel of St. John "What are you looking for?" "Come and see." (John 1:38,39) When an interviewer asked Anne Sexton, the poet, "What is the purpose of poetry?" She replied, "I think it is the same as what Kafka said of a book, "It is an axe to break the frozen sea within us." Catechetical models serve the same purpose. They are points of entry into being influenced, perhaps even convinced that persons with developmental disabilities are capable of faith. The doubt has to be acknowledged first of all: then in this suspended state, come and see. It is the Method Vivre in operation in a prepared environment, within a believing community that can be the axe to break the doubt.

A Place of Discourse

There is a host for the observation booth. Observers are helped initially to read the written session, to understand the various moments there are in the rhythm of the session as it will unfold, and finally are guided into the booths. The observers watch what transpires for about two hours. Following the session the observers fill in a questionnaire with four simple easy questions about their own situation and about the session they just witnessed. What is important is the free exchange of questions, answers and insights among the observers, booth host and staff members present. In October 1981, the Spred Newsletter dealt with over 300 responses from observers who were grouped as catechetical trainees, practicing catechists, parents, possible catechists and general inquirers. For Spred training, two observations are expected. Skeptics, true believers, all are welcome.

A Place Of Worship

The Spred catechetical groups at St John's naturally influenced the liturgical worship, environment and style of the parish. In December 1973, on the first Sunday of each month at a regularly scheduled Sunday Eucharist, we began incorporating much of the style, pace, music and emphasis common in the catechesis. The step to seeing the Eucharistic liturgy as a model for observation was easy. The involvement with the lives of our friends with disabilities and familiarity with the signs in catechesis drew us into a simply crafted liturgy with the accents on pace, on the appeal to all the senses, fragrances, sacred melodies, sacred movement, etc. A Sunday Eucharist at the Spred Center on the First Sunday of the month is a simple and profound experience, one that can be replicated within the parishes of the participants. Sometimes it is inclusion in reverse and rings with authenticity because the kind of liturgy it is, is best described as rudimentarily evangelical - it satisfies the belonging every Christian seeks.

A Place of Renewal, Encouragement

Jesus tells us, "Do not let your hearts be troubled...I am going to prepare a place for you...so that where I am you also may be" (John 14:1-3) Yes, this endeavor of catechetical models has been worth all the time and effort, the present is so rich and we are given a glimpse of the future.

Rev. James H. McCarthy, Chicago Spred Director



SPRED CALENDAR

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OBSERVATION

6-10 Year olds Mondays 6:00 p.m.
April 20, May 4

11-16 Year olds Tuesdays 7:00 p.m.
April 21, May 5

17-21 Year olds Thursdays 7:30 p.m.
April 2, 30

22 and Older Mondays 7:30 p.m.
April 6, 20

SPRED FAMILY LITURGIES
April 5, May 3

SPRED CENTER

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Directions: Exit 31st Street from Lakeshore Drive or
Dan Ryan, West to Lowe Ave, north to 30th and Lowe.

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