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PLACE

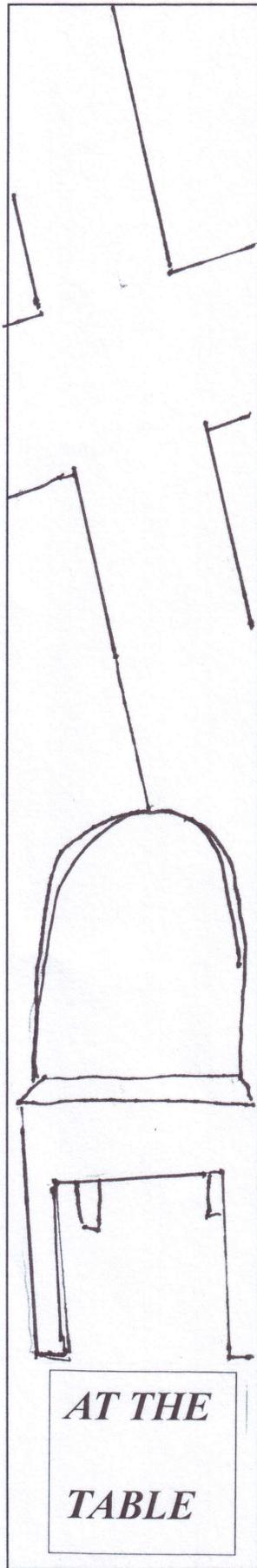
On a Tuesday afternoon, a few hours before our first Spred session of the year, I received a phone call from our leader catechist informing me about a new friend who would be coming and would I please accompany her in our group. I was asked to take the role of a helper catechist, unlike in the past when I simply observed the whole group during a session. I felt excited and nervous at the same time. This would be my first time in the role of a helper catechist in our Spred group. When I arrived at the Spred center that evening, I was feeling apprehensive. My heart was beating fast as I entered our preparation room. Our activity catechist welcomed me and accompanied me to Marie, the friend who I was to be with. As we approached, she was working with the sand activity in the corner of our preparation room. When I was introduced to her, she looked at me for a second and then offered her right hand to shake my hand. I told her my name and gave her a smile as we shook hands. I did not hear a verbal response from her.

I then realized the other part of the conversation I had earlier that afternoon from our leader catechist. She told me that our friend did not speak and that she is on the autism spectrum. The communication barrier was one of my main concerns about working with my new friend. I was not quite sure how I was going to build a relationship with a person who was non-verbal.

After shaking hands with Marie, I pulled up a chair and sat across from her at the table. I accompanied her as she quietly worked with the sand and seashells which were in a large container. She scooped the sand with a small shell and poured it like a flowing waterfall. While she held the shell in her left hand to scoop and pour the sand, she was catching and pouring sand with her right hand. She was attentively focused on the sand as she worked with the activity.

My anxiousness and worries started to subside gradually while I was with her. I believe her calming presence helped me get over my anxieties. I felt comfortable with her. She was at ease and did not disrupt any of the others during the whole session. She did not walk away from me and I observed from her behavior that she wanted to be with me. I believe we were both comfortable with one another. I was grateful and joyful that we were able to bond at our first meeting. It gave me hope that her presence and involvement in our first session would be beneficial for her whole faith formation.

In our Spred community many parents have shared stories about their sad and painful experiences of rejection and isolation because of their child's condition. These stories convey a social reality that disabilities can lead to being isolated and marginalized. Through no fault of their own or their families, our friends can be marginalized in parish settings, despite church documents that uphold their belonging to the family of God.



Many families are discouraged from attending the Sunday liturgy with their family member with disabilities because of the ways they have been treated by others in the assembly. There have been occasions when people with disabilities and their families were reprimanded and asked to leave the church because others could not cope with some of the difficulties the person with disabilities was having. In the Pastoral Guidelines for for Sacramental Access in the Archdiocese of Chicago, it states that “the parish community provides continuity in the sacramental life of all its members, including those with intellectual and developmental disabilities. If each person does not have a place before the table of the Word of God and the table of the Bread of God, where is there a place?”

There are questions that prevent those with intellectual disabilities from being welcomed at liturgical celebrations. Some ask: are they capable of having faith? Can they acquire faith and explain it? Are they capable of knowing their religion? Do they understand the meaning of prayers, hymns, gestures, sacraments? Can they really participate in liturgy?

These are pressing issues that we attempt to address throughout our catechist formation in Spred. As catechists, we play a vital role in supporting the rights of people with disabilities to share the liturgy with all believers. One way to achieve this is to provide the faith formation that will empower them to truly belong in our liturgical communities. We believe that through our Spred community of faith, our friends become more comfortable entering into the worship experience of the whole church.

Pope Francis is not the first pope to advocate for people with disabilities. In May 2009, Pope Benedict XVI visited and commended the community of Regina Pacis Center in Amman, Jordan for their outstanding professional competence, compassionate care and resolute promotion of the rightful place in society of those with special needs.¹ He encouraged everyone to ensure that suitable training and opportunities for people with disabilities be provided to facilitate their integration into society. Let our parish be like Regina Pacis Center, a place that provides services needed by our friends. Let us give them access to sacramental life. Parish leaders need sensitivity and the ability to listen attentively. They are not responding merely to the person with the disability but to his or her whole family. Patience, respect, and cooperation are necessary both on the part of the family requesting support and on the part of the parish trying to be supportive.

We cannot underestimate the power of being part of a community. Our friends with disabilities may not have the same cognitive capacity as we have to understand prayers, hymns, gestures and sacraments. We have to understand that faith is neither fundamentally abstract nor purely conceptual. It is about relationships. For that reason persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities can be educated in faith by providing them the opportunity to experience our faith. Each is a human being. Each person has his or her own way of relating to others. Abstract or conceptual knowing may be limited but there are other ways of knowing, such as symbolic or intuitive knowing and response. Our friends have a strong affective capacity to make others feel valued. Let the relationship they share with us, the friendship, our experience together in Spred become the vehicle for their physical, psychological and spiritual growth.

One of our fellow catechists shared this reflection: “Spred means creating bonds of new friendships, a beautiful sense of community, learning to see Christ in everyday situations, knowing that I need a Shepherd; not being afraid to grow, to love, to forgive; seeing my friend with disabilities

for the first time lean forward with her hands outstretched to hear what Jesus wants to say to her today.”²

It has been more than forty years since the U.S. Catholic Bishops issued the pastoral statement concerning people with disabilities.³ Today, there is a greater need to revive the message of hope contained in that pastoral letter issued in November 1978. We need to willingly accept the responsibility of advocacy, the determination to protect the rights of people with disabilities in society and in the church and above all the right to love and to be loved.

In 1985 the late Joseph Cardinal Bernardin of Chicago published a document for people with developmental disabilities where he called them his dearest friends. With much love and compassion, he expressed to them that God loves them very much; that they belong to God’s people; and they are full members of the church. In his closing message, he lovingly said “I want you to know that you have a place at the table of the Lord.”⁴

Despite the initiatives of the Catholic Church and the other faith denominations over the past years, a large gap still exists between the ideals that the Church upholds and the reality that the people with disabilities still experience in parishes. Their presence and involvement in the liturgy are still threatened. For many, accommodating people with intellectual and developmental disabilities in the liturgy is an inconvenience and providing a special ministry for them is not considered of value when it entails financial constraints. But by virtue of their baptism they have the right to receive from the church a teaching and a formation⁵ that permits them to attain a true Christian life.

Jennie Weiss Block, a Dominican laywoman and practical theologian argues, “what happens to those who are excluded? Certainly, those of us who gather as a community to meet our own spiritual needs prefer not to think about what happens to the people who are excluded or imagine how they might feel, particularly when we are not sure what we should do to become more inclusive. However, we must think about it. We must reflect on the consequences of our exclusivity.”

Pope Francis told those in the audience in one of his Eucharistic celebrations in Rome that when St. Pius X ruled in 1910 that children as young as 7 years old could receive Communion, similar objections were raised: “But that child won’t understand” he said the critics complained. But St. Pius went ahead, knowing: “Each one of us has a different way of understanding things. One understands one way and another in a different manner, but we can all know God.”

Every Sunday I always see Marie with her mom, dad and grandmother at our liturgy at the Spred center. I admire them for their love and dedication as they accompany her on her faith journey. I am also inspired by Marie who does not merely attend the liturgy but also participates according to her own capacity. When I see her, I remember how she leads me during our Spred session with her reflective presence, her deep awareness and loving attentiveness to others.

Marlon Bobier-Vargas, SVD
Chicago Spred Catechist

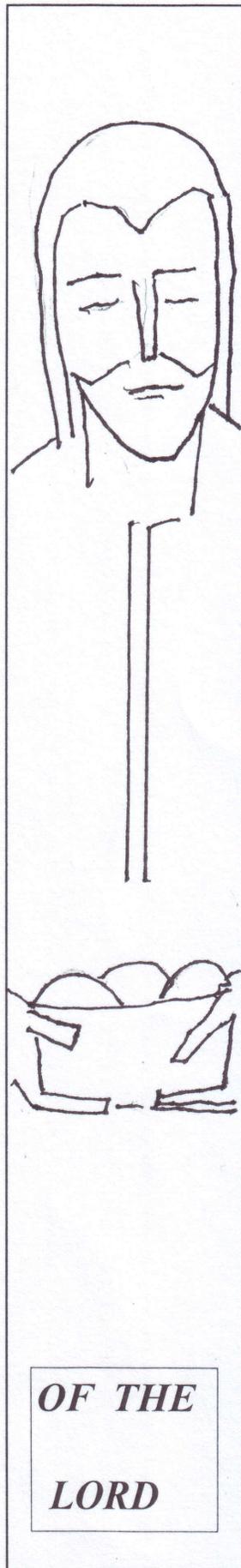
1. Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI, May 8, 2009

2. *Voices: Finding the Joy of Coming Together in Faith*, Spred, Chicago 2015

3. *Pastoral Statement of US Bishops on Handicapped People*, Washington DC, Nov. 16, 1978

4. *Access to the Sacraments of Initiation and Reconciliation: Pastoral Guidelines*, Chicago 1985

5. *Catechesi Tradendae, General Directory for Catechesis*, Rome, 1997



OF THE

LORD

SPRED CALENDAR

Spred Training

Introduction to Spred, English and Spanish

Sept. 14, 21, 28, 1:00 to 6:00 pm

Spred Center, 30th and Lowe, Chicago, 312-842-1039

St. Francis de Sales, Lake Zurich, English

135 Buesching Rd (south of Rt.22) 2nd fl

Role Orientation, English and Spanish

October 12, 19, 1:00 to 6:00 Spred Center

Helper Catechist Training, English and Polish

October 5, 1:00 to 6:00 Spred Center

Helper Catechist Training, Spanish

Oct. 26, 1:00 to 6:00 Spred Center

Observation

6-10 6:00 p.m. Monday Sept. 16,30, Oct. 14, Nov.4,18

11-16 7:00 p.m. Tuesday Sept. 17, Oct. 1, 15, Nov.5,19

22+ 7:00 p.m. Monday Sept 16,30, Oct.14, Nov.4,18

Spred Family Liturgies

2956 So. Lowe Ave, Chicago 11:00 312-842-1039

Oct. 6, Nov. 3, Dec. 1, Feb. 2, Mar. 1, April 5, May 3

Mamre Dinner Dance Fundraiser

Nov. 16, 2019 Crystal Sky Banquets, McCook IL

Visit our web site: www.spred-chicago.org