



SPRED

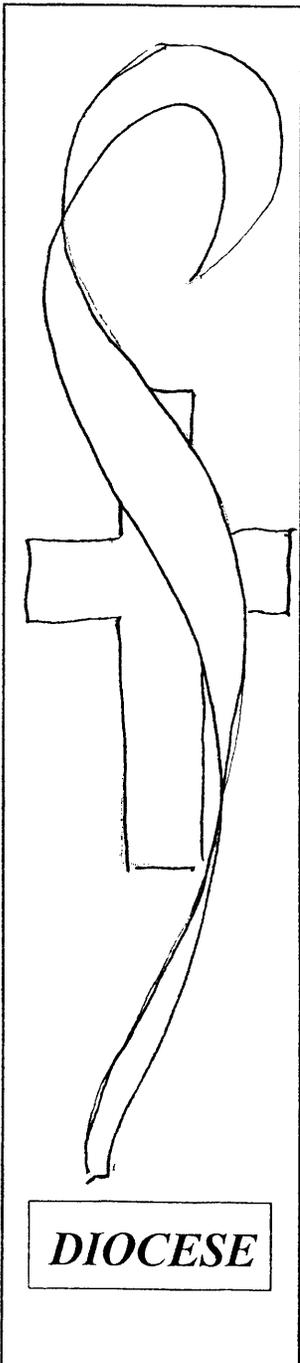
Archdiocese of Chicago

SPECIAL RELIGIOUS EDUCATION DIVISION

2956 S. Lowe • Chicago, Illinois 60616 • 312/842-1039

January 2010

Volume 78, Number 1



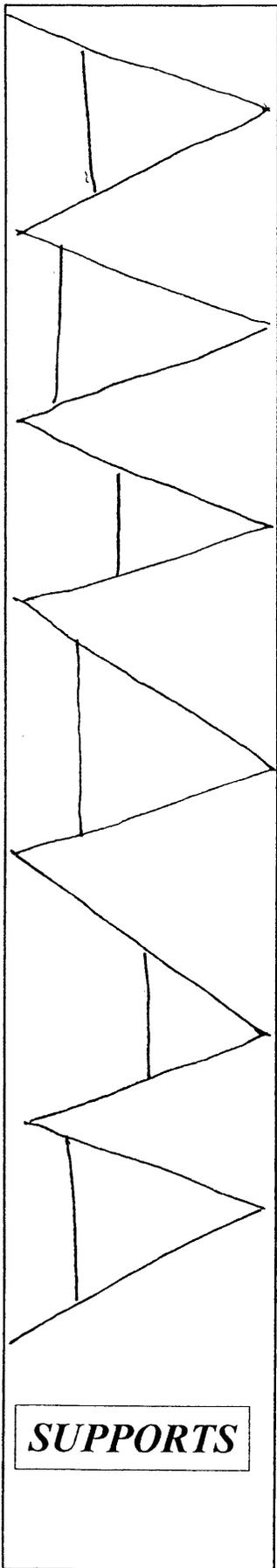
The year was 1960. There was a folder full of requests from parents in a file drawer in the Archdiocesan Office. Parents were writing letters with a desperate tone, asking the Cardinal to provide resources for religious development for their children with developmental disabilities.

Fr. James McCarthy was assistant director of the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine and was charged with the responsibility of providing days of recollection for the students in 109 public high schools in the Archdiocese. He became aware of the folder of letters from parents and received the go-ahead to look into what could be done. What resources could the Archdiocese develop so that those with developmental disabilities could be prepared to experience belonging in the Church? As Father Jim began to work evenings and Saturdays with educators and parents he realized there was a pressing need to find a suitable method for faith education with persons with developmental disabilities.

Sr. Mary Therese Harrington, S.H. joined Fr. McCarthy in an effort to develop resources and to research the catechetical materials currently in use in the United States. Following this search, attention was given to the European and Canadian scene. Sr. Mary translated various works from the French that dealt with persons with developmental disabilities and discovered the works of Fr. Eucharist Paulhus from Sherbrook, Canada and Fr. Jean Mesny from Lyons, France. The gift of their work has been the inspiration for the development of catechesis for persons with developmental disabilities in the Archdiocese of Chicago and through Chicago to other dioceses in the United States, England, Scotland, N. Ireland, Ireland, Australia, Malta, Mexico and S. Africa. The work begun in 1960 as a spare-time activity by Fr. McCarthy became a full time ministry named Spred, Special Religious Development. The elements of the Spred model developed providentially over a period of several years. 1

From 1964 to 1968 a variety of study weeks with Frs. Paulhus and Mesny allowed the Chicago team to grasp and adopt the method, *Vivre*, as designed by Fr. Mesny and to study the work of Fr. Paulhus on the religious educability of persons with mental retardation.

A pilot center was initiated in 1968 where the staff and volunteer catechists experienced symbolic catechesis with youth in the 11-16 age group. Trust and patience were needed to become comfortable with the new pedagogy. An observation booth was constructed so that parents, parish leaders and volunteers could be invited to see and experience the Spred model and feel confident enough to develop centers throughout the Archdiocese. Training courses were designed so that parish volunteers would receive an adequate orientation



to symbolic catechesis and could engage in various types of learning throughout the year. Roles within Spred faith communities were sculpted so that the responsibility for growth and development in a group could be shared among the leader, the activity catechist, the parish chairperson and helper catechists. The staff began to write sessions to be used with four age groupings of persons 6-10, 11-16, 17-21 and 22+ years of age.

The beginnings of Spred coincided with the convening of the Vatican Council and International Catechetical Study Weeks held in Eichstaett, Bangkok and Medellin, all of which sparked a period of renewal in the field of catechetics. Emphasis placed on the core of the message and the means of effectively communicating the Good News of our Salvation created an opening to address the need to proclaim the message to persons with developmental disabilities. The method adopted for use in Spred ministry embodied the description of catechesis from the Medellin conference. "Catechesis is the means by which any section of society interprets its own situation and expresses it in the light of the Gospel!"

Spred catechists began to form small parish communities of faith to welcome those with developmental disabilities. When families heard that the Archdiocese was beginning a catechetical program to serve persons with developmental disabilities the number of requests from parents grew quickly. It became apparent in a short period of time that a system needed to be developed so that all who wished could have access to Spred catechesis.

Since the goal of Spred is to prepare persons with special needs for full belonging in the liturgical life of the parish, it made sense to look for someone from each parish to be resourceful in developing a Spred community. This person, the Spred chairperson, is missioned by the pastor to relate to families and those who have responsibility for persons with developmental disabilities who live in group homes in the parish. The chairperson works to root Spred ministry in the parish. The diocesan Spred team coordinates the work of chairpersons in each deanery in order to meet the needs of persons in each age grouping. Chairpersons are Spred catechists whose sense of mission is nurtured in the Spred community of faith and whose energies are untiring in view of the goal of inclusion for all.

"If we have a spirit of friendship, if we are a friend of God and a friend of the person with disabilities and we are able to go within the symbolic intentionality, then we possess the fundamental disposition to be a catechist."<sup>2</sup> These words of Fr. Paulhus describe the qualities one looks for in the parish Spred community. One of the significant challenges faced by those recruiting new volunteers is finding persons who are open to experience and appreciate relationships in view of the goal of communion with Jesus who through the Spirit leads us to the Father. Spred catechists welcome their friends with disabilities into the communion they know through their catechist preparation session. They gradually become one through the bonding that occurs, sharing life experiences, listening with the heart to the word of God and receiving the message of Jesus. The need to become comfortable with the process of interiorization is essential and occurs over a period of time. One cannot rely on precision material for growing in faith. One must assume the role of witness through the discovery of God's presence in one's lived experience within the community. A two track system has been developed so that a catechist preparation session precedes each catechesis with those who are welcomed for catechesis.<sup>3</sup> This diocesan resource is an essential support for those faithful believers in parishes who become Spred catechists and exercise the mission they have received to be a sign of God's love in the world.

The development of the role of the Spred chairperson was essential for the replication of centers and the need to establish ownership in the parish. The development of catechist communities was fundamental in view of the needs of those being welcomed. The invitation to belong in the Church community of faith is experienced through the witness of the catechists. Being welcomed into a Spred community of adult believers one can develop a sense of the sacred, a sense of the Church, a sense of Christ and a sense of God. One can know how to relate in faith, hope and love.

A challenge that has been formidable has been the effort to communicate the necessity to prepare a suitable environment for Spred catechesis. Once you are in a situation where you can't rely totally on words to carry meaning and you value the process that requires you to relate sensitively to your life experience as the starting point of the journey inward, you are forced to prepare an environment that supports your goal. You set aside time to be together in such a way that you become still and focus on the present. You are given the opportunity to choose how you will become ready to enter the sacred space where you will gather around the holy book of God's word. Apart from the time for preparation in space that supports a silence that is alive and engaging, the community will find it difficult if not impossible to experience a deep sense of communion. A Spred environment resembles the spirit of a chapel and as such initiates one into that sacred space.

Words will never be able to describe the Spred experience of catechesis. Knowing this prompted the establishment of space for observing sessions from the very beginning of the program. As one observes one participates in the experience. Seeing catechists model behavior that calls those in their charge to participate, animates the observer to be in harmony with the work of the community. One sees various types of communication. One's way of looking, tone of voice and gestures are powerful means of witnessing the desire to be together and grow in faith together. The experience of observation is a part of the training process for each catechist. It is a valuable resource open to every parent, and pastor and pastoral staff. The experience of the prepared environment and the catechist community in relationship to those they welcome for catechesis is responsible in large part for the growth of Spred centers in parishes. This diocesan support provides encouragement to those who may never have thought that they could participate in Spred ministry. It provides certitude for those who may have had doubts, that persons with developmental disabilities are educable in faith.

Looking back, one gives thanks to God that Fr. Jim McCarthy looked seriously at the need to respond to parents who were desperate for a diocesan resource that would prepare children with developmental disabilities for full participation in their parish liturgy. One gives thanks that the Archdiocese continues to support Spred ministry and thanks to pastors who take the ministry seriously, and encourage their members to develop Spred ministry. One encourages parents to step forward and ask for the development of Spred catechesis in their parish. The diocesan staff is ready to assist, providing onsite animation of parish members, training, materials, observation experiences, publications and other types of ongoing enrichment experiences.

Sr. Susanne Gallagher, S.P.  
Spred, Chicago

1. Spred Newsletter, September, 2009
2. Spred Newsletter, May, 2009
3. Spred Newsletter, October 2009

