



Recently Fr. Jim McCarthy, the Chicago Spred Director wrote to Fr. Jean Mesny in Lyons in France to ask him a few questions. **Fr. Jean Mesny is the author of the Method Vivre** which is the method of catechesis used in Spred Chicago and in Spred in eight other countries.

1. When did you begin your work in specialized catechesis?

In 1956 Fr. Eucharist Paulhus, a Canadian priest, who was working on his thesis on religious educability for children with mental impairments at the Catholic colleges of Institut de Pedagogie of Lyons, had created in Lyons, two catechism groups: one at the psychiatric Vinatier Hospital education center and the other at a center for children with severe developmental disabilities. Before leaving Lyons, he asked the director of Religious Education if he knew someone who could pursue the catechetical project. The latter, with whom I had worked since 1952, asked me whether I would accept the ministry considering the experience I had acquired in 1953-1954 at the Institut de Pedagogie. That is how it all started.

2. Was there a special reason for your pursuit of this field?

A special awareness influenced my decision: the chasm between the quality of the relationship with the so-called “inadequate” children and the “abstract” nature of the knowledge that I had acquired during my ten year university studies. I had to look into the matter very closely.

In order to meet, in catechesis, with these youth, who embodied another way of living, another frame of a thinking system that is so basic, so matter of fact and so alive, it seemed urgent to me to work on this research.

3. Just how did you develop the Method Vivre?

Canon Colomb allowed me to put the catechesis into its family, social and religious context: to take into account the psychology of every age, to be matter of fact, to take into account who talks to whom, (ambiance profane). From this point of view, what were the starting points for revelation which I wished to offer to those being catechized? Then one has to bring forward those elements from real life which could awaken the person’s spiritual attitude, (ambiance profane purifiee. One has to discover in the liturgy and the life of the church (saints, Christians, immediate surroundings) a way to the dimension of mystery, church life is necessary here, the ecclesial evocation. In this context we proclaim the Word through the Book of the Word. In this context, the Book of the Word read in Church reveals the meaning of the message. Finally the message is internalized through an activity, gestures, celebrations, singing.



4. Would you speak of the capacity of a person with developmental disabilities for a symbolic mentality?

For our people the emotions play a central part in the shaping of character. Fr. Bissonnier refers to that as the “passage from the sensitive to the rational and to intelligence.” I call that “the intelligence of the heart,” a phrase Fr. Bissonnier always loved to hear me say.

Our people live in perfect harmony with the real world, with people, things, etc. They can feel, sense the “reality” but are unable to analyse it. In such a manner, they commune with the very nature of things and people. That explains the richness of their encounters. Even though at first we do not seek to comprehend things, we let ourselves explore and “discover” that innermost part of ourselves which allows us to pass from the heart of reality to its spiritual dimension.

Following Heidegger’s reasoning, we can assume that when I look at a tree, it is not just a tree but it is the tree I am looking at, different from any other tree. Indeed, the way we look at it affects our sensitivity, our emotions, our personal experiences as regards nature, our predispositions to read the ‘divine’ in all of creation. It is up to us catechists to rediscover this unity in our own persons.

5. How were you able to work or develop your insights?

In Lyons, I was on the diocesan team for Religious Education. The director, Jean Vimort, who was closely following those with psychiatric problems became very interested in my research. In 1957, I founded the first diocesan service of specialized catechesis. At the same time, I brought together catechists from the twelve Centre-Est regional dioceses to a training in which the Ancey General Vicar took part as a theologian. I kept the psycho-pedagogic dimension. After that we worked in very close collaboration.

I eventually established a work commission composed of diocesan and specialized catechetical leaders. We shared our experience, our difficulties, our discoveries and set for the following session the orientations, the evaluations of which we discussed at every meeting. Finally, I initiated catechist study and teaching sessions in collaboration with psychiatrists, theologians, psychopedagogues (among whom we counted Fr. Paulhus). We also worked with a potter, to help us to discover the value of the earth, with the curator in chief of the Nicephore-Niepe museum for art education, and a teacher of body language expression.

6. In France, have you worked alone? On a parochial level, at University level, both?

In France, I attended Fr. Bissonnier’s study sessions which allowed me to exchange and share my experiences theologically and spiritually. I taught at the Institut Catholique de Paris, more specifically at the Institut Pastorale. However, the Center National d’Enseignement Religieux, the National Center for Religious Education - refused to give the Method Vivre a label. The leaders of the different national specialized catechetical services deliberately ignored the research studies undertaken in Lyons.

It was abroad that I was welcomed with the Method Vivre, on a parochial, university, and national level. Our work generated documents taking into account the mentality of each country, Quebec, Switzerland, Belgium, Luxemburg and other cities in Italy and Spain. This, as well as Chicago with its remarkable international center for formation.

7. Is there a readiness a form of consciousness that is open to entering into a symbolic experience?

There is an uncertainty, a kind of subconsciousness, some desire to go beyond the here and now that destabilizes our certainties that a tree is ..., water is....., a mountain is.... Something happens that makes you navigate in another terrain.

8. How do you feel about the quality and quantity of your influence on others through the Method Vivre?

In France, apart from a few catechized in Lyons, there is not much. Some authors copied and appropriated our material without giving credit, some of the Vivre documents are published. Canon Colomb told me one day: “Your catechesis has reached a great level of coherence whereas other trends are still entangled in speculations. He went on to say: “to include the Mystery of the Church is essential.”

8. Are you still writing or teaching?

I have taught until 2002. I own quite a collection of documents, teaching notes on the liturgical, eucharistic and pastoral action involving the symbolic dimension. The Method Vivre is rather unsettling and requires from catechists a personal introspection. It relies on the active forces of the human being in the heart of whom the Spirit works. This is very difficult in France, although the Method Vivre is at work in Chicago, Belgium and Switzerland.

9. Who were your influences? Theologically? Pedagogically?

In 1944 to 1950 I was influenced by innovative approaches to understanding church by among others, Fr. de Lubac, S.J., Antoine Chavasse, and Yves Congar, O.P. Hans Von Balthasar’s Trinitarian theological orientation of the creative act was important. The renewal liturgical plans of the Swiss priest, Fr. Maurice Zundel, from Lausanne, were of significant importance to me, especially the insight: ‘our primal duty is to recover the symbolic and sacramental vision of nature and humanity, to look for the traces of the Spirit everywhere, the radiance of the immaterial light which lies in the divine charm of people and things.’ I was influenced by the biblical exegetical research of Albert Gelin and Fr. Georges, S.M. In the French catechetical movement I was influenced by Canon Colomb P.S.S. with whom I had worked and with Fr. Jean Vimort who was one of my first three research supervisors. And of course **the theology of St. Irenaeus**.

Pedagogically I benefited from the enlightened teaching of Fr. Leon Barbey, a priest at Fribourg University in Switzerland, founder of the Institut de Pedagogie of Lyons. He persuaded me to pursue, in addition to the scientific field, the specialized section because “...very few priests are interested in these persons”. I was influenced by the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget’s study on the different stages of intellectual development of the child, by Freinet French school regarding free speech in children and by Maria Montessori, an Italian doctor and pedagogue concerning the development of children through the use of objects, material games, self-control. I had met her when I was working at the Ecole nouvelle de Lyons. I was keenly interested in Carl-Gustav Jung’s psychiatric approach and Martin Heidegger’s philosophy of Being. I was influenced by close collaboration with the educational team specialized in various disabilities.

Thanks to Fr. Paulhus and to my relationship with the pioneer in France and in the world of special pastoral action Fr. Henri Bissonier, I have been blessed.(Translated from French, Autumn,2004)



SPRED CALENDAR

Core Team Training 2005

2-1 Introduction to Special Religious Education in English and Spanish

for parish chairpersons, leader and activity
catechists, Saturdays from 1 to 6 p.m.

February 5, 12, 19

Location: Spred Center 312-842-1039

2956 South Lowe Ave, Chicago

Third floor of Spred chapel building

3-1 Role Orientation in English and Spanish

for parish chairpersons, leader and activity
catechists, Saturdays from 1 to 6 p.m.

March 5, 12

Location: Spred Center, 312-842-1039

2956 South Lowe, Chicago

Observation 2004

6-10 Mondays 6:00 p.m. Dec. 6, Feb. 7, 21

17-21 Tuesdays 7:00 p.m. Dec. 7, Feb. 8, 22

22+ Mondays 7:00 p.m. Feb. 7, 21

Spred Family Liturgies

Dec. 5, Feb. 6, Mar. 6, April 3, May 1

**MAMRE DINNER DANCE
DRURY LANE, OAKBROOK TERRACE
APRIL 24, 2005**

Spred

Special Religious Education, Archdiocese
of Chicago, 2956 S. Lowe, Chicago IL 60616
Tel. 312-842-1039, Sept-May, Subscript. \$20.00
Editor Sr. Mary Therese Harrington

Non-Profit Org.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
CHICAGO, ILL.
PERMIT NO. 2769