

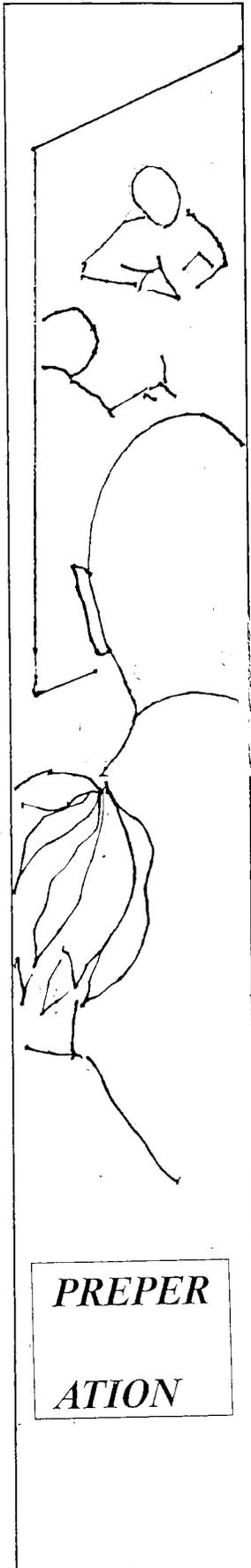
**CATE
CHIST**

I have been reflecting on the apostolic exhortation Gaudete et Exsultate (Rejoice and be Glad) On The Call to Holiness in Today's World, by Pope Francis, in the light of our experience of Spred catechesis. My focus has been on the value and necessity of the catechist preparation session. To set the scene for those who may not be familiar with the details of the Spred experience of catechesis, I will lead up to our experience of the need for a catechist community and the method of faith formation that calls each catechist to participate wholeheartedly in the catechist preparation process.

We were grateful and excited to receive knowledge of and experience with the symbolic method of catechesis from Frs. Jean Mesny and Euchariste Paulhus. After several months of work with persons with developmental disabilities and the method we realized the need to create communities of catechists, small groupings of adult believers who would welcome those with special needs and participate in catechesis with them. Each person with disabilities would be paired with a catechist. The ideal group number being served would be six. There would be a catechist to lead the group session and one to assist the group during the preparation process. Groups of 14 began to be formed in parishes. One of the catechists in the group would be chosen by the pastor to be the parish representative, and would seek out those waiting to be welcomed into a Spred community. Our ultimate catechetical goal is the experience of communion with God in a faith community as preparation for participation in the celebration of the Eucharist in the parish.

Our early experiences with the method that leads us to discover the presence of God in our life experiences helped us to realize that a time of preparation is needed for the total community prior to the catechetical session. Each person needs time to become still and free of distraction. We prepared an environment with materials that provide an invitation for each member to become engaged in personal activity that is satisfying and requires concentration. Putting forth effort to enter into the work of the group, according to one's capacity, is an important step in the formation of the group as a community. As a staff we chose to form a catechist community and welcome friends with special needs. We made our group accessible for observers.

We established an observation center where prospective volunteers, parents and parish leaders can experience Spred catechesis. This has been essential for the growth of centers. Most observers are amazed to experience the process of being readied and then experiencing the catechesis where all are led through the evocation of a lived reality to an awareness of the indwelling presence of Jesus. Observation became an important element of catechist training when one can reflect on what was observed.



It became apparent early in our experience that the process of forming the catechist community was essential. In fact, catechists need to grow in faith, in holiness, if they are to welcome and guide others, which they can do if they live the reality that they dwell in God and God dwells in them. Spred catechist preparation sessions were created so that each session was built around the same goal as the session they would experience with their friends with special needs. This creates a common spirit among the catechist community and readies all to be interiorly prepared to celebrate the same session goal with their friends.

Perhaps a challenge, even greater for some than becoming a faith friend to a person with intellectual and developmental disabilities, is the commitment of each catechist to their preparation session. The Spred model for catechesis relies on the spirit of one's presence. No book with pictures and words is appropriate. No information to learn as the way of communicating is expected. The model fits a way of knowing that is open to all, and for many, is the most possible way to grow in faith. Preparation of the catechist community calls for each member to have a strong desire to live the mystery of faith into which they will guide their friends. In becoming a catechist one desires to help another grow in faith. When the catechist enters wholeheartedly into the process of preparation and the experience with their friends, she/he discovers that this call to serve is a call to personally grow in faith, in holiness, to reflect God's presence.

Pope Francis: "We are never completely ourselves unless we belong to a people. That is why no one is saved alone, as an isolated individual. Rather, God draws us to himself, taking into account the complex fabric of interpersonal relationships present in a human community."¹

The challenge that we face as a catechist community is the commitment to enter into our life experience and reflect on it, becoming aware of all of its components. In evoking a particular experience that is in harmony with a question that has been posed, a question that holds the key to the goal of the experience, we become open to an awareness of its larger dimension, both liturgical and biblical. We are led to a new insight, a recognition of the mystery of God's presence in what we have lived. Depending on the goal of the experience, it might be an awareness of God's call, God's care, God's desire for our growth, our ability to forgive, etc. Together we rest in God's presence as we receive the message of Jesus and sing praise. We become ready to serve our friends by living in the mystery that we will live with them, helping them to identify with an experience they have lived and to live a new awareness of God's indwelling presence.

Pope Francis: "Do not be afraid of holiness. It will take away none of your energy, vitality or joy. On the contrary, you will become what the Father had in mind when he created you, and you will be faithful to your deepest self."²

The strength of the catechist community depends on their dedication to the process of sharing the mystery lived in each person. Such dedication readies them to be signs of the Spirit of God's abiding love with those they welcome.

Pope Francis: "Do not be afraid to let yourself be guided by the Holy Spirit. Holiness does not make you less human since it is an encounter between your weakness and the power of God's grace."³

Many of the friends we serve are not able to describe their experience of Spred. They will not be able to repeat the words of the reading from the book of God's word. They will participate by being a member of the community. They will show their desire to participate by their manner. Catechists will become sensitive to the ways of each in order to interpret their intentions, their wish to engage in the experience. All will be able to belong to the group and grow in faith, guided and supported by the faith of the catechist community who dwell in the mystery of God's love.

Pope Francis: "So often we say that God dwells in us, but it is better to say that we dwell in him, that he enables us to dwell in his light and love. He is our temple; we ask to dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of our life." (cf. Ps 27:4)⁴

A strong, vibrant experience of belonging in a Spred community is nourishment for each member. We have countless experiences of being in awe over the witness of faith expressed very simply in our friends with intellectual and developmental disabilities. We all have the possibility to manifest the gift of God's Spirit in an environment that is welcoming, respectful, and open to the personal expression of each. In this environment each person is encouraged to be faithful to the mission given, each with a personal gift. In this environment each person is filled with the desire to give thanks and sing praise. Each expresses joy that flows from receiving new life.

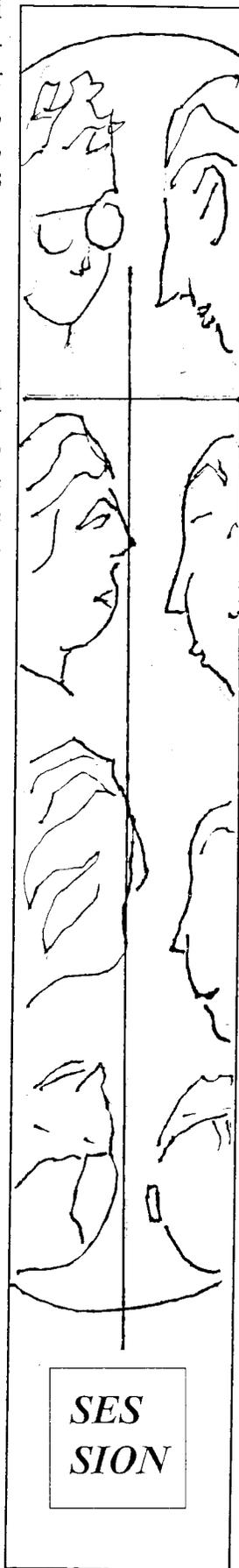
Pope Francis: Holiness is boldness, an impulse to evangelize... To allow us to do this Jesus himself comes and tells us once more, serenely yet firmly: "Do not be afraid" (Mk 6:50). Look at Jesus. His deep compassion reached out to others. It did not make him hesitant, timid or self-conscious, as often happens with us."⁴

Experience in a Spred community prepares persons with special needs to be able to experience a sense of belonging in the celebration of the Eucharist. Hopefully, they experience in the larger worshipping community, being part of the body of Christ, called to glorify God. The witness of faith in the assembly, again, becomes the support needed for all to enter the prayer of the whole church.

Pope Francis: Each community is called to create a "God-enlightened space in which to experience the hidden presence of the risen Lord". Sharing the word and celebrating the Eucharist together fosters fraternity and makes us a holy and missionary community.⁵

Many parishes in the Chicago Archdiocese celebrate Spred Family Liturgies, incorporating persons with special needs in the preparation of the altar and presentation of the gifts. The readings are accompanied with simple gestures by members of the catechist community to express the meaning of the scripture. The responsorial psalm is expressed by gesture by catechists and members with disabilities. Catechists and parents accompany those who participate. The homily is simply proclaimed and with gesture, again to aid everyone's ability to engage. Spred ministry prepares the way for all to find a place at the table of the Lord. Our friends with disabilities have gifts to share with the larger community of faith.

Susanne Gallagher SP
Spred Chicago Staff



SPRED CALENDAR

Spred Training

Introduction to Spred, Feb. 9, 16, 23, Chicago 1-6pm
Spred Center, 30th and Lowe, 312-842-1039

Role Orientation, March 9, 16, Chicago 1-6pm
Spred Center, 30th and Lowe, 312-842-1039

Spred Family Liturgies, Chicago 11:00 am
Spred Chapel 30th & Lowe
Feb. 3, Mar. 3, April 7, May 5

Observation

6-10, 6:00 pm Monday Feb. 11, 25, March 11
11-16, 7:00 pm Tuesday Feb. 12, 26, March 12
17-21, 7:00 pm Tuesday Feb. 12, 26, March 12
22+, 7:00 pm Monday Feb. 11, 25, March 11

Helper Catechist Training, English,
Sat. March 2, 1:00 to 6:00 Spred Center,
30th and Lowe, 312-842-1039
Sat. April 6, 11:00- 4:00 Queen of Angels Spred 2nd fl
4412 N. Western, Register 10:30 Betty Rogus 773-588-0614
or www.queenofangelsspread.org

SPRED

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