

The National Catechetical Directory for Catholics of the United States has a section on parish catechists.

Parish catechists, many of whom are volunteers, may be engaged in catechizing adults, young people, or those with special needs. Theirs is a particular way of carrying out the promise which the church makes at every Baptism: to support, pray for, and instruct the baptized and foster their growth in faith.

The fundamental tasks of catechists are to proclaim Christ's message, to participate in efforts to develop community, to lead people to worship and prayer, and to motivate them to serve others.

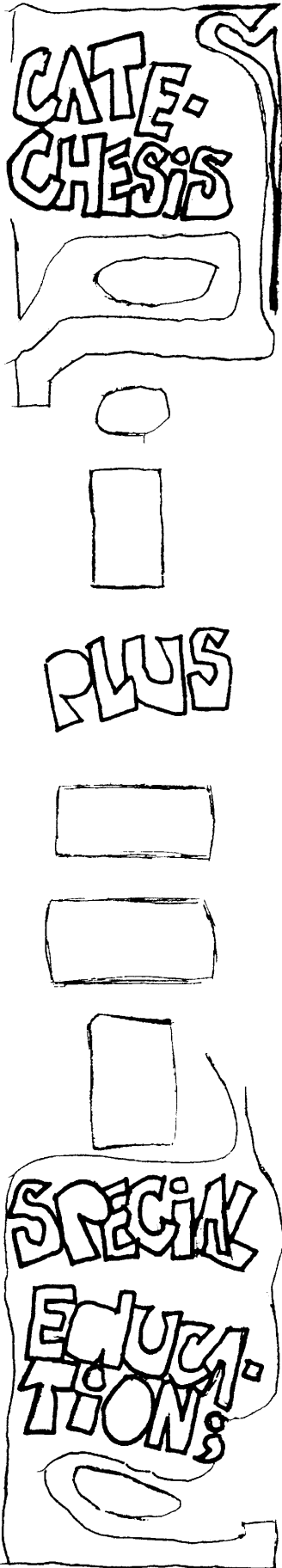
Because catechists approach their task with varying degrees of competence, programs should be designed to help individuals acquire the particular knowledge and skill they need.

The training of volunteers should include the following elements:

- + basic orientation and preparation, including instruction in theology, scripture, psychology and catechetical techniques.
- + opportunities for liturgical celebrations, prayer, retreats and other experiences of Christian community.
- + regular assistance from more experienced persons.
- + more specialized training for those who will work with physically or mentally handicapped persons. (See #213)

How does all this affect parish volunteers who enter the Spred program in the Archdiocese of Chicago?

The basic orientation of Spred is that the catechist must not simply know doctrine conceptually but must have the opportunity to absorb and assimilate the mystery hidden in the doctrine. The mystery must be translated from books, which are not accessible to persons with developmental disabilities, to relationships through which the mystery is mediated. Unless this evolution takes place in the catechist, only ideas and concepts in the guise of theology will be communicated and by definition they will not interest the person with intellectual or developmental disabilities very much.



Specialized catechesis involves more than catechetics plus special education. It requires a synthesis. One catechizes from within the life situation of friendship with a person with developmental disabilities. God reveals himself in the life and one responds in faith within life events.

Faith is not so much a big coat that I put on, as the breath that I learn to breathe. Faith is not so ready-made that all I have to do is fit into it, no matter what my disability. Faith forms part of the horizon of my world in which I find meaning as a person with a developmental disability. God speaks in order to be heard by someone, me. I respond to someone, Him. The catechist is the person who helps support the relationship that is faith.

The goal of the catechesis with a person with developmental disabilities is to bring the person to the moment of welcoming the Word with the best dispositions possible. During the catechetical session we want the person to have the opportunity to place a personal act of faith. All the catechist can do is reduce obstacles and prepare the way for the Lord.

When the Lord is welcomed by the person, an effect is inevitable. This effect is not always visible nor measurable. It touches the roots like an underground spring that gives and sustains life. We do not question growing flowers, "Are you absorbing water?" nor do we ask the water if it is giving life to the flowers. (Jean Mesny, Catechist Training)

The effects of specialized catechesis is best summed up in the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit, rather than in knowledge accumulated.

If this is the orientation that the catechesis is to take, how does one prepare a catechist?

Three forms of catechist formation are in use in Spred Chicago.

Adult Preparation Sessions

For every two-hour catechetical session with our friends with disabilities, there is a three-hour preparation session for the catechetical community. The goal of the catechist preparation session is to enter into the mystery that will be the focus of the next meeting with our friends with disabilities. The catechist does not ask his or her friend to go down into a mystery that the catechist is not in touch with first. In this entering into the mystery first, the catechist experiences a personal synthesis that authenticates the catechetical process. Not only is there a personal synthesis achieved through the adult preparation session, but a community ambience or atmosphere is prepared, one of readiness and openness to the mystery. The mystery focused on thus, becomes more accessible when the process is initiated with our friends with disabilities.

Observation of Catechesis in Motion

At the Archdiocesan Spred Center at 30th and Lowe in Chicago, there are sessions for children, adolescents, young adults and adults with developmental disabilities. Catechists come to observe sessions throughout the year. Observation helps to focus expectations, roles, developmental differences and similarities, effects of various forms of disabilities, styles of friendships, developing awareness of the sacred, use of symbol, use of music, use of body movement, etc. Through observation the catechist can see the ultimate synthesis of method, mentality, and program.

SPRED Training

Oftentimes before a catechist can make a synthesis, they have to look at all the parts. Spred Training provides the opportunity to ask the questions of what, how and why, or to put it another way program (what), method (how) and mentality (why).

The course called Introduction to Special Religious Development helps the catechist to have some insight into the basics of Spred. These include:

+ Method. The method used was designed by Jean Mesny of Lyons, France. It is both symbolic and inductive. The community begins with life and ends with communion, with mystery in the deep of life. There are skills involved in helping a community move through the various phases of the method. So the new catechist learns the phases and how to function in an inductive manner.

+ Mentality. The only way to understand the why of the method is to have a sense of the manner in which revelation takes place, the God who reveals himself, the development of personal faith, the mystery of the Church. One also needs a sense of symbol, myth and ritual and how they come into play according to the development of intellectual functioning and emotional growth.

+ Program. There are roles in a community of faith and one should know the responsibilities that are involved. There is the need for coordination among Spred groups for mutual help and development.

The course called Role Orientation goes more deeply into various roles in the community of faith. If the catechist is taking the course for college or graduate credit, a field placement in that role with supervision is involved.

The courses on the supervisory level involve two 45-hour work projects. The first deals with observation so that a person in a cluster of Spred centers can see what is going on in a community of faith and help the community to reflect on their experiences in view of development. The second is on animation so that areas of the Archdiocese that have not developed pastoral catechesis for persons with developmental disabilities can begin to reflect on needs and resources. The course also helps a person to develop a network of coordination in a given area.

Some universities accept Spred training for undergraduate or graduate credit. All Spred Courses can be taken by any parish volunteer who wants to be effective in a Spred community of Faith as a bearer of good news.

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