**SPRED**

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My first introduction to SPRED was a description of the method. I was amazed, excited, wanting to become involved. I was a teacher. I knew how to present content and to transmit knowledge. I also had experience relating to persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities so I expected that the method used by SPRED ministry would be different from my experience of education. My surprise and amazement was the realization that the SPRED experience could be appropriate for anyone as a path to growth in faith.

The description of SPRED ministry was that it provided a way, a method to grow in faith through the discovery of the mystery of God’s presence, God’s love, within each person’s life experience.

My life experience was a source from which I could journey toward a sense of the sacred, the mystery of God’s love, God’s presence in all of life. As a catechist I could support the experience of the sacred in the life of another by being present to the sacred in my experience.

After my experience as a volunteer SPRED catechist, I gladly accepted the invitation to become part of the SPRED staff. We focused on the gift of the method created by Fr. Jean Mesny. We created sessions for persons with special needs and catechist preparation sessions that made it possible to experience the same goal. We decided to become a model of a SPRED community of faith that could be replicated in parishes.

When we gathered together, we valued taking time for reflection to enter into a past lived experience in order to connect with its energy. I remember Fr. Mesny calling it ‘symbolic bonding.’ Each of us in sharing our lived experience with one another around the Book of God’s Word became aware of the presence of God in the center of our being and among us. We became prepared to welcome others as our faith friends.

We soon became aware that the environment plays an important role in our being able to reach the goal of our catechist preparation session. We gathered in a welcoming space that supported a spirit of friendship. We had sufficient time to reflect in an environment that supported interiorization and allowed each of us to participate wholeheartedly. We were able to move from this meeting space to a space made sacred into one with soft lighting, a table with the book of God’s Word, fresh flowers and a candle. Around this table we, shared, listened and celebrated the presence of Jesus. The environment supports this sacred encounter.



As we experienced the value and importance of an environment that supports the goal of the catechesis for the catechists, we realized that we also needed to prepare an environment to welcome our friends with special needs. We needed to develop a process of preparation for them in that environment for the total community so that all would be ready to enter the holy room for catechesis.

We were very happy to receive the gift of a person who was a Montessori educator and trainer. She joined our community and supported the catechetical method. She was happy to grow in faith with us. She realized the need to prepare an environment in which both catechist and person with special needs could become peaceful and free of distraction. She knew we needed an environment where each one could choose an activity to provide the experience of being engaged interiorly.

After several work sessions with materials that would support the need to be attentive and result in satisfaction and enjoyment, we prepared our environment with a variety of activities, some being art materials, sensorial materials and others being everyday life materials.

All the materials were organized in such a way as to provide everything needed for the activity. Being displayed on open shelves, the environment held many possibilities for choice and engagement. Simplicity and visual attraction made it possible to choose several activities during the time of preparation or to become so involved as to remain with the same activity for the entire time.

The type of activity helps the user to disengage from everyday life activity to make it possible to enjoy being together in friendship getting ready to go to the holy room. We wanted to avoid fostering the feeling of being obliged to produce something or learn something.

Enjoyment, peace, enriching one’s human spirit in an environment with friends is possible with the example of the catechist community. All is in view of the need to become interiorly quiet to be able to participate in catechesis.

Many friends are able to work independently with an activity. Some friends are more able to become involved if they work more closely with their catechist. Some do not become ready to engage with an activity until they feel secure in the environment. All are welcomed. All are respected and helped to agree to enter into the life of the community. All grow in faith together.

I am reminded of a comment made by Fr. Mesny regarding those we welcome. He mentioned that we need to educate ourselves to understand the ways of expression that our friends offer us. We are called to learn and welcome their gestures, their attitudes. We often welcome friends who have little or no verbal language. They do communicate in their own way and their parents help us to know from session to session the details of their experiences.

When you observe a total community session, you see each person with special needs with a catechist. Each catechist is aware of living the mystery of God’s presence. This spirit of presence inspires our friends to become ready for catechesis. Together, as a community, we are the environment for encounter.


Another memory of a statement from Fr. Mesny is, ‘Even though our knowledge is better than that of those we catechize, their intuitions can be better than our own. Perhaps they are better than us in grasping the significance of community which is the immediate welcoming place among us and in us for the presence of God.’

I once asked a dear friend what SPRED was all about. I knew that she was very happy to belong to a group. She said, “SPRED is when my friends come to be with me.” The community that welcomed her was well established and very dedicated to the process of being sensitive to the variety of needs and gifts of each member.

SPRED seems to be unique, the focus being the mystery of God’s presence in what we have experienced rather than on what we know about God. Coming to know through our experience, which we discover within a faith community, gives us a strong sense of belonging in the church.

Many volunteers hesitate before joining a SPRED group when they realize the time commitment involved. Parish animation meetings provide the what, why and how SPRED catechesis meets the needs of persons with intellectual disabilities. When they say ‘yes’ and join a SPRED group, they become personally engaged. And the gift given as a volunteer becomes a gift received.

Catechists were asked how SPRED has influenced their lives. Many responded in similar fashion.

“My experience with SPRED was a little overwhelming at first, yet very moving. Only as years passed did it become evident to me the impact SRED had on me and on my faith.”

“SPRED caught me unaware. For the longest time I thought: with all the pressing demands of daily life...who has the time! SPRED slowed the clock and paused. An invitation to collect together as a small community of faith in the evenings, when we had thought we had given our all, to share stillness, to share our frailties, to share joy, to become aware that it is not in spite of, but rather because of who we are, we are called to live the mystery together.”

“I accept this reality, learned through this commitment: that our special friends offer us more in emotional and spiritual blessings than we can ever offer them. The catechists are being catechized.”

The catechist preparation session, the experience of supporting our friends to become prepared and experiencing the mystery of God’s presence with them is life changing. Growing in faith is life changing. Would we have been looking for such a method or finding one apart from persons with special needs?

Sr. Susanne Gallagher, SP
Archdiocese of Chicago SPRED Staff

CHICAGO SPRED CALENDAR

**Orientation 2022**General Orientation (2-1)
September 17, 24 and October 1, 1–6 p.m.
Role Orientation (3-1)
October 15, 22, 1–6 p.m.
SPRED Center, 2956 South Lowe, Chicago
Contact: SPRED Office, 312.842.1039

**Observation**
Queen of Apostles
Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday
4412 North Western, Chicago, IL 60625
Contact: Julia Hess, 773.539.7510
[**queenofangelsspred.org/observation.html**](http://queenofangelsspred.org/observation.html)

**Day of Recollection and Prayer
Saturday, August 20, 2022**At the Portiuncula Center for Prayer in Frankfort, IL. for SPRED catechists.
Contact: Elizabeth Sivek, 312.842.1039.

**Sympathy**
Chicago SPRED catechists offer their sympathy to the family of Charlene McGuire and to the SPRED families and catechists in Kansas City, MO. As a parent of one of our friends, Charlene worked hard to set up SPRED in her parish where she was a leader catechist for many years. She helped set up SPRED in Kansas City. She recently passed away. May she rest in peace and rise in glory.

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