



MAMRE: Welcoming and Introducing the developmentally disabled to the Lord

Some months ago, as my part of marking Inclusion Sunday, I had the pleasure of having dinner with about 500 people who have mental retardation or other developmental disabilities, their families and many Special Religious Education catechists. There are over 100 SPRED communities of faith throughout our Archdiocese. These communities of faith draw members from over 150 parishes. I had the impression that the relationships formed are stable and long lasting. This network of friendship built year after year in our parishes is supported by parish priests, parish staffs and parish SPRED catechists. You could see the fruit of all this work at the dinner dance, where everyone seemed very happy and comfortable to be together.

The dinner was sponsored by Mamre, the fundraising arm of SPRED. Not too many people know the story of Mamre and why it inspires SPRED catechists so much. The story comes from the book of Genesis (18:1-15). "Abraham was sitting at the entrance of his tent and looking up he saw three men standing nearby. Bowing down, he invited them to rest under the tree of Mamre. While they were resting, Abraham ran to his wife, Sarah, who was up in years, and asked her to bake bread. Then he ran to pick out a steer and to get some milk. He waited on the three as they ate under the tree. One of them said, 'next year Sarah will have a son.' Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, and Sarah laughed. The Lord said to Abraham, 'Why is anything too marvelous for the Lord?'"

This story reflects all the values that SPRED catechists hold dear. It tells of welcoming strangers with warm hospitality. The strangers bring with them the blessing of new life which they promise to Sarah. And this promise is kept! Abraham, Sarah and the three guests are happy to share a meal in the shadow of the tree of Mamre.

The income from the annual dinner dance is used to pay the salary of one full-time lay worker whose job it is to help to connect group homes and residences to the local parish and the local parish to the group homes and residences. When people with mental retardation and other developmental disabilities move out of their family homes, they become part of a new neighborhood. Sometimes they are not sure how to connect with the local parish. Sometimes the local parish is not sure how to connect with a small living unit made up of people with disabilities. The group home does not fit the pastoral profile of a nursing home. They do not need a chaplain in the traditional sense. They need help to make friends so they can share in the life of the parish through catechesis and liturgy. The SPRED community religious worker starts the ball rolling so that the parish can catch on and provide a hosting faith community to accompany those who live apart from their families in their pilgrimage of faith. Once they get into a SPRED community of faith, they are supported in their process of inclusion into parish life.

Much like in the RCIA,, each person with a disability has a sponsor in SPRED. There are currently 650 parish volunteers who give about three hours a week to be friends with a person who has a disability. They come together with about five other

sponsors and their friends to build a community of faith. At first, this one-on-one relationship in a group looks very labor intensive, but over time it is the commitment to these special relationships that grounds the group in the ups and downs of life as they grow together in faith. It is not unheard of that someone who has been a sponsor in a group and has had to move away comes back every week to the group, drawn by invisible bonds of faith, hope and love. Often a person with a disability who has had to move away from the family and into a group home because of sudden events is in terrible shape until a long-trusted SPRED sponsor shows up and is the bridge again into new parish life. This network of relationships criss-crosses the Archdiocese as people move and try to cope in faith with new events in their lives.

When a child with a disability lives at home with the family, the whole family has to be welcomed into parish life. The question for the child with a disability is: What is the best place for initiation into catechesis? Both the context and the content of catechesis have to be looked at honestly for the good of each child's development. What may be helpful for a young child may be very difficult for an adolescent. For this reason, a parish has to consider making a range of opportunities available, from inclusion in the regular religious education classes to SPRED communities of faith, where more one-to-one adult support is available.

To be with the regular religious education group of the same chronological age is helpful socially. However, if the regular program uses books and expects everyone to read, the one who cannot read may feel shame and separation and may not be comfortable enough to learn or grow in faith. Most children withdraw from situations in which they see they lack the ability to learn as others do.

SPRED employs a distinctively liturgical catechesis, so sacramental initiation and liturgical participation are part of the life of the small community of faith. If the child has not been baptized, the small community uses many features of the catechumenate for children. The process works to help the child to develop a sense of the sacred, a sense of Jesus Christ, a sense of the Church and a sense of personal relations characterized by faith, hope and love. When the child has a desire to receive Holy Communion and has developed a sense of faith, hope and love, he or she is received according to the capacity that they manifest. In some situations, the community of faith carries a child for awhile with the hope and expectation that, in good time, the child will manifest a desire and a capacity for Holy Communion. This process is enriched and enlightened by the sacrament of Confirmation in which the Holy Spirit is given to assist and support the growth in faith of each one. The days are gone when a child is denied access to the sacraments of initiation just because there is a disability. When the community celebrates its life through sacraments and liturgy, the child or adult with a disability shares in these celebrations as part of the life of the community.

Our dinner was almost over when Moises Medina, a young man with Down's Syndrome, approached me and presented me with a sculpture of the Good Shepherd and his sheep. I was happy to receive this gift because it spoke to me of the caring relationship that exists between the Good Shepherd and all of us who need his loving care. I proudly display it in my home. Sadly this young man became very ill the following week, and I ask you to pray for him and for his family. The sculpture that he gave me was created by Fr. James H. McCarthy who has been the director of SPRED for more than 30 years. I am grateful to Fr. McCarthy and his colleagues for their generous and dedicated service to their "special friends: and to the Archdiocese of Chicago. They are a blessing to us all. God bless you

Sincerely yours in Christ,
Francis Cardinal George, O.M.I.
Archbishop of Chicago