

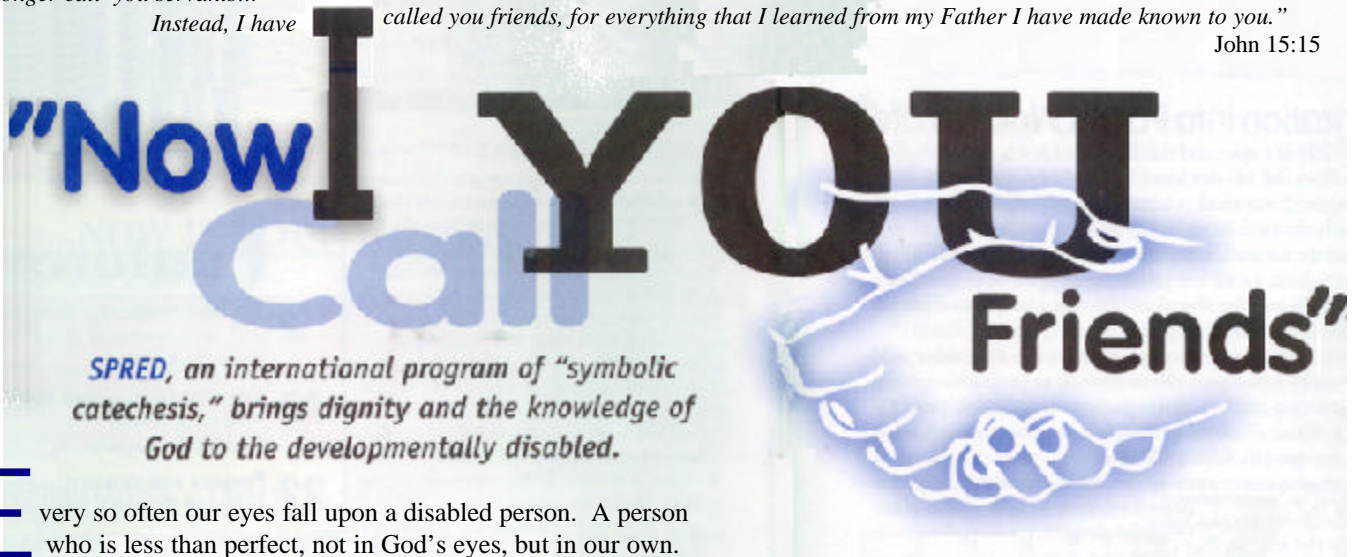
The following article appeared in the Jan/Feb 1998 issue of Immaculata magazine.
The article has been slightly reformatted to better appear on your computer screen.

"I no longer call you servants...

Instead, I have

called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you."

John 15:15



Every so often our eyes fall upon a disabled person. A person who is less than perfect, not in God's eyes, but in our own. We stop. We thank God for all the blessings we have been given. We thank God for our soundness.

Story and photos by Carrie Swearingen

Polishing the Diamonds

But there is a priest, Fr. James McCarthy, who strips the veil of awkwardness from the faces of the disabled, using that veil instead as a polishing cloth, so that the disabled will recognize themselves, and we will recognize them, as the radiant jewels God so deliberately set within His design. Much like the polishing cloths this priest uses on his profound sculptures, the disabled, too, are restored to their intended magnificence through the carefully orchestrated work of his hands and his heart.

Modeling the fiat of Mother Mary, Father McCarthy of the Archdiocese of Chicago has dedicated his life to the initiation, development and now international embrace of a program known as SPRED – Special Religious Education for the Disabled. SPRED's focus is symbolic, or experiential, catechesis and sacramental initiation for those with developmental disabilities such as autism, cerebral palsy, epilepsy and mental retardation.

With the loving help of Sr. Mary Therese Harrington since 1963 and Sr. Susanne Gallagher since 1967, this blessed team has molded SPRED into one of the Church's most respected – yet hidden – ministries of mercy.

An Evening with "Friends"

In writing about the SPRED program, certainly interviews with facts and figures would be important. But the heart often comprehends what the mind cannot. I discovered this paradox as I observed a typical SPRED session in its entirety.

It was my turn to feel different.

I sat motionless on the blue cloth chair in a rectory basement at Queen of Angels parish on Chicago's north side. Having already been introduced to most of the SPRED catechists and program participants, or "friends" (taken from John 15:15), I thought it best to limit my intrusiveness. I planted myself in a small room just around the corner from the main action, facing a free standing linen closet with earth-toned vases and a spray of eucalyptus. Surrounding me, peach walls gracefully supported hand-loomed artistry.



SPRED founder Fr. James McCarthy



Activity phase one: A developmentally disabled "friend" (R) quietly enjoys crafting with a helper catechist.

Something mysterious was going on in the next room. I peered occasionally around a large oak door. There was a welcoming peace in the room. Softly colored spotlights cast subtle shadows across the heathered carpet, clean wooden tables, milky white ceramic pitchers and crisp linens. Classical guitar music drifted from a hidden cassette player.

After taking a few photos, I began to marvel as leader catechist, Betty Kaufmann, and five helper catechists worked with crafts and children's games with four mentally disabled companions. They worked in near silence, facing each other one-on-one.

They were communicating on equal levels; they were, in fact . . . "friends."

I began to understand the mystery.

"He is My Brother"

As I sit on my blue chair, I think much about SPRED's formation. Father McCarthy felt the anguish of disability-based prejudice early in life. His brother, Gerald, had been diagnosed developmentally disabled at childhood.

"Gerald was eighteen months younger and I always had to attend to him," remembers Father McCarthy of his now late brother. "In those days, there were few options. Eventually the family found a special place, Mayfair School, on Chicago's northwest side."

McCarthy speaks with limited fondness for this lone haven for disabled persons that eventually closed its doors and now stands as an Irish heritage center. "Gerald was at Mayfair until he was twenty-one. Then he had nowhere to go. This was about 1949.

"I can still remember a painful episode at seminary. People, even priests, were naïve. My mother and brother came up one visiting Sunday and, after they left, I returned to a table with my fellow seminarians. A classmate leaned over and asked, "Who was that silly looking goof sitting there with you?"

"I said, 'He's my brother.'"

How It All Began

Though the high profile Kennedy family secured a certain awareness of the developmentally disabled in the early 1960s, options were scarce in the 1950s. "Gerald just stayed at home," McCarthy remarks with hollowness.

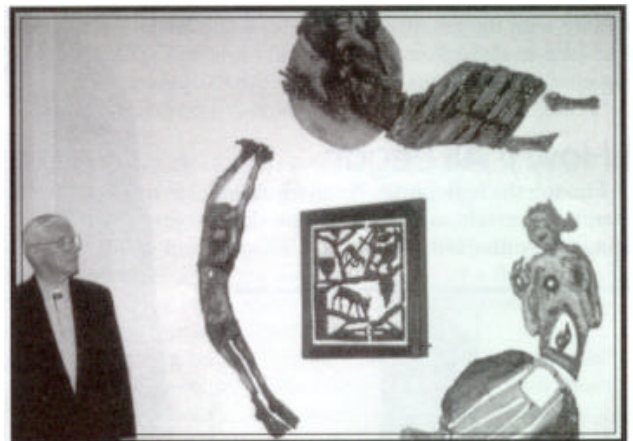
And there is even more of a need for SPRED today.

A study of Chicagoans suggests that more than 52,000 people ages 15-64 have mental retardation. Over 19,000 are likely to need continual services. Still another study says that developmental disabilities affect about 1.6T of the population. Using this figure, there are 184,688 persons with developmental disabilities of all types in the Chicago area alone.

Moved by his experience with his brother, Father began working with families of the developmentally disabled in his spare time as a newly ordained priest (1955) at Santa Maria del Popolo parish in Mundelein, Illinois, and as the Chicago archdiocesan CCD retreat master in 1960. His off-hours work caught the attention of Albert Cardinal Meyer, and in 1963 St. Theresa Harrington was assigned to Father to research existing models upon which to base a formal archdiocesan program for the mentally disabled. McCarthy and Harrington decided upon two programs that stressed experiential catechesis: one called "Vivre," developed by the French priest, Jean Mesny, and another by Canadian priest-psychologist, Euchariste Paulus.

SPRED was accepted as a formal agency of the archdiocese in 1967. The first program was established at St. Mary's parish in Evanston. Since then, SPRED has been adopted in six United States dioceses, and internationally in eleven dioceses in four countries. The international headquarters take up four buildings of a former parish on the south side of Chicago.

In 1976, Father McCarthy began having SPRED participants work with clay as a means of preparatory catechesis. He soon discovered, and has since developed, his own skills as a sculptor. Father sees sculpturing "as a form of prayer," and the SPRED chapel is now graced with his exquisite religious artwork. (The pieces are available for acquisition to support the ministry.)



Father McCarthy examines his original sculpture, "Christ Has Died, Christ Has Risen, Christ will Come Again." It surrounds the SPRED chapel tabernacle which he also designed.

Integration into Parish Worship Life

Yet, SPRED is a spiritual ministry, and not a rehabilitation program. Because of the learning problems of the participants, ranging from mild retardation to severe autism, it relies on symbolic catechesis based on the personal experience of God and the sacred derived through the senses and through relationship. Because of the subtleties of symbolic catechesis, SPRED catechists require serious training and spiritual preparation. Father McCarthy explains:

“We train volunteers who are twenty-one and older and willing to make a two-year commitment, to prepare a special place where they can welcome persons with developmental disabilities. One disabled person enters the group and is matched one-on-one with a volunteer.

Through the experience of intimate friendship, our disabled friends discover a place where they belong and can enjoy meaningful relationships which help them to realize their own giftedness and dignity.”

SPRED centers from within parishes and welcome persons with developmental disabilities according to chronological age. The four groups include children ages 6-10, adolescents ages 11-16, young adults ages 17-21, and adults ages 22 and older.

McCarthy continues: “The goal of SPRED is to assist people in parishes to integrate persons with developmental disabilities and those with learning problems into parish assemblies of worship through the process of education in faith. The idea is to bridge the SPRED base community into this larger community so that all are respected. It’s like small churches moving into a larger church.

“Our lives are full of mystery,” expresses Father McCarthy. “Each experience evokes memories, a period of purification and eventually we get to the liturgy where we find ourselves living out these experiences.

If you would like to initiate a SPRED program for the developmentally disabled in your parish, contact Father McCarthy at:

**SPRED
2956 S. Lowe Ave.
Chicago, IL 60616
312-842-1039**

Does not everyone have a right to discover this home in liturgy?”



Spirituality phase two: A motion-filled circle of prayer, music and fellowship in the “celebration room.”

Extensive Catechist Preparation

To better understand the SPRED methodology, I called Julie Hess, who coordinates SPRED activities in Chicagoland’s northern parishes. Julie invited me here to her own Queen of Angels parish that has hosted SPRED since 1979. Introduced to the SPRED program to better accommodate her special daughter, Jenny, Julie surprisingly accepted the invitation to become a helper catechist just six months after Jenny died at age six.

“Initially, the program provided a wonderful healing process,” Hess admits. “I discovered small communities of faith and how important they are to the individual as well as the greater Church.

“You live in Evanston, for example,” Hess continues. “I have enough people with disabilities in just the Evanston area alone. Every parish there could use the SPRED program, not only your parish of St. Mary’s.

When a diocese is interested in embracing SPRED, we insist that a devoted representative arrives with the blessing of the local bishop and commits to a two-year program at Loyola or DePaul University while completing a practicum with SPRED. From there, they return to their diocese and secure leaders and catechists throughout parishes.”

SPRED helps parents to recognize the personhood of their disabled child, says Hess. Sometimes acceptance means “forgiving” that child for not being what the parent had hoped for. Further, SPRED helps those children to discover God and, in doing so, helps them to become whole.

Message from Jesus

Each weekly SPRED session is composed of three phases.

The first is *Activity*. Verbal communication is replaced with crafting or, for the more profoundly disabled, simple games with colored blocks and shapes. From my chair, I watch wall decorations being loomed, cloth napkins being rolled, and painting being done on old wooden easels. All fall under the quiet but watchful monitoring of the activity catechist. In this atmosphere of fellowship, words really do seem useless.

Phase two is *Spirituality*. All proceed to the “celebration room,” where they form a small circle and participate in a short paraliturgy. Here, God’s presence is most apparent to the friends. Betty, the leader catechist, carefully proclaims a section from John’s Gospel. Jesus speaks to His Father:

“I have made your name known to them and will continue to make it known, so that the love with which you loved me may be in them, and so that I may be in them” (15:26).



Agape meal phase three: Breaking bread as one.

With lights dimmed and one warm flame resting on an altar beside the Holy Book, Betty begins a group discussion in near whisper tones. Tonight the topic is “connecting”: with our opportunities at home, at work and with family.

The cassette player fills the room with song. The lyrics begin with “Love one another as I have loved you.” The group joins in, holding hands, swaying in time. They break and the leader catechist circles the room clasping hands with both friends and catechists for a personal message from the Lord. “Do you know what I have done for you? I have washed your feet with My hands,” Betty repeats to each, looking deeply into the eyes, representing Jesus.

As Sister Susanne Gallagher explains, this moment of intimacy is the summit of the paraliturgy and the entire evening. This is eucharist, thanksgiving.

Breaking of Bread

The room becomes silent. Classical music returns, strings and a flute. The group sits in contemplation, a spiritual state born of God’s insistence to rest on the seventh day and being emulated in a Chicago rectory basement.

I return to my little blue chair, facing the free-standing linen closet. The group begins phase three, the *Agape*, the sharing of the meal. A table in another room is set tastefully with cutlery, plates, cloth napkins (never paper) and flowers. The fare is simple: vegetables, fruit, crackers, cookies. Attentive helper catechists ensure that all have their fill.

It is said that the breaking of bread in charity is a spiritual act, transcending the physical. Then this is eucharist, too.

Changing the World

After agape, I sit alone, amidst my own seventh day. Tears drop and blur the ink of these notebook pages below. I am trying to listen to God from this little blue chair. I hear Him recite only one line, one He once inspired in the anthropologist, Margaret Mead:

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.” †



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