

**I AM IN  
THE  
FATHER**

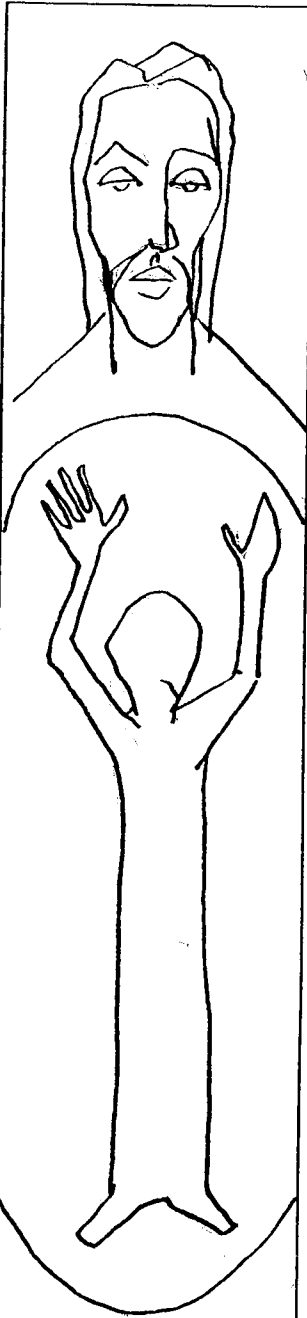
The celebration of the beginning of the New Year is often accompanied by a heightened desire for fulfillment, to be joined with others in complete harmony. One is reminded of the message of Jesus who tells us, "I am in my Father and you are in me and I am in you". We hope to become that one body that St. Paul speaks of, all of us in union with Christ and belonging to each other. Spred ministry responds to the call to belong as one body, the call to belong to each other, by forming small communities of faith with persons who have special needs.

The place of The Archdiocesan Spred Center has been an immeasurable asset in this mission. Being able to model catechesis, to show by example, supports the development of parish groups and lends credibility to the work of preparing catechists for Spred communities of faith. The chapel and Spred family Masses make it possible to model the natural flow between catechesis and liturgy and provides the opportunity to show genuine ways of participating in worship with persons with special needs. The place of the Spred Center gives witness to the desire to become one body, to sense our belonging to each other. It exists to provide support to parents and persons with special needs, catechists and all who wish to develop Spred ministry.

Since a prepared space is essential for Spred catechesis it is important to be able to model appropriate environments for each of the four age groupings. The prepared environment supports the goal of the catechesis. The space needs to possess a quality of otherness, a sense of the sacred. Being able to experience the prepared environment is invaluable. It sparks the creativity of catechists who look at possible spaces in their parish setting that would be able to serve as their Spred center. It helps them to realize that they can develop such a space.

The meeting room in a Spred center where we gather to greet one another and where we prepare ourselves to become ready for catechesis is a space well ordered and peaceful. It is set up to invite us to choose to become still and present to each other through personal work. The work addresses our need to focus and is appropriate for the age group of persons with special needs. The environment gathers us and allows us to engage without fear of competition or judgment. The spirit of the space is joyful and full of care and respect.

The second space that we prepare communicates a sense of the sacred. The book of the Word is placed in the focal point and is flanked by fresh flowers and a candle. A semicircle of chairs, one for each person in the group, surrounds the focal point. Soft lighting surrounds the peaceful gathering space. Colored spot lights give emphasis to the focal point. Equipment for music is at hand. The simplicity of the space is essential. It is filled with the promise of receiving the message of God's love, God's care for each.



**YOU ARE  
IN ME**

When the space is appropriate and cared for and the community of catechists is well prepared both become bearers of the message to be proclaimed. Supported by an appropriate environment the spirit of the catechist community becomes almost tangible. When friends with disabilities are welcomed they are attracted to the ambience. They sense the peace and joy among the catechists. They want to participate, to belong.

Some say that Spred is labor intensive. They look at the task of finding a catechist for each person with special needs as a great burden. Others sense the excitement of building a strong small faith community of adults and they search for those who welcome the opportunity to grow in faith with other adults. They invite people in the parish to meet together to hear about Spred and then they ask those who are interested to observe a session. Often, it is after the experience of observing a Spred session that the decision to become a catechist is made.

Observation gives one the opportunity to enter into the experience of catechesis in a non threatening way, to live the mystery of faith being celebrated and get caught up in the gentle spirit of relating among the members.

Parents need to know that the experience of Spred catechesis will be helpful and will fit their son or daughter's needs. The gentle process of relating and the method that leads to an experience of the sacred gives parents who come to observe the assurance of support for the needs of their child.

Observation is a training tool for catechists. There is much that can be learned by seeing the process as it is experienced by others. Roles can be distinguished. The style of relating can be grasped. The mentality, the spirit of the community can be caught. An experience of observation gives the new or prospective catechist the sense that they can be successful. It affirms those who have been catechists for months or years.

Some comments from observers provide a good description of the ways that observation helps to build and strengthen Spred communities of faith.

"I saw catechists helping their friend to settle into concentrated work by being involved in work themselves. They seemed so peaceful and happy to be together. I would like to be with them."

"I see myself as a helper catechist. I hope to develop such a loving relationship with these special friends through Jesus the Word."

"It was so helpful to observe the leader catechist patiently listen to each person's story and draw everyone in. I am going to be the leader catechist in our parish Spred program."

"I observed the peace of God's presence in the meeting room and celebration room. I want to help our group establish itself in our parish community."

"I want to make sure this is something I can do. I truly hope to make a difference"

"We want to get the Spred program in our area. Now we know what it is all about so that we can recruit some friends and parishioners to become active with us."

The experience of observing a session allows the participant to grasp the spiritual dimension of the ordinary. The experience of God's presence is extremely personal. Hidden meanings come to light. Words and silence are intermingled. Catechists witness the mystery of faith within them. They guide their special friends to an awareness of God's presence in their lives.

Being a Spred catechist means saying "yes" to the process of introspection. We let ourselves explore and discover that innermost part of ourselves which allows us to pass from the heart of reality to its spiritual dimension. We realize that those we welcome for catechesis can respond to the love of God in their lives if the journey toward that awareness is through their lived experience. The adult preparation session is an invitation to each group of catechists to become the body of Christ for others.

In his letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul reminds them that he came to them in weakness and without any particular eloquence. He reminds them that it was the power of the Spirit that animated him so that their faith rests on the power of God rather than the wisdom of others. (1 Cor 2: 1,5)

The process that calls each catechist to reflect on a life experience requires a trusting spirit. Each of us relies on the power of the Spirit to manifest God's presence within us through what we have lived. We feel our weakness and we feel the power of God's presence as we share our stories, listen to the Word of God and receive the message of Jesus. God takes the initiative; God's Love becomes tangible. We become an extension of the goodness and loving kindness of God. We become prepared to meet our friends with disabilities.

The catechist community becomes a powerful witness over a period of time. Like any community it becomes aware of its mission through experience preceded by training and observation. Once a group begins, it is the catechist preparation sessions and experiences of catechesis with friends with disabilities that build relationships and form the catechists as a community. On going support is important. Various levels of training and reflection are offered and a place to observe others is always available. There is a need to develop our ability to catechize and a place and times to reflect with others is essential.

The body of Christ that we long to be is always maturing. We trust that we are being "transformed from glory to glory into His very image by the Lord who is the Spirit" (2 Cor 4:18) Our effort is to be an extension of the invitation embodied in Christ. We trust our baptismal mission, that we are called to be a visible, effective presence of God. We want to be a source of grace that attracts our friends to trust and to find a home in the Word of God with us.

Sr. Susanne Gallagher, S.P.  
Spred Chicago

Jerome Murphy O'Connor O.P., The Presence of God, Concilium Vol. 50., Paulist Press, New York 1969

Thomas Merton, The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia, "Contemplation" p. 82 Orbis Books, Maryknoll New York 2002

Josef Pieper, In Search of the Sacred, Ignatius Press San Francisco 1991

