

**40
YEARS
OF
WORK:**

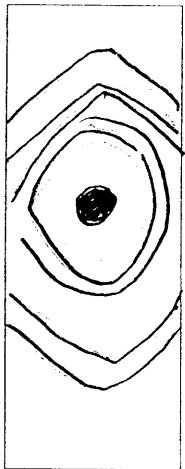
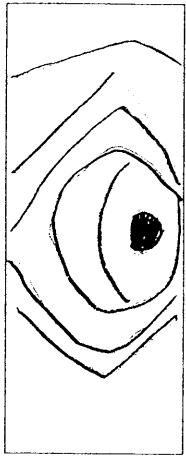
Forty years ago, Spred sessions began with our friends with disabilities. It was September, 1968. Six children with intellectual disabilities between eleven and sixteen years of age entered the two mobile classrooms next to the Religious Education Office. They were Jimmy, Danny, Johnny (Hanzie), Eleazar, Ann and Patricia. We confronted the feigned boredom and unconcern of Ann (So...), the frisky curiosity of Danny, the gentle gabbiness of Jimmy, the quiet malleability of Patricia, the shy attentiveness of Eleazar, the bigger than life presence of Johnny who liked to pull people's hair. There was a helper catechist for each child. We had all agreed in our session prior as a group of Spred catechists to embark on this innovative enterprise by being observed. We were apprehensive but we believed observation was very important. So we were observed by parents, volunteers, catechists and parish priests through a one-way-viewing mirror.

After the session we met with the observers. We would ask and receive questions about the children, what had been seen, why we acted in a given way, and we would ask: do you see yourself in these roles? Each child was quite different, some requiring limited care, or intermittent, extensive or pervasive care.

The following week during the preparation session for catechists, we began with feedback. What happened at the session with the children last week? We could let our hair down - examine what happened, reflect on how people reacted. Was there a better way? Sifting through the written remarks of the observers, we would cut apart what transpired, exploring ways to fineness our process. This pattern became a modus operandi for Spred catechists.

At the urging of Fr. Jean Mesny, we went further. We put our books aside and in September, 1968 we began the Spred Newsletter to give more careful thought to what we were living. We needed to unpack what was happening- to, for and from the children, ourselves, and the symbolic mode of conveying the Christian message. As years passed, the phenomenon became more complicated with adults with intellectual disabilities. We approached all this with a bit of trepidation. We found ourselves in boundary situations in pastoral catechesis.

What we began to learn from being observed, talking to observers, in our feedback with catechists, and in trying to put down in writing something that would help others, was improvisation. I don't mean making up a session as we go along, or playing with the symbolic process or, God forbid, developing a new theology. I am addressing catechists of children and adults with intellectual disabilities and this endeavor calls for judgment and a heap of prudence in the catechetical relationship.



OBSRVATION

Improvisation is the manner of acting in the moment in response to the immediate environment. It focuses on bringing spontaneous, unrehearsed action to an event taking place. It is done within a range of options that best fit the situation even if one has never experienced a similar situation. The boundary that I speak of is the unforeseen. The skill of improvisation can apply to many different forms of communication and expression - it cuts across all artistic expression - and above all - pastoral catechesis.

At the beginning forty years ago and over the years, we received a great deal of insight and support from catechists in France and Canada, so last year when a memorial biography of the first priest to help us appeared, we were delighted. The book on the life and ministry of Fr. Henri Bissonnier was published in October 2007 and presented to a gathering at Lourdes in France: Henri Bissonnier - Une Pedagogie de Resurrection. With many international authors making their contributions, this text examines the pioneer catechetical thought, intuitions and efforts of Fr. Bissonnier who worked in France with those with various disabilities. His initial work was in the late 1940s toward the end of the war and he continued to work until his death in January, 2004.

Based on this book, an international colloquium was held in Paris in November 2007. The seminar was put together by the Institut Supérieur de Pastorale Catechetique de Paris, (I.S.P.C.) Three of the presentations by Fr. Jacques Audinet, Nicole Fabre, and Raymond Brodeur were remarkable as well as the conclusions drawn by the director of I.S.P.C. Francois Moog. Many of their insights, were also ours from our history in Spred.*

Jacques Audinet began to work with Henri Bissonnier at the same time as he was doing his own pioneering work with the catechumenate (RCIA) at Saint Sulpice. He began to see similarities, how each one must go at his or her own pace. There must be someone to accompany them. In the realm of the spiritual life the notion of disability has no place. Everyone, children, adults and catechists are all at the beginning. He would describe these beginnings in this way.

+There had to be access to the totality of the Christian Message. It could not be a partial or mutilated thing. Yet, at the same time, the famous French catechist Marie Fargue, using the methods of Jean Piaget of Switzerland, was able to show how children were not able to assimilate the Christian Message communicated in the format of the catechism.

+Experience shows us how language and communication are not limited to verbal language and even less to conceptual knowledge. Gesture, attitude and posture of the body, affective communication and symbolic evocation occupied a primordial place in the inter-human communication that is catechesis.

+Bissonnier showed how this endeavor of catechesis with persons with disabilities has to take place in an environment of community. Community is the premier place for formation.

Nicole Fabre was also a catechist with Henri Bissonnier in the early days. She went on to become a practicing psychoanalytic psychologist. She worked with Bissonnier at Bicetre, a large psychiatric hospital in Paris. The catechists found themselves in extreme situations. Where a problem seemed to be insurmountable, and one was tempted to do less, Bissonnier always would do more, more creativity, more solidarity, more mutual bonds with others. The insights that helped her were as follows:

+A person with a disability is apt to be dominated by the feeling of being less than others. There is a narcissistic wound, a lack of self worth that is carried by the person. She cautioned how, in the name of compassion, one can pervert a relationship by giving consolation in place of affirmation. She stressed the need to go beyond sentimentality. Each catechist and catechumen must keep his or her identity and respect the other.

+The person with a disability may not have access to verbal language, but have access to non-verbal, symbolic communication so a catechist must experiment with one's body and artwork.

+It is important to have a team of catechists. Persons with disabilities can be extremely sensitive on an emotional level. There is an urgency to keep the lid on, keeping a responsible distance, keeping everyone's respect.

Raymond Brodeur from Quebec had Bissonnier for many of his classes at Laval University. Brodeur recalled the points that Bissonnier returned to often:

+The catechetical orientations of the church should be toward humanization, balanced by the Word of God, welcomed and shared within the church.

+The body needs care in order to cultivate the spirit. In specialized catechesis, the body is in play before pastoral issues arise.

+Touched by illness, suffering himself at an early age, Bissonnier's vibrant spirituality prevented him from suffering from burnout. His faith enabled him to put his ardor in the service of many.

+What was important about him was his manner, the way he went about his work. He saw symbolic catechesis as a formation in the Christian life which cannot be considered as a project of acquisition of things to be known, nor as a process of conforming to pious practices that are imposed from the outside. Catechesis first of all and in its totality is a way of conforming self to Christ and to his attitudes. We cannot impose a sixteenth century catechesis.

+As we become more and more skilled in the process of catechesis, we realize that by going deeply into the pathology of disabilities, we gain access to a realization of what is truly normal.

At the end of the presentations and discussion, Francois Moog the director of I.S.P.C. offered a summary of insights to lead the way for future work.

+Limit situations are places of revelation. When we are stuck, God is present.

+The dignity and integrity of those with disabilities must continue to be affirmed.

+Relationships, language and symbolic processes are necessary.

+In our efforts, we need to focus more on communication with the Lord than on cognition or formation.

Francois Moog strongly affirmed that we must engage the Church as to its catechetical responsibility. The Paschal Mystery must be central, yes, the disfigured marginalized body in the light of Christ crucified, but also the dignity of each person does not reside in their disability but in their humanity, saved, delivered and justified by the Resurrection. The Institut Superieur de Pastoral Catechetique of the Institut Catholique of Paris, commits itself to continue the research and work of Henri Bissonnier.

In Chicago we affirm all these insights and give witness to the excellence of work done on the parish level. We commit ourselves to share our insights to delight and challenge the church as our friends are welcomed into the Christian community.

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*Manuscript sent to Chicago Spred by Pierre and Francoise Compagnon; translated into English by Sr. Mary Therese Harrington, Spred Chicago.

