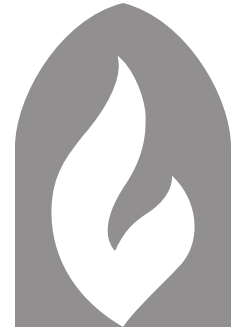


SPRED



A publication of Special Religious Development

Volume 104 | Number 9 | May 2024

Fr. James McCarthy, founder and director of SPRED, shared a conversation with Sr. Susanne Gallagher about her work. Sr. Susanne became a member of the SPRED staff and focused on the preparation phase of the SPRED method of catechesis. At the time of this interview, she celebrated 40 years with SPRED.

Fr. Jim: You are a Sister of Providence who taught in grade schools for several years. You gained a master's degree in special education at the University of Illinois in DeKalb and then spent a year and a half in training to be a Montessori directress. How did this background influence you? Was it as important to unlearn as to learn some ways of thought?

Sr. Susanne: I loved teaching and thought that I might be effective educating children with varying developmental disabilities. My sister, Rita, was born with Down Syndrome. Family and friends were attracted to her gentle spirit.

After joining SPRED I was given the opportunity to study Special Education. I followed the courses to the end, but with each course I became more aware of the distinction between teaching and catechizing.

A series of study weeks with Fathers Euchariste Paulhus and Jean Mesny who developed the Method Vivre became our inspiration. They spoke of catechesis as a question of personal conversion. We invite others to know God not in a scientific way but in a personal way.¹

One forms a relationship to God with their whole being. We need to witness to that relationship where everyone can see. They challenged us to experience God through a vital personal communion rather than an intellectual unfolding.



Sister Susanne recognized by Cardinal for 55 years of service to SPRED.

At the same time, we were blessed to become acquainted with a very gifted Montessori educator, Celma Pinho. She was sensitive to symbolic catechesis and recognized the need for a prepared environment to support the method and bring comfort to the person with special needs. With her help, we began to develop a time of preparation as the first phase of a SPRED experience.

Environments were designed to encourage growth and development in view of symbolic catechesis for each of four age groupings. Celma welcomed me into her teacher training course that was grounded in the work of Maria Montessori who believed that a prepared environment nourishes and makes personal transformation possible. One's surroundings can become part of one's very being.²

When a SPRED community gathers in friendship in the prepared meeting space and each person

becomes focused through concentration, a sense of harmony develops. The participants are ready to follow the leader catechist into a sacred experience.

Through my education, I became aware of how intimately we share life and how profoundly we are affected by all of creation. In relation to faith, this is very important since faith education is rooted in life.

In the experience of the symbolic progression, we first recognize ourselves in an experience we have lived. We then identify and reflect. When a new awareness is stirred, we become ready to welcome and commune with the Spirit of Jesus who speaks to us and leads us to the Father.

When one's human experience is the starting point from which the message of faith — the message of Jesus — is revealed, then everyone who lives in relationship can grow in faith. It means that we can come to recognize the presence of God diffused in all of life, in all of creation. As we experience this communion in faith together, the bond between us deepens. We sense our belonging in the family of God. This knowing in faith is on the level of being rather than clinical deduction.

Fr. Jim: Observation of groups in the process of “normalizing” is of great importance to you. Why?

Sr. Susanne: Observation manifests so much of reality that is not easily described in words. When you observe the preparation time, you can



Sister Susanne with Father James McCarthy.

sense the spirit of the community: a choice to speak or not to speak, to assist or to encourage independence, to change work or to continue with the chosen activity. All these situations draw the observer into the process, providing the possibility for new insight into the method and mentality of SPRED.

Observation of the preparation process reveals the power of the prepared environment in assisting the community to become mindful, to grow in relationship with limited conversation. The observer learns what it means to be normalized by becoming so in the process of observing. The ability of persons with disabilities to relate, to become absorbed, to be influenced by the environment and the community becomes tangible to those who observe. Through observation, one absorbs the gentle spirit of joy in the community of faith.

Fr. Jim: How do you advise new activity catechists? Is there a priority to the elements involved? Is there some initial focus that would be their rudder?

Sr. Susanne: The highest priority for me is to help activity catechists be clear about the goal of catechesis. If they remember that communion with Jesus is the summit, they will not get sidetracked with nonessentials. They will set a tone in the environment that fosters concentration and collaboration. The activity catechist will choose materials that have the power to help all in the group become grounded, centered. The activity catechist offers leadership and insight to draw all into one mindset.

The companions will witness a spirit of peace and joy. They will become ready in spirit to welcome their partner into the experience of preparation. If the activity catechist values the experience of becoming personally centered, he or she will be able to guide others to follow the same path.

Observation of another group is a great help to a new activity catechist. When one observes the process, it is easier to understand the importance of all the elements in view of the goal. As an activity catechist becomes confident in his or her role, the importance of observing one's own community becomes more evident in guiding the process of preparation.

Fr. Jim: How do you coach catechists to be as effective as possible during the preparation phase of the session?

Sr. Susanne: A new helper catechist is understandably concerned about being successful in relating to their friend. As an activity catechist, I try to help new members become comfortable in the environment. It is important to feel at home in the space where the group will share life and become a community.

It is essential to understand the goal of the preparation time. Workshops that give new catechists the opportunity to work with art materials, sensorial materials and everyday life materials awaken in them a new awareness of the power of these activities to influence one's way of being in the world.

When new catechists sense joy and peace in becoming focused and free of distraction, each person will be able to appreciate the value of the preparation time. Then, choosing work in view of their own need, they will be able to realize the gift that they offer their partner. Recognizing their common need will help them to relate authentically.

We all need places where we can pause and just be, so that we can discover the faith dimension of what we live. Our friends with disabilities need the witness of the catechist to draw them into that blessed recognition. Companions are most effective when they give witness to their own desire to grow in faith.

Fr. Jim: As an activity catechist for more than 35 years, how do you "stay fresh?" Is it by a multiplication of exercises, or a growing 'mindfulness' within a set of activities?

Sr. Susanne: I am continually intrigued through the act of observing members of the community interacting with a predictable array of materials. Each time the community gathers, we are different. We interact differently. We have different needs. I try to be present to each person. I know that the basic types of art materials, sensorial media and everyday life activities have the power to enliven our spirit and free us to grow together as a community of faith.



Sister Susanne Gallagher

Mindfulness, the wonderful experience that occurs when we make the effort to respond attentively to what is before us, is essential. To be mindful is to be open, ready to absorb, to listen, to receive, to continue growing. As one continues year after year in a SPRED community of faith, a grand cohesion develops.

The catechist preparation sessions that precede each experience with our friends keep us mindful of the gift of faith we have received. We experience our lives as sanctuaries of the sacred presence. The phases of our experiences within a SPRED family blend into a seamless taste of the sacred. We are happy to be together. We feel blessed to be friends. We gather with a hunger to receive the message of Jesus, anxious to give thanks and praise.

We prepare ourselves. We choose to be together around the Book of God's Word. We identify with what we have lived. Jesus speaks to us. We are nourished in faith together again and again.

1 Notes: SPRED Study Week, June, 1967, Mentality, Method, Program
2 Montessori's Method: 80 Years Later by Nancy McCormick Rambusch, "Montessori Life", Spring, 1990.

CHICAGO SPRED CALENDAR**Contact:** 312.842.1039 or SPRED@archchicago.org**SPRED Center:**

2956 South Lowe Avenue, Chicago, IL 60616

SPRED Family Masses in June, SPRED Center, 11 a.m.

English: June 2, 2024

Bilingual: June 16, 2024

Training (Orientations) 2024, SPRED Center**Contact:** 312.842.1039 or SPRED@archchicago.org

General Orientation (2-1): Sept. 14, 21, 28, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Role Orientation (3-1): Oct. 12, 19, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Helper Catechist Role Orientation, SPRED Center**Contact:** 312.842.1039 or SPRED@archchicago.org

Spanish: Oct. 5, 1 – 6 p.m. SPRED Center

English: Oct. 26, 1 – 6 p.m. SPRED Center

Spred Day of Reflection

Saturday, August 17, 2024

Portiuncula Center for Prayer, Frankfort, IL

For information contact Elizabeth Sivek,

312.842.1039, ext. 220.

ARCHDIOCESE OF CHICAGO



Special Religious Development
2956 South Lowe Avenue
Chicago, IL 60616
312.842.1039
spred-chicago.org

Non-Profit Org.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
CHICAGO, IL
PERMIT NO. 2769

SPRED