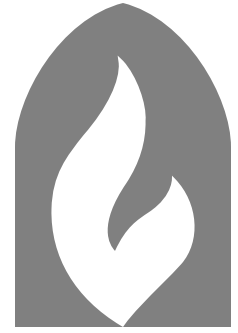


SPRED



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SPRED: A Community of Joyful Missionaries

By Father Marlon Bobier Vargas SVD

During a congregational retreat in August, I had a chance to revisit the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Fatima in Portugal. At the Basilica of Our Lady of the Rosary, I saw a group of eight wheelchair-bound people with disabilities, accompanied by their caretakers.

Their presence led me to recall this year's World Youth Day (WYD) in Lisbon, where the theme was "Mary arose and went with haste" (Luke 1:39).

Pope Francis' visit to the sanctuary in Fatima on August 5 was a highlight of the celebration. In several languages in front of the statue of Our Lady of Fatima at the small Chapel of the Apparitions, he led young people with disabilities and other pilgrims in prayer and meditation on the joyful mysteries of the holy rosary.

The pope's message touched many hearts: "The small chapel in which we find ourselves is like a beautiful image of the Church: welcoming,



SPRED catechists and friends lead the congregation in the responsorial Psalm during a parish SPRED liturgy.

without doors. The Church does not have doors so that everyone can enter."

This message resonates with the welcoming spirit we experience whenever we participate in a session with our SPRED faith community. Many SPRED groups gather in a small space at their parish.

Despite limited space and resources, we transform the small space into a sacred environment to welcome everyone. When we arrive at our SPRED session, one of the first things we do is extend a handshake to our friends and catechists to open each other's hearts—like holding a door open so each person can enter the SPRED room.

Being able to attend the WYD celebration this past August in Lisbon was truly a gift. What made it most memorable was the presence of numerous people with disabilities who attended the weeklong, crowded, international Church celebration.

During the opening Mass, our group sat almost two kilometers from the main stage. We were together on the grass area under a tree on a side street. Thanks to the huge monitors, we were able to participate in the mass. Sitting next to us was Joseph, a young man from Scotland with disabilities, and his father.

The image reminded me of how a catechist accompanies a SPRED friend on their faith journey. I approached them and introduced myself.

I learned that Joseph is blind and has different developmental and intellectual disabilities. We had a brief but good conversation. I was moved by Joseph's participation. He engaged in prayer

and listened attentively to the Liturgy of the Eucharist. As we parted ways, I happily gave them my rosary from the Sanctuary of Saint Francis Xavier in Navarra, Spain, that I owned for a long time.

After the mass, thousands of young people began to walk like a sea of waves, carrying their countries' flags in a variety of heights, colors and sizes. They chanted, sang and cheered as they walked home.

The crowd became louder when a group of people with disabilities passed in front of us. They held hands as they moved in line so they wouldn't be separated from their group. When people in the crowd saw them, they began to wave, applaud, and give them high-fives as they passed. They protected them from the crowd by making an open path for them to pass safely.

Indeed, our friends are members of our faith community, the Church. We walk with them. They journey and celebrate with us. In the celebration room, we stand together holding each other's hand, showing our unity and solidarity like Jesus holding Peter's hand when he was drowning in the waves.

More than 1.5 million pilgrims attended the final event, the missioning Mass. There, two young friends stood beside Pope Francis and served as altar servers during the celebration of the Eucharist. Their presence gave joy to many people. It is what we do in our SPRED liturgy celebration in our parishes. We let our friends participate actively by inviting them to minister and serve by preparing the altar and presenting the gifts of bread and wine.



A SPRED friend is warmly welcomed by the celebrant to the parish SPRED liturgy.



A SPRED friend, accompanied by his catechist, brings forth a candle during the preparation of the altar.

The friends came to the WYD celebration not as observers but pilgrims. They were able to participate actively because people from their faith community recognized their presence and empowered them.

In our parish, we celebrate with our SPRED friends. For instance, October is dedicated to Our Lady of the Holy Rosary to commemorate the Blessed Mother's final public appearance to the shepherd children of Fatima on October 13, 1918.

After receiving the good news from Angel Gabriel, Mary "arose and went in haste" to visit her cousin Elizabeth. She decided to stay with and serve her. Our SPRED catechists strive to imitate Mary's virtues of commitment and service. Like Mary, they stay with our SPRED communities to pray and serve our friends.

In October, we also celebrate Mission Month to remember and honor the great missionary men and women in our Church and, more importantly, to raise awareness of our calling to renew our missionary commitment through prayer and service.

The life of Saint Francis Xavier, who traveled as a missionary to China, Japan and India, invites us to improve and deepen our relationships with people with developmental and intellectual disabilities in our parishes and neighborhoods.

As Saint Francis Xavier did, we give our service with joy and love. This is our mission in SPRED! But we must carry out our mission not only inside

our SPRED environment; we must keep in mind our mission no matter where we are. Let's be mindful of our friends wherever they may be—at the mall, theater, a sporting event, church, park and other places where we joyously share space with them.



The SPRED community gathers in joy and love at the SPRED Chapel to celebrate liturgy.

“Missionary joy” was the resounding message of Pope Francis to the young participants of WYD in Lisbon and to all Church members. He emphasized that joy is not a mere personal sentiment but a dynamic force that propels us to share it with others.

Pope Francis underlined his message by saying, “Our joy is meant to be shared with others. We are called to bring that joy to others as part of our mission.”

His message encourages us to look to role models like Mary and Francis Xavier whose faith and optimism brighten our faith lives and encourage us to explore the roots of our deep joy.

Pope Francis said that when we reflect on our past, we can't help but think of those who illuminated our journey: our parents, grandparents, close friends, clergy, religious figures, mentors and educators. They are the foundation of the joy we experience.

To extend this joy to others, Pope Francis continued, we must first discover and cultivate it within ourselves. He candidly acknowledged that nurturing this sense of joy can be demanding and challenging. Despite setbacks and moments of stumbling, he encouraged his listeners to persevere, rise after a fall and make renewed attempts.

Pope Francis culminated his address by underscoring our responsibility to uplift one another during times of adversity. He asserted, “Every aspect of life comes with a cost; effort is required for everything. But there is one element that is boundlessly free: the love of Jesus. Armed with this gift of love, and fueled by our determination to progress, let us stride forward in anticipation, rooted in our heritage, facing the future without trepidation. Have courage, unyielding courage!”

We sometimes are overshadowed by uncertainty within our SPRED community. We worry about the dwindling number of catechists, lack of financial resources, division and conflicting issues among SPRED leaders and others.

Pope Francis' words echoed as a powerful call to reclaim the spirit of joy as an agent of transformation. He invoked a sense of collective purpose, reminding everyone that our mission isn't only an individual endeavor but a shared endeavor—a mission to kindle the embers of hope and camaraderie in a world that hungers for authentic connection.



Fr. Jose Santiago, OP, SPRED Chaplain, igniting the spirit of mission within the heart of a new SPRED Catechist after mass.

Let us ignite the spirit of mission in our hearts. Let us raise awareness of how our friends must be recognized and involved in our parish community life. Let us embrace mission animation efforts and build faith communities where everyone is welcomed, accepted and loved.

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

2956 South Lowe Avenue, Chicago, IL 60616

St. Francis de Sales:

135 South Buesching Road, Lake Zurich, IL 60047

Queen of Angels:

4412 North Western Avenue, Chicago, IL 60625

Role Orientation for Core Team (3-1):

Oct. 14, 21 | 1 – 6 p.m. | SPRED Center

Helper Catechist Role Orientation:

English: Oct. 28 | 1 – 6 p.m. | SPRED Center

General Orientation for Core Team (2-1):

Oct. 21, 28, Nov. 4 | 10 a.m. – 3 p.m. | St. Francis de Sales

Role Orientation for Core Team (3-1):

Nov. 11, 18 | 10 a.m. – 3 p.m. | St. Francis de Sales

Observation, SPRED Center (Make Reservations)

6–10 Group | Nov. 6, 20, Dec. 4 | 6 p.m.

11–16 Group | Nov. 7, 21, Dec. 5 | 7 p.m.

17/21 Group | Nov. 7, 21, Dec. 5 | 7 p.m.

22+ Group | Nov. 6, 20, Dec. 4 | 7 p.m.

Observation, Queen of Angels (Make Reservations)

17–21 Group | Oct. 28, Nov. 8, 29 | 7 p.m.

22+ Group | Oct. 24, 26 Nov. 7, 9, 28, 30 | 7 p.m.

22+ Group | Oct. 28, Nov. 11, Dec. 2 | 9:30 a.m.

Observation, St. Francis de Sales (Make Reservations)

6–10 Group | Oct. 24, Nov. 14, 28 | 6 p.m.

11–16 Group | Oct. 25, Nov. 15, 29 | 6 p.m.

SPRED Family Liturgy, SPRED Center | 11 a.m.

English: Nov. 5, Dec. 3

Spanish: Oct. 15, Nov. 19, Dec. 17

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