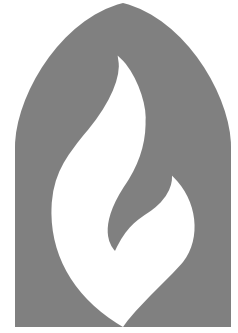


SPRED



A publication of Special Religious Development

Volume 104 | Number 8 | April 2024

I can still remember my first experience with SPRED.

It was sometime last spring, in April or May of 2023. As a Capuchin Franciscan friar and student at Hyde Park's Catholic Theological Union, I'd been tasked with spending the 2023-24 school year serving with a local nonprofit or archdiocesan organization. I volunteered to do my work with SPRED, an organization that specialized in providing a type of ministry that was unfamiliar to me.

The mission of SPRED is to form small faith communities to welcome persons with special needs and offer a type of faith formation which respects their way of knowing and honors the gifts they have to offer.

I had previously tried my hand at a variation of the sort of work that SPRED does. In my mid-20s, before I'd become a friar or even thought about moving to Chicago, I was entertaining the idea of studying for the priesthood in southeastern Wisconsin, where I'd grown up. My pastor at the time, who was guiding me through the process of discernment to enter the local archdiocesan seminary, encouraged me to teach at his parish's weekly high school-level religious education classes. I agreed to give it a shot.

For the better part of a full academic year, I spent Sunday nights helping to shepherd a group of sophomores and juniors through a three-hour evening gauntlet that included Mass, a cafeteria dinner and about an hour's worth of classroom faith instruction. To say that I imparted any knowledge to those in my



Monsignor Kaczorowski Confirms a SPRED Friend.

charge would be an overly generous assessment of my catechetical achievement.

As I recall, the boys who attended the classes were mostly there to talk to the girls, who were there to talk to anyone but the boys, and nobody ended up paying any attention to the lessons I co-led with one other instructor.

By last spring, though, I felt ready to give catechetical ministry another shot. When I heard about SPRED, I realized I might enjoy a bit more success here than I'd had as a futile and hapless CCD instructor. As a SPRED catechist I'd be a member of a team — a community of other catechists.

I was told that the sessions wouldn't have the look and feel of a "classroom," which, I'd learned from experience, could prove a fatal turnoff for participants who had already spent the better part of the previous week cramming their heads full of lessons in geometry, calculus and biology. The call to be in another classroom setting certainly did not offer much appeal.

Still, I'd only heard about SPRED before I had volunteered to work with the organization. I'd never actually had the opportunity to experience one of its catechetical sessions for myself. And so, when an invitation was sent to me last spring to spend an evening observing a group session, I welcomed the opportunity to get a firsthand glimpse at my future commitment. Signing up for things without knowing anything about them has proven one of my life's recurring foibles.

Whatever questions provoked any uncertainty, though, quickly evaporated as I sat through a brief opening lecture introducing me and a few other SPRED rookies to the catechetical method and model of specialized catechesis. Following the warm welcome, we were ushered into an observation room that peered into a neighboring classroom. Yet, it did not look or feel like a classroom. From here, I could see the gentle unfolding of a typical SPRED session.

I watched as a team of adults and young children worked in mostly uninterrupted silence — soundtracked by soft music and broken only occasionally by mostly whispered chatter — for the better part of an hour. I found myself disarmed and mesmerized by a silence that I realized wasn't empty or vacuous but that was rich and prayerful. It struck me that I had been invited to participate in a truly meditative moment, one that I'd have been hard pressed to replicate in my own Capuchin friary.



Monsignor Jim Kaczorowski during the Consecration.



Monsignor Kaczorowski offers a blessing of peace for the sacrament of Reconciliation.

The group's members then gathered in a semicircle and greeted each other briefly before being invited into their nearby celebration room. Again, we could peer into and taste from our observation post. I cannot remember anymore what the catechesis session that night was about, or even what the object was that served as its centerpiece.

What I do recall is that I became gradually cognizant, as the session wore on, that I was witnessing something not at all unlike the Eucharistic liturgy. This became especially poignant as I watched everyone in that evening's group crowd around a small table, each person rubbing elbows with their neighbor as they passed around and shared a simple meal. What had begun as an exercise in quiet, prayerful meditation had pilgrimaged its way through the Word and had now arrived at its own type of sacrament.

A few months later, I was finally working in my own group — two of them, in fact. Since September, I've been helping with adult-level groups on both the north and south sides of Chicago. And since then, I've been trying to replicate the experience of that first "liturgy" of catechesis I'd witnessed and been so inspired by the previous spring.



Monsignor Kaczorowski celebrates a SPRED Family Mass at Queen of Apostles Parish.

Indeed, from time to time, the feelings stirred during that first session I observed echo in my own lived experiences. I savor the gift when I attend the semi-monthly Masses at the SPRED Center chapel, where the Eucharistic liturgy moves at a pace that invites me to embrace all the little blessings which I often overlook at my home parish. The agape gatherings of SPRED communities offer a simple experience that evokes an awareness of an action beyond just eating — toward authentic communion.

Catechesis, as SPRED has taught me, is most effective when it evokes the liturgies it's meant to prepare us all to celebrate more mindfully. Catechesis is most effective when it embodies the same ritual actions of liturgy and sacrament. Through a lifelong cyclical movement between catechesis, liturgy and sacrament, we discover a deeper awareness of God with us throughout all the stages of our life.

I've found myself wondering at times whether the method that our SPRED communities embrace might not be of some benefit to those who participate in religious education — the

CCD I used to teach. Indeed, there's a type of presence I've felt in my weekly SPRED sessions that I'm not sure is nurtured in the catechetical experience of youth and young adults.

That's a shame and an oversight. My own experiences of catechesis, liturgy and my relationship with God have been so enriched through my participation in SPRED — so much so, in fact, that I wish there was a way to more readily share the fruits of these precious gifts with so many more. Our friends with special needs and unique gifts have provoked the inspiration of the SPRED founders to develop a treasure for all who hunger for more.

For the time being, I suppose, I guess I can let SPRED remain one of Chicago's best-kept secrets.

By: McLean Bennet
SPRED Catechist and Student at Catholic Theological Union (photo below)



CHICAGO SPRED CALENDAR**Contact:** 312.842.1039 or SPRED@archchicago.org**Vicariate I ABCD:** Tuesday, May 14 | Prince of Peace Parish, Lake Villa**Vicariate I EFG:** Thursday, May 23 | SS. Thomas Becket and Alphonsus Ligouri, Prospect Hts.**Vicariate II ABCDE:** Tuesday May 21 | Queen of Angels SPRED Center, Chicago**Vicariate III BCDE:** Tuesday May 21 | St. Denis and St. Bede Parish, Chicago**Vicariate IV AD:** Friday, May 31 | St. Ferdinand Parish, Chicago**Vicariate IV E:** Wednesday, May 29 | St. John the Evangelist Parish, Streamwood**Vicariate IV BC:** Tuesday, May 28 | St. Charles Borromeo Parish, Melrose Park**Vicariate V AB:** Thursday, May 23 | Two Holy Martyrs Parish, Chicago**Vicariate V CDE:** Thursday, May 30 | St. George Parish, Tinley Park**Vicariate VI A plus St. Pius V:** Tuesday, May 14 | SPRED Center, Chicago**Vicariate VI DE:** Thursday, May 16 | St. Augustine Parish, Midlothian**MAMRE SPRING CASH RAFFLE to Benefit the SPRED****Ministry:** 1st Prize: \$2000, 2nd Prize: \$1500, 3rd Prize: \$1000.

Drawing will take place on Sunday, May 19, 2024 after Mass at the SPRED Center Social Hall. Tickets are \$10 each and can be purchased through the SPRED Center. Call 312.842.1039 or email at SPRED@archchicago.org for more information.

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