



“Praying without words: How Spred leads us to the sacred.”

This was the title of a presentation I was asked to give by a priest friend who had often celebrated the Sacraments of Eucharist and Reconciliation with Spred groups. I am thrilled that this has been his experience and his insight.

The title begs the question: what is prayer?

Many of us will remember being taught that prayer is the lifting of our minds and hearts to God. This teaching can lay a heavy burden on us. We feel we must make an effort to speak to God, to praise God, to give thanks to God, to ask for help. We normally use words, thoughts, images and feel we have to keep our minds fixed on what we are saying. But there are times when we cannot find the words. We get tired of words. Tired of asking God in words that have no life left in them. Tired of thinking about God. Tired of saying prayers that may be beautiful in themselves but are not bringing us closer to God.

It is good to remember that no matter how hard we strive to get closer to God, in the end it is God who comes to us and not the other way round.

We come to awareness that knowing **about** God is not the same as being known **by** God.

The contemplative tradition has a lot to teach us about prayer as the focus of God’s action. God is seen as that prime mover, therefore the attitude to develop is one of receptivity. To do this it is important to clear the mind of words and thoughts.

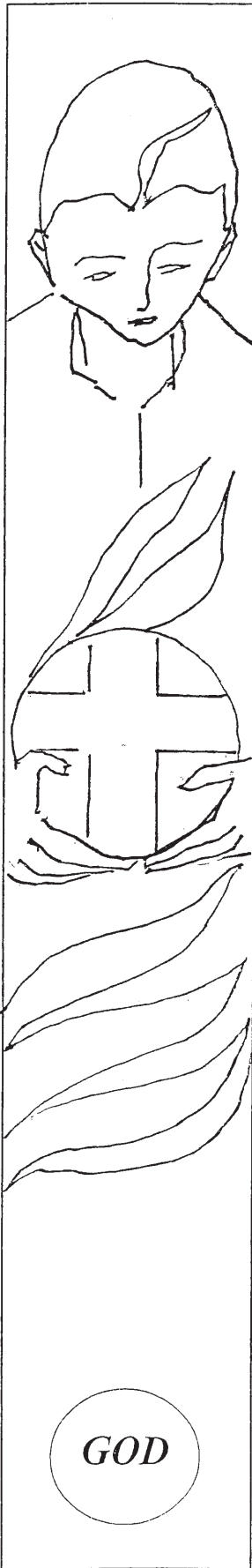
“When we pray we have no need of the spoken word. Sometimes the tongue is silent and the soul is sighing. That means that God is being prayed to inside, in the room of your heart.”

St. Augustine

The Spred method is so effective because it has taken into consideration the special needs of those with intellectual disabilities for whom words can be the least good means of communication either with others or with God. The fact that these people might never be able to use words to pray does not mean that they are not able to pray. People are not defined by what they do but by who they are and God, we can presume, who made us in his image and likeness, must want to be in relationship with each one. “God so loved the world that God sent his Son.” (Jn.4:3)



IN
SILENT
PRAYER



A relational God wants to be in relationship with us. In our faith journey, we all need to know we are loved. How else can we grow in love? In a Spred group, we all support one another with each friend having that special companion. Knowing and accepting one another “just as we are” is a great gift.

As we consider the preparation phase of an integrated session, we are aware that everything has been prepared to help people to come to quiet. The room is warm and welcoming with soft lighting, quiet, gentle music is playing and each catechist is already seated, working with an activity that fosters concentration. Walking into this ambience one is enveloped immediately in a blanket of love and acceptance. Choosing and settling with an appropriate activity, silence gradually descends on the group. This silence has substance. It is not just an absence of noise. It is a Presence.

“God speaks to us in the great silence of the heart.” St. Augustine

The busyness in our heads, the anxieties about all we have to do dissolve as we apply ourselves to the work of creativity. Somehow we know that we are being stilled, the torment inside ceases and we are held in peace. The wordless prayer rises up from the community, perhaps well captured in the words of the mystic Meister Eckhart:

“When I pray for nothing, then I pray rightly. I never pray so well and powerfully as when I pray for nothing and nobody. One is just there.”

When I am training new volunteers, I love to use ‘The story of the Cup’ a parable from the east:

“Once upon a time there was a man who was always so busy that he had no time for God. He worked very hard and had a wife and a family. Reaching the middle years he decided he would like to know about God and so he set about asking family and friends. None were able to help him but someone suggested he should speak to the wise man who lived out of the city and up the hill. One day he set out to achieve his goal. Reaching the little hut of the guru, he knocked on the door and was welcomed. The wise man invited his guest to sit down and offered some tea. As he prepared this, the man from the city talked and talked about the reason for his visit, about his family, his work. Eventually the wise man put the tray on the table and proceeded to pour the tea. The man from the city continued to talk. The wise man poured the tea and soon it fell over the rim of the cup and onto the saucer, then to the floor. The man from the city jumped up and said, “Everyone said you were a wise man and you don’t even know how to pour a cup of tea.” “On the contrary,” said the wise man. “You see this cup? It is full to the brim just like you. You came here wanting to find God but there is no room in you” The wise man then emptied the cup, showed it to the man saying, “Empty yourself and God will find you.”

By the end of the preparation phase, we are hopefully emptied and ready to be filled with God’s Word as we move to our Celebration Room. This movement is like a little pilgrimage. We choose to go to our sacred place, knowing from past experiences that we enter holy ground. Here, with the others, we will encounter the Other. Always there is anticipation: always there is expectation. Once again, it is the Spred method that enables each one to enter into the holy. For example, the Leader catechist may have a tray of beautiful shells. Each person chooses one shell.

Each one takes time to feel it, to look, to admire its beauty. We share this experience with others. Skillfully the Leader catechist then guides the group to focus on the inner beauty of each person:

I wanted to share this very special beauty here together.

There is beauty in the shells we hold in our hands.

There is beauty in the heart of each one of us.

There is beauty in Elizabeth (each one is mentioned.)

The focus on each one gives time to absorb the truth of these words. How sacred.

Evoking a real liturgical experience is relevant and meaningful to all:

Remember when we all gathered round the altar with Fr. John?

He carried the Book of God's Word.

We sang Alleluia.

We felt the glory of God's love in our hearts.

Jesus helped us sing praise.

God's Word is spoken into the space we all crafted during the preparation time:

In the Book of God's Word, a friend of God says:

"We are the earthenware jars that hold the treasure
of God's glory."

The message delivered to each one is received so prayerfully that even if one's disability means that the words are not intelligible, the gentle, grace-filled gestures and presence of the Leader catechist takes on the shape of God. This holy presence persists as we rest in silence before leaving the Celebration room.

As we celebrate the Spred Family Mass in the parish, we are careful to take into consideration the recommendation of the General Instruction on the Roman Missal that "each and every liturgy should take into account the nature and circumstances of each assembly." What best fosters active and full participation for people with intellectual disabilities?

- Use of liturgical mime during the readings
- Periods of silence after the readings
- A group leading the congregation in song and prayerful gesture for the Responsorial Psalm
- Quiet, gentle music accompanying those who process to lay the altar cloth and present the gifts. The focus they create captures everyone.

Parishioners at our parish are still in awe after 15 years of the prayerful silences created during our liturgies. This great community act of thanksgiving is indeed prayer which requires not just raising our minds and hearts but stilling them to be receptive to God's great gift. We see the bread broken, the cup shared. Be comfortable with one another and with silence, we are all led more deeply into this great Mystery.

As a catechist who has travelled in faith with a Spred group for 30 years:

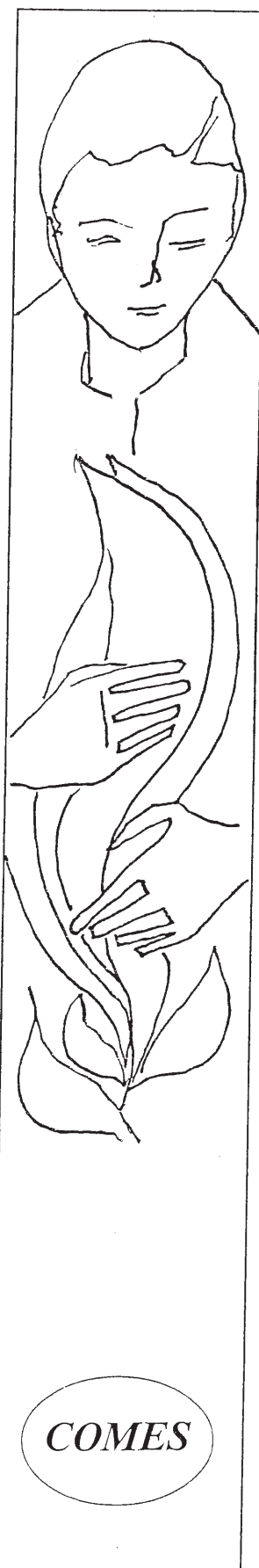
"I know the Immovable comes down. I know the Invisible appears.

I know that he who is far outside the whole of creation

Takes me (us) within himself and hides me (us) in his arms." Killistos Ware

Sr. Agnes Nelson

Spred Director Archdiocese of Glasgow, Scotland



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Diocese of Providence
One Cathedral Square
Providence, Rhode Island 02903
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Providence Spred News

The Gift of SPRED

On March 5, 2014, an article reported in Our Sunday Visitor Newsweekly, by Mary De Turrís Poust on the Diocese of Providence's Program for Special Religious Education (SPRED) for faith development with people with special needs. It was noted that many diocese and parishes do not have programs for people with special needs to prepare them for sacraments and life – long faith formation to enable them to share their gifts and fully participate in the life of their parishes.

The article reported that there is a need for parishioners to be aware that 20% of the people in our parishes have some kind of disabling condition.

The United States Bishops' 1978 Pastoral Statement on people with disabilities called on the Church to evangelize and catechize parish members with special needs. A support system on a diocesan level offers parishes information, networking the training of catechists greatly helps to meet the spiritual needs of people with disabilities.

The Diocese of Providence Special Religious Developmental Program (SPRED) is an example of this. SPRED uses a symbolic, liturgical catechesis. The Method is *Vivre*. Our diocese is affiliated with this international program that originated in the Archdiocese of Chicago in 1966. It is intuitive model based on small faith communities and a sharing of life stories, liturgical experiences and biblical readings, prayers and hymns.

Father Norman W. Bourdon when interviewed said, when he became pastor of St. Joan of Arc in Cumberland, 23 years ago, the SPRED program was already up and running. SPRED was established, he said, because "children and adults with special needs were being neglected, probably because in general people thought they could not pray, express or learn their faith."

Father Bourdon said his special needs parishioners are woven into the church community and are not outside it.

Rather than divide his parish, SPRED has knitted it more closely together, with many people attracted to the program as catechists and helpers. When special liturgies are held, parishioners appreciate the different styles of prayer expression they witness.

"One of the greatest challenges is to get people to be part of the program. It seems once they do, they never leave. They love it, and the 'special friends' more than appreciate it". "Many people feel that to volunteer in the SPRED program, they need special qualifications. You only have to be willing and the rest will fall in place."

St. Joan of Arc SPRED, hosts training for parishes and catechists in the Method *Vivre* throughout the Diocese of Providence. "Anyone who first comes to SPRED doesn't realize how happy, beautiful, appreciative and responsive these people are. They instantly melt away any concerns you might have about not being adequate to be in the SPRED program," Father Bourdon explained. "It is important to the families of people in SPRED to know that the Church cares about and helps them as they deal with children and adults with special needs."

The Diocese of Providence thanks The Archdiocese of Chicago for SPRED, enabling our diocese to offer appropriate faith development for people with special needs.

On Saturday, May 3, 2014 Catholic Financial Life sponsored the 37th Project FAITH seminar for people from the New England Dioceses who work in programs for people with special needs. We thank our guest speaker, Sr. Vivian Marie Patenaude, RJM who enriched us spiritually as she enabled those present to understand and appreciate the gift and beauty of the "EIGHTH" SACRAMENT (the Sacrament of the Present Moment.)

Catherine Madden Turbitt, Spred Staff