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Sister of Providence combines work, prayer life in ministry for intellectually challenged

by Sr. Camille D'Arienzo

Conversations with Sr. Camille

Providence Sr. Susanne Gallagher

Profession: Staff member at Special Religious Development (SPRED)

Lives in: Chicago

Sr. Camille: Susanne, the opportunity to have this conversation with you appeals to me on several levels. To begin with, I trust Sr. Rita Clare Gerardot's recommendation that I contact you regarding your devotion to children with disabilities. My own Mercy community is engaged in that ministry in many dioceses, including my own Brooklyn diocese as well as in Chicago where you reside. However, most compelling to me is the fact that my 10-year-old grandnephew has autism. I know how much it meant to our family to have him receive his first Communion with his younger sister.

What drew you to this work?

Gallagher: I was teaching first grade in a parish school in Chicago in 1966. One of the sisters with whom I was living came home from a meeting and asked me if I knew there was a program for people with special needs directed by Fr. Jim McCarthy. She was aware of my interest in special education because one of my younger sisters is a person with Down syndrome. I called Fr. McCarthy, and he invited me to meet with him. During our meeting, he described the method called Symbolic Catechesis that was being experienced in several small SPRED (Special Religious Development) groups. He invited me to become a volunteer in one that met on Saturday mornings. I was thrilled.

It sounds like an answer to prayer.

I had been praying for a way to commingle my work and my prayer life and to become involved with people who are intellectually challenged. During my interview with Fr. McCarthy, I sensed that SPRED ministry would be a place where I would become more aware of God's presence in my life, and I would grow in this awareness within a community of catechists and people with developmental disabilities. I participated as a SPRED ministry volunteer for six months and was invited to join the SPRED team being formed. I asked permission from our mother general to accept the invitation for full-time ministry, and it was lovingly granted.

How did this program develop?

Fr. McCarthy began to search out ways to provide religious development to people with developmental disabilities when he was assigned to be assistant director of the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine (the CCD office) here in Chicago in 1960. Sr. Mary Therese joined him in 1963. She had access to what was available in French, being able to speak and understand its written word. She discovered the work of two French priests, Fr. Paulhus from Quebec and Fr. Mesny from Lyons, France. They came to Chicago several times to introduce the method they had developed. What a gift it has been!

Why is the method particularly helpful to people with developmental disabilities?

Many channels we use to gain knowledge and take for granted are not available for people with developmental disabilities. The symbolic method begins with one's life experience. Our goal is communion with Jesus lived within the context of a believing community. Such a short description is not sufficient to express the sacredness of the experience of coming to discover God's loving presence in what we live. It allows all of us to grow in faith, and it readies us to participate in liturgy where we receive God's mercy.

How do you prepare volunteer catechists to experience this method?

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After gaining the support of the pastor, the SPRED Community Religious Worker encourages people from the parish to volunteer for this ministry. We look for eight adults who will welcome six people with special needs. We work with four chronological age groupings, 6-10, 11-16, 17-21 and 22+. We provide training and opportunities to observe the catechesis. Each group of catechists agrees to a set of seven standards so the continuity among groups is assured. Some of our 22+ group members have been in a SPRED group since the age of 6. After the catechists have had some experience, they're invited to participate in seminars and enrichment experiences to deepen their understanding.

What caused you to establish the model you use?

We knew we could not possibly serve all in need with our small core team, and we realized that SPRED ministry needs to belong to the parish. Our goal is to have centers of each age grouping available in every part of the archdiocese so that all with special needs can find a place of welcome and become prepared to experience belonging in the liturgical life of their parish. They can move from one group to another as they grow older.

How many such groups exist in Chicago?

There are 150 SPRED groups in the archdiocese, with 16 more parishes preparing to establish new groups.

Do you have support from the diocese?

Recently, Cardinal Francis George remarked to Fr. Jim, "You have created a model for the world." The prompting of the Spirit that moved Fr. McCarthy to find a way to serve families who waited for the church to prepare their children to receive the sacraments was a special gift that continues to inspire many to participate in SPRED ministry.

Last May, the three of you received the University of Notre Dame's Laetare Medal, the oldest and most prestigious honor given to American Catholics. Notre Dame's president, Holy Cross Fr. John Jenkins, credited you with having "summoned the Church to a crucial and too often overlooked ministry." He continued, "Insisting that a developmental disability neither tempers Christ's invitation nor restricts one's right to respond, they have ushered countless people to their rightful place at the Eucharistic table."

We were stunned to be awarded the Laetare Medal, and even now, the honor seems to be a bit of a dream. The declaration from Fr. Jenkins was very meaningful. Highlighting the reality of "reaching out to those who might not otherwise have learned that we are members of one another ... and are the one wholly human body in which God dwells" is powerful. We have heard from parents, caregivers and devoted catechists who rejoice knowing that their child and faith friend has been publicly acknowledged as belonging to the human body in which God dwells. Many experience having a loved one undervalued and not allowed to participate.

This distinction is rewarding; however, my guess is that the deeper rewards are not public ones. Am I right?

We know from experience how valuable belonging to a small faith community is for our friends with developmental disabilities. Recently, I heard someone ask my sister Rita what her SPRED group was all about. She said, "That's when my friends come to be with me." People who are often thought to be less are actually bearers of gifts that are priceless. They witness to simplicity of life that welcomes and treasures friendship. "Being with" takes precedence over "having" or even "doing." In this context, our friends with special needs become a source of inspiration for us. Together, we discover that all relationships are part of the One Relationship.

Has the SPRED model been replicated in dioceses apart from the Chicago area?

Yes, indeed. SPRED ministry is welcomed and growing in 28 dioceses and several hundred parishes nationwide. There are SPRED diocesan directors in several other countries, including England, Ireland, Scotland, Australia, South Africa, Malta and Mexico.

Programs such as yours require fundraising and supportive parishes and individuals. It must require a great deal of faith, too. It sounds like trusting in God's providence has been a way of being for all of you.

Yes! We are called to respond to a particular need. The gifts given to support our effort to respond are varied and treasured. Our new website, spread-chicago.org, helps the viewer become aware of ways to participate with us. We trust that we'll be given all that is necessary to be faithful, to provide a welcoming

environment that communicates the mystery of God's love and mercy.

Susanne, so far all we have learned about you is the depth of your passion for the ministry you enjoy. Please tell us where and with whom you grew up.

I grew up in Oak Park, Ill., a village next to Chicago. We were members of Ascension parish. I am second oldest of 14 children. My mother and father gave us a good example of how working together and sharing the burdens and joys of life is important. Their shared trust in God's providence shaped my experience, though I only know this by reflecting on our life together.

We were educated, in turn, by the Ursuline Sisters, the Sinsinawa Dominicans and the Holy Cross Sisters. I remember some fondly, even to this day.

Did you have any specific role models?

My mother was a role model for me. We were close. I enjoyed helping her care for my younger brothers and sisters in small ways, especially when they were babies. My mother gave so generously. I never sensed that she tired of us all, yet I'm sure we must have been quite a challenge for her at times.

What drew you to the Sisters of Providence?

My aunt was a Sister of Providence. We visited her when she was in the Chicago area and sometimes we would travel to our mother house at St. Mary-of-the-Woods, Ind., to visit her. Those visits seem to me now to have been God's way of introducing me to my future home away from home. Vocation is filled with mystery, is it not? I felt great peace when I chose to enter the community.

In what other ministries have you served?

I taught in grammar schools for seven years before I joined the SPRED ministry. One year, I taught kindergarten in the morning and eighth grade in the afternoon. It was great fun. I loved teaching.

Do you have a favorite Scripture passage, and how does it impact your life?

I am particularly fond of the Gospel of St. John, especially Chapter 17. Jesus prays, "I have made your name known to them ... so that the love with which you loved me may be in them and so that I may be in them." Everyone has the need and the right to experience God's love. I need to be part of a movement that strives to awaken others to that love by personally becoming more conscious of it myself.

How and with whom do you relax?

I relax sharing meals with my ministry team and with friends who are Sisters of Providence. I also relax working with plants and with the earth. I find ways to be silent. Stillness is full of presence for me. Sometimes I sit with my sister Rita and we listen to music. Through music we share what cannot be put into words. We experience "being" together.

Finally, Pope Francis shows so much concern for those on the margins and with special needs. How do you think he would respond to your SPRED ministry?

I've been reading and praying with *Evangelii Gaudium*, the proclamation of the Gospel in today's world by Pope Francis. Its spirit is so supportive. He says, "Goodness always tends to spread. Every authentic experience of truth and goodness seeks by its very nature to grow within us, and any person who has experienced a profound liberation becomes more sensitive to the needs of others."

And you, Susanne, are certainly exceedingly sensitive to those with special needs.

Thank you for letting me speak of my SPRED ministry experience. Words sometimes seem inadequate to express the ongoing renewal of spirit with others. The invitation to join us in some way is open-ended. We look forward to a time when everyone can participate in the joy of the message of Jesus.

[Mercy Sr. Camille D'Arienzo, broadcaster and author, narrates *Stories of Forgiveness*, a book about people whose experiences have caused them to consider the possibilities of extending or accepting forgiveness. The audiobook, renamed *Forgiveness: Stories of Redemption*, is available from Now You Know Media.]

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