

CONTRACT FOR ADULT COMMUNITIES OF
SPRED CATECHESTS



SPRED
SPECIAL RELIGIOUS DEVELOPMENT
ARCHDIOCESE OF CHICAGO

One of the most serious questions underlying the movement to develop SPRED communities is this: are persons who are intellectually and developmentally disabled really educable in faith?

Superficial observation may tempt some to profound doubt. Research* and experience both support that they are educable in faith, if faith is seen as experiential, as the experience of the sacred, a sense of the church, a sense of Christ and a sense of God.

Everything thus depends on the faith tonality of the catechetical group of adults who provide the atmosphere for this experience. The common bond in faith that grows among them is the core education media for people with developmental disabilities. People with intellectual and developmental disabilities share the life of the group in varying degrees, but the burden of growth in faith falls primarily on the adult community.

For this reason, the adult SPRED catechists participate in an Adult Preparation session prior to each Total Community session. The effort is to be in communion with the deep mystery of life, the faith dimension according to the theme which will be the focus in the coming session with our friends with disabilities.

This shifts the style from a teacher – pupil pattern to growing together as a community of faith. Over a period of many years, as group after group experiences similar patterns of struggles and growth, an agreement or covenant was drawn up to facilitate growth.

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The SPRED Catechists' Covenant to the SPRED Community

This agreement /covenant emphasizes the seriousness of our endeavor. This contract strives for high visibility, so that the group can put all the cards on the table. It sets forth for closest examination, of an approach that has been thought through in its goal, means, principles and its facing of group problems. This contract is an effort to respect you, your time, your faith life.

You are asked to examine it carefully. It recognizes that for many understandable reasons you might desire to agree or disagree. The group cannot settle to begin a serious task until all the members have examined the contract and have agreed to it.

Why Adults?

This contract subscribes to a catechesis of adults. All too often due to the pressure of time and due to adult's passion to teach children their religion, the emphasis of adult faith is bypassed. We submit that this is an error of major proportion. Religious education moves forward only when adults grown in faith. The adult faith community is primary so that others have a Christian community into which they can be welcomed.

Why the group?

You will be working with a small group of adults. Sound theology dictates that faith in the Lordship of Jesus will be found in a community of believers. The American experience and expertise in group dynamics are called upon to ensure the effectiveness of the group and the growth of the individual in it. The needs of the

Christian today often call for smaller, more vibrant faith groups in a church that knows its catholic and universal nature all too well. Yet the group, like the individual, goes through growing pains. Group problems are outlined in the contract so that the group might be enabled to face them honestly when they arise.

Why the Faith Session?

If God speaks, it is in order to enter into the lives of persons, to save them and to win a loving response. Historically there is a shift in focus in religious education from the primacy of instruction (wherein the goal is the true) and from the importance of formation (wherein the goal is the good) to a more primary goal from which truth and value follow namely, initiation. Initiation is the process of advancing into a more and more interpersonal relationship with God, which by its very intimacy, is in some measure mysterious. When God speaks to us, it is to establish a life of communion. This life of communion is the experience of faith. From communion with God's presence in life itself, the truth will be known as personally meaningful and the good will be seen as personally valuable. This communion is the goal of the faith sessions.

MEANS

What are the means used in a Faith Session?

The process is known as symbolic catechesis or the *Method Vivre*.

The French title, *Vivre*, is the one used by the method's originator Fr. Jean Mesny. In summary, the means used to prepare oneself to grow in faith are:

- To unfold, to interpret life situations
- Within a group
- Through a symbol
- In faith
- In light of the Word
- Moving toward communion
- And witness.

PRINCIPLES INVOLVED IN THIS PROCESS

The symbolic process generally involves various phases. When a person settles down before a symbol, a call is received from the symbol itself. Becoming aware of how the symbol is calling, one must struggle to accept or to reject the movement of the symbol. This requires time. If the person decides to follow the movement of the symbol, a process of interior movement of entering into harmony with the symbol is accompanied by affectivity, feeling. If a person flees or protects self from this affectivity, the movement is destroyed. However, as the symbolic process is entered into, it leads the person, in the company of others, toward the deep of things where the Word of God can have a resonance.

The movement then is usually attraction by the symbol, a spontaneous response, moments of resistance, of struggle, acceptance, letting non-essentials drop, new awareness, harmony, joy.

This symbolic movement is mingled with the experience of faith. Faith, a mystery in itself as it is a gift, is not only an act of intellectual adhesion; it is a movement full of trust and love. It is a response of the whole person.

This movement is essentially free, dramatic, obscure, but leading to certain knowledge. It involves a turning (conversion), a dropping of non-essentials (purification), and the joy of new discovery (witness).

The core reality underlying everything is the life of the Trinity. This mystery at its deepest level is God himself. Through creation, the Trinitarian movement is given in a diffused manner in the universe. The transcendent God concentrates his immanence in Jesus. Through him, all life comes from and returns to the Father. Through his obedience of faith in the Father, expressed in his total openness to the experience of death and through the life of the Spirit poured forth in the resurrection, all reality is ultimately grounded in the risen life of Jesus. The inner core of any symbol ultimately touches this. Through the mystery of the Kingdom, expressed in the Church, his new life is explicitly focused. In space and time, God calls each person to this life through the mysteries of covenant, salvation, election, sanctification and creation.

LEADERSHIP

Any group needs leadership. A SPRED group has tri-leadership, a leader catechist, an activity catechist and a parish chairperson. The leadership team has three functions; host, celebrant, educator. The ideal is that this threefold leadership will assist in creating a fellowship of believers who will be in communion with the presence of God in an awareness of life. In this sense, we subscribe to a shared and diffused leadership.

The function of host is to create an atmosphere of welcome and warmth so that persons will get to know one another, be more and more at ease and will lower their defensive barriers to each other. All leadership team members share this role in a SPRED community. During the preparation session, the activity catechist in particular helps create a welcoming atmosphere and warmth. As host, the leader catechist presents the theme whereby the group is quieted, united interiorly and readied for a celebration.

The function of celebrant is to be in harmony with the core dynamic, the deep meaning of a life situation. The leader is to call the members into interiority and expression in view of this life situation, beginning thus with a concrete event, not from abstractions from the world of ideas.

The function of the educator is to stimulate the group to be aware of their own experiences and what is happening in each catechetical session so that it may be a more and more meaningful experience. The leader is to stimulate the group to reflect on the experience in the light of theology, pedagogy, as well as medical, psychosocial and

personal data. As the group matures, lectures, readings, papers, bibliographies, etc. can be suggested to various members of the group.

GROUP PROBLEMS

The following problems sometimes emerge in this catechetical process. It is suggested that the group suspend to the symbolic process to take time to face these problems if they appear. One meeting focused on an exploration of a group problem can free a group to return to the symbolic process with authenticity. The problems can gravitate around the leader, individual persons, or interactions in the group.

Leadership Problems

Overdependence on a leader

If the group suffers from overdependence on the leader, it will never arrive at mature fellowship. The leader's role is visible but the leader is to facilitate growth toward adult interaction, communion and witnessing.

Domination by a Leader

Sometimes a leader might try to 'mother' or 'father' a group. The group must alert such a leader and help the person to "let go".

Personal Problems

Tyranny of the technical person

This type of person is closed to appreciating the world of the spirit and therefore the world of symbol. Such a mentality sees the symbolic process as esoteric, arty, overly feminine. Poetry, art, dance music and silence make the person ill at ease. The western culture can produce this type of person.

Limitations of individual members

Lack of maturity, a closed mind, personality blocks, insensitivity to life, inability to communicate are some of the limitations that will block a full sounding of the mystery and fellowship. The group will move only as rapidly as the slowest member allows it.

Going it alone, apart from the adult faith community

Adult faith needs and adult community. No catechist can rely solely for growth in faith on his or her direct charges or disabled friends.

Threat of Self-Disclosure

There will be demands on every person within the group. You will be asked to be open about yourself. You will not be asked to reveal your past life or darkest secrets. You will be asked to accept others simply because they are, to encourage them to fulfill the contract, to positively respond to others in the group.

Process Problems

Inability to experiment

All the members of the group must participate wholeheartedly if it is truly to become church. Participation is learned by doing. Let there be a climate of experimentation. Members should not prejudice the experience by reserving their judgment or giving self-fulfilling prophecies. Participation will be enhanced by evaluation. Cooperation with one another must be reached. Let the reality have its emotional impact. Let language be colored by feeling.

Remaining on a superficial level

Sometimes members can sabotage the dynamics of the group and prevent the group from accepting the depth of the mystery. Often this will happen by a tacit understanding. Engaging in interaction is not easy. The forms of flight to be avoided are humor, silence and withdrawal, abstract interpretations, tacit decisions not to talk about certain subjects, cynicism.

Getting sidetracked from the primary goal.

The primary goal is the experience of faith before the mystery. Analysis, evaluation, theoretical discussions are benefits but are secondary.

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*Paulhaus, Euchariste, L'Educabilite Religieuse des Deficients Mentaux, Emmanuel Vitte, Lyons. France, 1962