

October Reflection

People with Special or Additional Needs – “So that the works of God may be revealed” – John 9:3

The purpose of any so-called ‘missionary’ activity is the preaching of the gospel, as Pope Francis continually reminds us. In these pages for some months now, we have concentrated on those whom we might associate with this great work – parents, teachers, catechists and priests. But this ‘missionary’ work is not confined to these people alone. It is a feature of the lives of all of us from the very day of our baptism. “God has chosen me to do him some definite service; he has committed some work to me that he has committed to no other. I have my mission”, as the beautiful prayer of Cardinal Newman tells us. In the ‘preaching’ of the gospel, we seek to bring God’s word and works to the attention of others and thereby to bring them to Him. Sometimes this can happen in the most unlikely of places from people whom you would never expect to be ‘preachers’ but who most definitely are, like our children!

For 48 years in our diocese, the agency called SPANNED (Supporting People with Additional Needs in the Nottingham Diocese) has done precisely this, often so quietly and imperceptibly that very many people have still never heard of it. All those years ago, a person with a disabling condition of one sort or another was often perceived as someone to be pitied or helped, labelled ‘disadvantaged’. You are only ‘disadvantaged’ by other people! From the beginning SPANNED worked to ensure that all people in this situation were regarded primarily as ‘persons’, not as ‘handicapped’ or ‘disabled’ at all, rather as ‘people’ who had choices to make and gifts to give, and set about enabling them to do so, thus taking them out of the darkness of general ignorance, which still sadly exists in many places. As time went on through the work of our then six groups throughout the diocese meeting regularly, the ‘works of God’ were certainly revealed to our friends, but more especially by and through them to others. They came to be seen as ‘contributors’ and the ways in which this took place were many and varied – unique even in the whole of Europe – and still are.

The ‘Pauline Project’ of 1983 in Nottingham for example, saw our group going into local parishes on a Sunday to ‘lead’ the Sunday liturgy, much to the surprise and then delight of priests and congregations alike who never thought that people with disabling conditions could do such a thing. Our mimes to music, interactive group work and SPANNED Masses, especially those with our three bishops have been unforgettable instances of ‘missionary’ activity at its highest, and the presentation of “The Dance of the Light” in Derby in July 2000 – the story of Jesus’ life ‘danced’ to the music of ‘Riverdance’ by 169 people – will never be forgotten by those privileged to be present. Latterly, our missionary activity centred on a year’s project on this precise subject – “I have my Mission” – and recently in the production of a specially written play about Greta Thunberg and our publication of ‘If you want to change the world...’, our SPANNED Climate Change Manifesto, the result of two years’ work on climate change only last month. The work of SPANNED has ensured that the preaching of the word in these special ways can mean that the Word is not only proclaimed but also ‘heard’ in an entirely different manner, which is received with joy and touches not only the hearts but the minds of all who are privileged to witness it or participate in it.

For further details you may contact SPANNED at St Peter’s Priory, Leicester Road, Hinckley LE10 1LW and subscribe if you wish to our quarterly magazine which, after the Ordo and Year Book is the longest running publication in the diocese. The history of the agency was published in 2018 in a book called “Nothing Like This Before”, which sums it up perfectly.

Dear Father,

We thank you for this beautiful world and we are very sorry if we have damaged it or the people who live in it. Help us to appreciate what you have given us and to look after your world always. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Prayer written by SPANNED for their climate justice project.

Written by **Fr Frank Daly**
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