



**N.I.C.E.** Our Lady Of Mercy, Park Ridge, NJ

## Needs In Catholic Education

### **SPIRITUAL SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES WITH A SPECIAL NEEDS CHILD**

As Baptized members of the Catholic Faith, it is everyone's right to participate in the Mass as well as all the Sacraments, Signs and Symbols of the Church and receive Religious Instruction.

Families come to Mass to teach their children about God's Word, to worship and to celebrate together. Sometimes with small children this can be difficult even under the best of circumstances. Raising a child with special needs presents additional challenges.

**Over 20 years ago a Mother asked a question. "What does our parish have for children with special needs when they can not participate in the classroom setting"?** At the time it was my second year as Director of Religious Education, and I had never been approached with the idea. I asked her, "What would you like us to have for your child?" I began to realize that perhaps there are others who have the same need and questions as this parent did. Parents who were looking for acceptance and understanding from their parish community. I asked this mom to gather others like herself and invite them to come to a meeting for a discussion on what we could do as a parish. I also posted a notice in our parish bulletin asking for other parents or relatives and special needs professionals who would be interested in giving us their ideas and input in order to develop a workable model. A program was developed here at Our Lady of Mercy, to welcome these children and their families to an opportunity to help enrich their family faith life and to fully participate in the gift of the Mass.

Because I had no formal training in special needs myself, I was able to seek out a teacher who taught a special needs class during the week. Together, with the help of the parents, we worked out a strategy that would reach their children of various ages and needs including, Autism, Asperger's Syndrome, Down Syndrome, ADD, ADHD, Prater Willi Syndrome, and Cerebral Palsy.

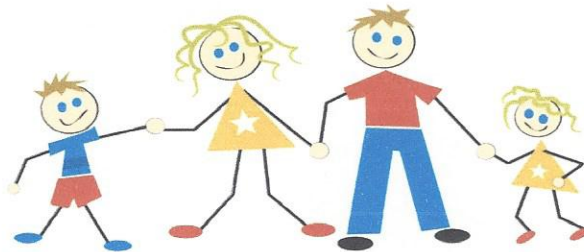
Our program, "**Liturgy of the Word with Special Needs**", modeled after the program "Liturgy of the Word with Children", is scheduled weekly during the **11 AM Mass**. After our Opening Prayer, families are quietly escorted to another area in the church where the Word of God is shared in music, using pom-poms, ribbon sticks, bells etc., Gospel story and simple craft. All within the time frame of a 20 minute window. Under the heading, "**Needs In Catholic Education**", families have now experienced the joy of seeing their children receive their **First Penance and First Holy Communion and Confirmation!** They also have a feeling of acceptance and support from their parish community during the celebration of the Mass.

Teen volunteers from the local high schools help out each week by doing community service hours. Each teen is asked to sit one on one with each child and assist them during the craft time. Parents are then able to talk to each other forming a network and community bond.

All siblings are also invited to participate creating a family event that might not happen elsewhere in the week.

The group returns before the Offertory in order to continue in the participation of the Mass with their community. Parishioners are welcoming and supportive of our families and have come to know our presence at Mass and understand that we are all God's children.

Through Sacrament preparation, Mass participation, and parent to parent support, this program thrives and encourages the faith life of the special needs family and not just the individual child.



*Amy Ballanco has been a part of the program since it's conception in 1998. She is a Master Catechist and has taught Catechetics and Sacraments for 47 years. She was the DRE/CRE at Our Lady of Mercy Parish in Park Ridge, N.J. for 21 years, from 1997 to 2019. She has instructed workshops for Catechists and Parish Catechetical Leaders in the Archdiocese of Newark, on how to start a program of their own. This program has also been sought out by and implemented in Jewish and Methodist faith practices and is adaptable to any worship experience.*

*Articles featuring our program have been included in "Catechist Magazine."*

*This program is recognized by the Archdiocese of Newark and the Governor of New Jersey. We received a Commendation from Governor Chris Christie in 2012.*

