

Baynesville classes reach out to all

Seven-year-old John Cirincione shows up with his entire family for religious education classes on Sundays at Immaculate Heart of Mary, Baynesville. His dad Paul settles him into his classroom while his mom, Robin, prepares a separate classroom as teacher of a preschoolers' religious education class. The Cirinciones are parishioners of Immaculate and also have two daughters ages 3 and 4.

Severely autistic, John is one of seven children who benefit from the teachings of the Catholic faith in Immaculate's religious education for students with special needs.

An aide keeps John focused in a mainstream religious education class, as are three other children - one deaf - in different grades. Down the hall, Katie Mason, 17; Allissia Kelley, 14; and Maggie Breschi, 16, form a class of their own. One girl has Down syndrome, one is extreme bipolar and the third has multiple physical disabilities and uses a wheelchair.

According to the director of religious education for Immaculate, Sister Regina DeAngelis, S.S.F., the religious education classes for children with special needs are open to children from the North Baltimore County region of the archdiocese.

"Any child can come; it's totally accessible to anyone," said Sister Regina. "We would like for area families to know we welcome children with special education needs because we have the personnel and also the physical access."

The program is currently able to handle 12 students. "If we recruited other special education aides or willing parents to accompany, we could possibly accommodate more in the mainstream classroom," she said.

Two state-certified special education public school system teachers, Mary Ann O'Brien and Judy Benz-Amerhein, volunteer to teach these children. Two aides assist.

"Parents seem to love it," said Sister Regina. "It's reciprocal. The teachers love what they are doing."

It can be challenging at times, but in terms of the rewards from the children, Sister Regina said, “Ah! Just to see them smile! Just to see them express the same faith as we have. They have great faith – they are very open and giving – I’d assume because so many people have given to them.”

If a region is interested in beginning religious education for special education students, contact William Fleming, Archdiocese of Baltimore coordinator of catechesis for persons with developmental disabilities, wfleming@archbalt.org, 410-547-5410.