

Deaf Culture and Deaf Church

Considerations for Pastoral Ministry

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The Second Vatican Council opens possibilities for Deaf Catholics to reimagine themselves as church. In many ways this is a profound experience for a community historically left on the margins and denied access to religious education, sacraments, and opportunities to minister.

In 2004, as I was finishing my studies for the Master of Divinity degree, I was given a special opportunity to participate in serving the Deaf in the absence of the priest who usually ministers with this particular parish community. My pastor, Monsignor Patrick McCahill, who has ministered to the Deaf since 1968, was supposed to preside at the Holy Week liturgies. Unfortunately, he became ill and was temporarily unable to fulfill his responsibilities. Other priests could have presided over these liturgies with the Deaf instead of him with the help of sign language interpreters; however, McCahill did not ask these priests to preside because presiding at Mass with a sign language interpreter is not the usual experience for the Deaf people of St. Elizabeth's Church in New York City. Since he believed that Deaf people should lead the Deaf church, he asked me if I would lead a communion service for each of the several days that he was incapacitated. I led prayer and proclaimed God's Word at liturgies in which more than sixty Deaf people participated each time.

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Three Deaf people in the congregation carefully observed me as I explained God's Word in sign language. A question came into their minds. They wondered if I was hearing or Deaf. After the service, they introduced themselves to me. They asked me if I was hearing or Deaf. When I replied, "I am Deaf," they were very surprised because they never thought that Deaf people could lead liturgies and preach. They believed that it was impossible for Deaf people to be ordained or become lay leaders because they never saw Deaf leaders serving the church. Their attitude and beliefs changed through that service. The three people were impressed with my preaching, and they understood my signs clearly. Many Deaf people also enjoyed the service, especially my signs. I learned that even if no priests preside at Mass in the Deaf church, Deaf lay people could lead liturgical services. It is important that Deaf lay people be responsible for the Deaf church.

Deaf Church and Vatican Council II

The liturgical reform of the Second Vatican Council was a great gift for the Deaf faithful. The Mass could be celebrated in the vernacular language and this opened possibilities for Deaf Catholics. The committee of the International Catholic Deaf Association sent a formal letter to Pope Paul VI to ask if he could accept sign language for use at Mass. The pope granted permission to celebrate Mass in sign language, and he said it is "the unique way in which the Deaf can participate in the Liturgy in a truly active way" (Preston, 36). However, "the Vatican has not given approval to American Sign Language as a liturgical language" (Jones, 38). After the Second Vatican Council, a priest could celebrate in sign language during Mass and face the Deaf faithful. The Deaf faithful better understood the proclamation of the Word of God. Some could now read the priest's lips while others could read the signs.

The Deaf church became stronger after the Second Vatican Council. The Deaf faithful had new possibilities to serve actively God and the church. This had implications for the success of Catholic Deaf ministry. After the Second Vatican Council, the relationship between the Deaf church and the hearing church improved as well; still the relationship needs to develop even further.

The Relationship between the Deaf Church and the Hearing Church

According to *Lumen Gentium*, "All [women and] men are called to belong to the new people of God" (13). This invitation extends to the Deaf faithful, and the changes brought about by the council strongly influenced the Deaf church to see itself as equal to the hearing church and to affirm that the Deaf faithful are

also God's People. Historically, the Deaf resided on the margins of the church's life, excluded at times from catechetical instruction and from most ministries, including priesthood. In the early church, it was not possible for Deaf people to be members of the church and receive the sacraments because churchmen believed that Deaf people could not hear the Word of God and understand it. This position was based on a misinterpretation of Romans 10:17, and it prevented church leaders from recognizing the rights of Deaf people. Pedro Ponce de León, a Spanish Benedictine monk (1520–1584), corrected the misinterpretation of Romans 10:17. He insisted, "The Church's attitude toward Deaf persons was chiefly derived from the text of Romans 10:17" (Pahz and Pahz, 6). He became interested in teaching Deaf people and believed that Deaf people could receive the sacraments and be

the children of God. "It was Ponce's hope to remove this obstacle to salvation by teaching Deaf persons to perform oral prayers and confession" (Pahz, 6). With his efforts, Deaf people became members of the church and could receive the sacraments. In effect, ministry with the Deaf begins in the sixteenth century with the efforts of clerics like Ponce and Francis de Sales to educate Deaf people. Not until after the Second Vatican Council did the Deaf faithful come to realize and accept God's call to minister in the church in ways not possible before. However, acceptance means that hearing Catholics need to see Deaf Catholics in new ways as well, not as supplicants but as full participants in all aspects of the church's life.

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The hearing church does not know about Deaf culture; therefore, they sometimes marginalize and oppress the Deaf faithful. For example, the Deaf faithful attend a Mass in the hearing church; however, no sign language interpreter is present. They ask the hearing faithful to hire sign language interpreters for them. However, the hearing faithful often do not provide sign language interpreters. The Deaf faithful feel that "for Deaf people to become Christian has often meant to become hearing" (Dittmeier, 32). Some hearing people believe that a Deaf ecclesial community is not needed, and they "force Deaf faithful" to attend hearing liturgies somewhat akin to what the church has done historically in some of its missionary endeavors" (32).

A liturgy without sign language interpreters prevents the Deaf from the full and active participation that is called for in the constitution on the liturgy of the Second Vatican Council. According to Robert Schreiter, "The Good News can be truly liberating" (111). The Deaf faithful can participate in their liberation through the Good News if they understand the Gospel through sign language. Deaf church leaders who proclaim the Gospel in sign language empower the Deaf faithful to

assume an active role in living the Gospel in their daily lives. Sign language is an integral part of Deaf culture, and its significance for communication of God's Word cannot be underestimated. It is important for hearing faithful to understand Deaf culture so that they will realize that the Deaf faithful are brothers and sisters in Christ and they will not oppress the Deaf faithful.

Understanding Deaf Culture and The Deaf Community

In the Deaf community, most Deaf people use the words "Deaf," "deaf," "hard of hearing," and "thinking hearing" (Padden and Humphries, 53). "Deaf" (using a capital "D") refers to those who are actively involved in the Deaf community. Most of them are the prelingually deaf and congenitally deaf. Some postlingually and adventitiously deaf are actively involved in the Deaf community. On the other hand, "deaf" (using a small "d") refers to those who are not involved in the Deaf community and do not learn sign language. Most of them are the postlingually deaf. However, some prelingually deaf and congenital deaf are not involved in the Deaf community. The meaning of "deaf" is the same as the meaning of "thinking hearing." Some of the hard of hearing are involved in the Deaf community; and some of them are not involved in the Deaf community but remain involved in the hearing community. "Prelingually deaf people who come from Deaf families frequently become the leaders in the Deaf community" (Jacobs, 74). They call themselves "the Deaf."

Deaf people have their own culture because they use sign language. "They have long identified themselves as a linguistic minority rather than a disabled community" (Burch, 2). In general, hearing people think that Deaf people are disabled people. However, Deaf people insist that they are not disabled people. When a Deaf person is in a hearing community, he or she sometimes feels that he or she is a disabled person. When he or she is in the Deaf community, there is no disability. "Disabled is a label that historically has not belonged to Deaf people" (Padden and Humphries, 44). In the United States, up through the middle of the twentieth century, Deaf culture was threatened by educational insistence on strict oralism, the restriction of communication to lip reading and oral expression (Jacobs, 14). "By protecting and codifying their Sign Language, Deaf people unified their community" (Burch, 16).

Is a Deaf person someone with a disability? Deaf scholars insist that Deaf people are not persons with a disability. They agree that Deaf people are a linguistic minority. They understand Deaf people as constituting a linguistic minority sharing a unique culture and a common experience. Many hearing people feel that Deaf people are disabled persons because they do not have the sense of hearing. However, even though Deaf people cannot hear, they can communicate in sign language or use an oral method. Therefore, from the perspective of Deaf culture,

a sense of hearing is not necessary for Deaf people. Douglas Baynton writes: “For most profoundly deaf people, to be deaf is not to not hear, but a social relation—that is, a relation with other human beings, hearing and deaf. What the deaf person sees in these other people is not the presence or absence of hearing, not their soundfulness or their silence, but their mode of communication—they sign, or they move their lips” (24).

A Deaf person communicates with Deaf people in sign language. However, when the Deaf person meets hearing people, he or she may not communicate well with hearing people using an oral method because often his or her oral speech is not good. Should hearing people think that such a person is a disabled person? For example, consider what happens when a hearing person meets Deaf people. He or she cannot communicate with the Deaf because he or she does not know sign language. Should he or she think that Deaf people are disabled persons? Rather would not Deaf people think that the hearing person is disabled? If hearing people, who do not know sign language, believe that Deaf people are persons with disabilities, then hearing people should realize that they are also disabled. Writing on people with disabilities, the United States Catholic bishops show a care for Deaf people. However, the bishops continuously refer to the Deaf in the context of “people with disabilities.” This failure to appreciate a Deaf cultural sense of self-understanding and self-reference raises questions and can be an obstacle to efforts to encourage Deaf pastoral leadership.

The privileges of the Deaf church ought to be equal to the privileges of the hearing church. If the hearing faithful want to respect the concept of the Body of Christ, then they ought to support the Deaf church. The members of the Deaf community as baptized Catholics should be provided with opportunities to participate in all of the church’s ministries. This includes ordained ministry, but should not be limited to ordained ministries. The Deaf lay leaders are important in the Deaf Church. The leaders have made the Deaf church stronger.

Pastoral Leaders in the Deaf Church

Currently, church leaders and documents do not see the Deaf as the Deaf see themselves. The U.S. Catholic bishops do not mention the Deaf church specifically, and as noted, the church documents consider the Deaf under the category of people with disabilities. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops states:

People with disabilities are not looking for pity. They seek to serve the community and to enjoy their full baptismal rights as members of the Church. Our interaction with them can and should be an affirmation of our faith. There can be no separate Church for people with disabilities. We are one flock that serves a single shepherd. (33)

The U.S. Catholic bishops do not yet understand that the Deaf community is a distinct cultural group and the Deaf have their own culture. In addition, they do not understand that Deaf people do not consider themselves persons with disabilities. Rather, Deaf people understand themselves as part of the rich cultural diversity of the Church, a linguistic minority group to be perceived as one would ethnic/racial communities such as Hispanic, Asian, Native American and African American peoples. The New York State Pastoral Workers with the Deaf explain:

Deaf people do not see themselves as people needing to be pitied; they do not see themselves as somehow broken, needing to be fixed. Instead they prefer to use a cultural model. Here, first of all, are people, unique and special, whose experiences are different from those of hearing people but not inferior, whose way of viewing the world may be distinct from that of hearing people but not inadequate, whose usual means of communication, American Sign Language, is not an impoverished version of English but a beautiful language rich in nuance and expressive complexity. (4)

It is disturbing and patronizing that the church's leadership fails to take heed of a community's naming of itself. This is an example of disempowering people by denying their right and ability to name themselves. This also has implications for recognizing the agency of the Deaf faithful.

Because of their self-understanding as a distinctive culture, the Deaf constitute their own ecclesial community, bound together by language and shared experiences. As with other distinctive cultural communities, it is important to have pastoral ministers and religious leaders—lay, religious, and ordained—arising from within the community. Therefore, there is a need for ongoing formation as well as opportunities that provide access to theological and pastoral training. Deaf priests, deacons, religious, and lay leaders including pastoral workers, catechists, and eucharistic ministers need to serve in a Deaf ecclesial community. The Roman Catholic Church should support the Deaf faithful who are called to the priesthood and religious life and as lay leaders for the Deaf church.

Many hearing pastoral workers including priests, sisters, brothers, and lay people have been serving the Deaf. However, the number of hearing pastoral workers with the Deaf Catholic community has been decreasing. Since the number of Deaf pastoral workers is small, it is impossible for Deaf pastoral workers to be serving all Catholic Deaf faithful throughout the United States. More Deaf pastoral workers are needed to minister with the Deaf community.

One significant movement in the preparation of Deaf leaders was the *Cursillo* movement brought to the United States from Spain. The first Deaf *Cursillo* was held in Chicago in 1970. Since there were no Deaf *Cursillistas*, hearing *Cursillistas* were invited to give a *Cursillo* weekend for Deaf candidates. The hearing *Cursillistas* delivered the talks to the Deaf candidates through American Sign Language

interpreters. The Deaf Cursillo movement has been successful and popular among the Deaf faithful in the United States since the 1970s. The number of Deaf candidates rapidly increased. Deaf Cursillo influenced some Deaf Cursillistas to be more active in serving their local Catholic Deaf communities and to become interested in evangelizing other Deaf people. It has also helped Deaf Cursillistas build strong Catholic Deaf communities. The experience had the benefit of successfully training Deaf candidates to be lay leaders working for the Catholic Churches in their home areas.

For example, many Deaf faithful have no signing priests or religious sisters in rural areas or in small cities. When they attend Mass at local Catholic Churches, they hear about the Word of God through sign language interpreters; however,

they do not understand it clearly. They have never read the Bible or shared it with their Deaf neighbors. Many did not accept the fact that they even had leadership skills; therefore, they avoided serving their Catholic Deaf communities. However, participation in Deaf Cursillo proved inspirational. Not only did the Word of God move them, participants were also impressed with the Deaf team who led the weekends. Seeing their own in significant leadership roles changed the lives of a number of Deaf Catholics who in turn became active in serving their local Catholic Deaf communities.

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The existence of Deaf Cursillo is certainly important for Catholic Deaf ministry. The pastoral workers who work with the Deaf have seen

Deaf people change and become more active and involved in the Deaf church. Many Deaf people tried to learn the Catholic faith from hearing catechists and pastoral workers; however, they often felt frustrated because they did not understand well what these catechists and pastoral workers explained. Therefore, they gave up learning about the Word of God and being Christians. In addition, many Catholic centers for the Deaf did not have Deaf catechists and Deaf pastoral workers; therefore, many Deaf faithful did not have a chance to learn from Deaf catechists and Deaf pastoral workers about the Catholic faith. Deaf Cursillo has nurtured recent generations of outstanding Deaf leaders. These Deaf leaders in turn helped prepare more than 2,000 Deaf Cursillistas so these Cursillistas could understand better their Catholic faith and become more active in their Deaf church.

Deaf faithful want more Deaf priests to serve the Deaf church in the United States; however, since the number of Deaf priests is few, they depend on hearing pastoral workers who are lay people. In some cities, hearing priests have celebrated

the Mass and sacraments in sign language. However, in some cities, since hearing priests do not know sign language, they use sign language interpreters for the Deaf when they preside at Mass. In many areas of the United States, there are no priests who minister to the Deaf faithful because they do not have time to pay attention to the pastoral needs of Deaf Catholics. Since there are few hearing priests who minister to the Deaf in towns and rural areas, sisters or lay leaders often ask Deaf priests and hearing priests who know sign language to visit their places to celebrate the Mass and other sacraments.

Reading Mark 7 Through a Deaf Hermeneutic

The story of the healing of a Deaf man in chapter seven of the Gospel of Mark is well known in the church. Jesus Christ prayed with a Deaf man and said, “*Ephphatha*.” Then the Deaf man could hear and speak. When I read the story, questions come into my mind. I am wondering if the hearing people had asked the Deaf man if he wanted to hear and speak before they brought him to Jesus Christ; did they bring him without discussing it with him? The Deaf man did not seem to communicate well with the hearing people. The hearing people thought that the Deaf man was a person with a disability; therefore, they brought the Deaf man to Jesus and asked him to heal the Deaf man. They wanted him to hear again and speak. They believed that being Deaf was God’s curse. They thought that healing the Deaf man would save him from God’s curse. The hearing people seemed to decide to bring the Deaf man to Jesus Christ without asking the man. It appears that the hearing people did not respect the Deaf man’s desire and his rights. Jesus Christ might have met other Deaf people; however, there is no indication he healed them because their deafness was not against the Father’s will. The hearing people demanded that Jesus Christ heal the Deaf man. Jesus Christ could have refused to accept their demand; rather, he accepted it and led the Deaf man off to another place. Jesus Christ did not heal him by his own power; he prayed to the Father so that God’s will could allow the Deaf man to hear and speak. When Jesus Christ was about to heal the Deaf man, he did not say, “Hear and speak,” or “Let him hear and speak.” Instead, he said, “*Ephphatha*,” meaning, “Be opened.”

A question came to my mind. When Jesus Christ was about to heal people who were blind, he said, “See,” and those who were blind could see. He also met people who were crippled and said, “Walk,” and they could walk. However, why did Jesus Christ not say, “Hear and speak,” when he was about to heal the Deaf man? It is clear that the meaning of the phrase “Be opened” is different from the meaning of the words “Hear and speak.” If Jesus Christ said “Hear and speak” to the Deaf man in the Gospel of Mark, then deafness would have been a disability. Jesus Christ did not just heal the Deaf man; however, he wanted all the people to open their hearts and minds so that they could receive the Word of God. Many people could

hear; however, they refused to be open to the Word of God. “The word ‘*Ephphatha*’ is spoken to all of us, Deaf and hearing, and needs to be heard by all” (N.Y. State Pastoral Workers, 4). This implies that physical deafness is not a problem in itself; the problem is that people are not willing to attend to the Word of God.

The teachings of the Second Vatican Council have influenced the emergence of what can be called Deaf church. Empowerment of the Deaf Catholic community can be seen in the liturgy as sign language allows for more active participation on the part of the faithful. The development of faith formation programs as well as theological and pastoral training programs serve to enhance the active participation of the Deaf, lay and ordained, in the various ministries in the church. While many positive changes have occurred, there remains a need for a continued commitment to the empowerment of the Catholic Deaf community. Jesus’ shout of “*Ephphatha*” was not only to the Deaf man and to hearing people of his time but moves us today to be open to each other and to the ministerial possibilities the Deaf faithful bring to our church.

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