

## **International Catholic Foundation for the Service of Deaf Persons**

Conference Theme: Come, Drink at the Well: New Life with Mary for the World; Models for Evangelization and Collaborative Ministry

Date: August 2 - 7, 2003

Location: Hotel Fiesta America Reforma  
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Presenters: Fr. Joseph J. Bruce, SJ and Sr. Arlene Trant, MM

Title: REMOVING THE OBSTACLES

Introduction: After the introduction Joe and Arlene will go to the stage. (The tiles will be placed on the stage beforehand.) Upon seeing the tiles, they will look at each other and then start removing them from the imaginary roof. They will set them aside and with a smile dust off their hands.

Joe (to audience): This is what our ministry with Deaf Catholics has been like in Guatemala.

Arlene: Joe, I am not sure they (pointing to the audience) understand what we mean. I think we need to explain a little bit more. Why don't you tell the Gospel story that inspired this talk.

Joe: (Reads and signs the gospel story in Mark 2:1-12 while Arlene points to the pictures that have been taped to the wall.)

Arlene: Our model for Evangelization is this:  
REMOVING THE OBSTACLES IN ORDER FOR THE MEMBERS OF THE  
DEAF COMMUNITY TO HAVE ACCESS TO A PERSONAL ENCOUNTER  
WITH JESUS.

Arlene: Let us begin with the first verse of the Biblical story. Part 1 "Jesus goes home and everyone in the town him goes to him."(Mark 2:1)

Joe: Where is Jesus' home? Where does he live? Right here with each of us. We want to begin our presentation by sharing something about the socio-economic, political and religious reality in Guatemala today.

Our experience of ministry with Deaf people in Guatemala has been like the gospel story of the paralyzed man. The reality in Guatemala is similar to the reality of Jesus' time. There are many problems. Among them are extreme poverty, corruption, impunity, unemployment and under employment. There is no government or church assistance for Deaf people. Most people are uneducated or undereducated. Most Deaf people are dependent on their families. There are 22 different Mayan languages spoken and the official language is Spanish.

Most Deaf people and many hearing people lack confidence and self-esteem. There is widespread oppression of the Mayan people, of women, of the poor and of people with disabilities. Generally people do not take initiative to begin something. It takes a long, long time to get things done. Change is very, very slow or not at all. People keep lots of things inside themselves. Health care is in very bad shape.

Sr. Arlene and I work more with middle class Deaf people. Church workers (priests, nuns and lay people) are overworked and overwhelmed. There are no outreach programs for Deaf people. Even though Deaf people are proud of Guatemalan Sign Language, it is not standard. There are very few signs for religious expression. There are almost no poetic signs which are badly needed for religious expression.

Most Deaf people are isolated even within their own families. There are no newsletters and religious periodicals. Almost all Catholic churches do not have signs indicating the name of the church. Mass schedules are in small print inside the entrances of most churches. All information about church activities is by word of mouth, usually announced from the pulpit at the end of Sunday Masses. Almost everyone are born Catholics and very poorly educated in their faith. There are large numbers of Evangelicals and if the trend continues, in 5 or 10 years the majority of Guatemalans will be Evangelicals.

But there are SIGNS OF HOPE. Guatemalan bishops have been very outspoken. They have chosen to be on the side of the poor. Guatemala now has its own saint, Santo Hermano Pedro who was canonized when the Pope visited Guatemala a year ago in July 2002. Many people also consider Monsenor Juan Jose Gerardi, who was murdered for publishing Guatemala, Nunca Mas (Guatemala, Never Again), a saint.

Guatemala now has one Deaf teacher of Deaf children. She is Brenda Fajardo and is very active in Catholic Ministry for Deaf people. There is one hearing teacher, Doris Parada (whose mother is Deaf) who is also a teacher of Deaf children. She interprets manually many church functions. Deaf people who have been educated through the Georgetown University (Washington, DC; USA) program for the most part have jobs.

Sign language for religious expression is improving. Some Deaf Catholics and some Evangelicals (most of them hearing people who sign well) have gotten together to explore the possibility of having common signs for the names of the books of the Bible.

Now Sr. Arlene will share a little of this history of Deaf ministry in Guatemala. Part 2. "Friends bring the paralyzed man to Jesus."(Mark 2:3)

Arlene: When Fr. Joe and I read the gospel, we realized that the paralyzed man never spoke. We were thinking that this man is probably deaf and the people who brought him to Jesus were hearing. This is what happened in ministry with Deaf Catholics in Guatemala. I will give a history of Deaf ministry which was begun for the most part by hearing people.

#### 1. Parents:

The first people who bring Deaf people to the Church are their parents. They are brought to the Church with their family for baptism. They are baptized because it is part of the Catholic culture of Guatemala. Usually they learn very little about the Church and have very little or no understanding of their faith.

#### 2. Teachers:

In the past some Deaf children sometimes attended religion classes with hearing children. Well intended hearing people prepared Deaf children for their First Communion along with hearing children. When teachers use pictures to tell Bible stories, usually Deaf students did not understand the stories. Often the teaching for Deaf students was watered down to something like this: "God is good. God loves you. The devil is bad. Do not be bad. Be good." With this kind of preparation and understanding, they were seen to be "ready" to make their First Holy Communion and to receive the sacrament of reconciliation.

#### 3. Clergy:

There were times when a Deaf person wanted to go to confession. One Deaf woman in Guatemala shared her personal experience of the frustration of trying to find an accessible priest for confession. When she found a priest, he told her that she need not worry about her sins and that God loves her. The translation of this is: "Go away and do not bother me." She went away and felt rejected from the person she went to seek comfort. This response may not be from ill-will, but often because members of the clergy are not prepared to relate to the needs of Deaf Catholics.

#### 4. Protestants:

Seeing the lack of outreach to Deaf people, missionaries from other denominations began to invite Deaf people to join their churches. The fastest growing of these churches are various groups within the Evangelical Churches. The Mormon and Jehovah Witness missionaries also have learned Guatemalan Sign Language and invite Deaf people to their churches. Like Fr. Joe said, traditionally Guatemalans have been Catholics but are

poorly instructed in their faith. When missionaries from other religions approach them

and invite them to their churches, they often follow because there is nothing offered to them in the Catholic Church.

Arelene: Part 3. "Friends open the roof so the paralyzed man can meet Jesus." (Mark 2:4) Hearing people began removing the obstacles for Deaf people to have a personal encounter with Jesus.

#### 1. Interpreters:

Catholic interpreters (usually children of Deaf parents) began to understand what was happening and met with some Deaf people in order to interpret Sunday Masses. Sometimes their services included offering Bible classes and sacramental preparation. There was even a time in Guatemala when a hearing priest was involved in learning sign language and celebrating Masses with the Deaf community. However, everything depended on the interpreters. When they became too busy and stopped interpreting the Masses, the Deaf people stopped attending Masses because it was not communication accessible.

#### 2. Watching and waiting with the Deaf community:

This is the reality I encountered when I arrived in Guatemala in 1998. There were a few Deaf people who attended Mass at the Cathedral in Guatemala City and a couple of interpreters who interpreted the Sunday Masses for them. This small group of Deaf people was sitting on the side apart from the main congregation with no view of the altar. They did this because the sound of the celebrants' voices was better there for the interpreters! None of the Deaf Catholics went to communion. When I asked why, the Deaf people told me that they were not able to go to confession. I sat with them every Sunday on the side. I did this for one year. One day, one of the Deaf Catholics, Carlos Oliva arrived from El Salvador and informed others that Deaf Catholics there had Bible classes. He was bemoaning the fact that they did not have Bible classes for Deaf Catholics in Guatemala. Alleluia! Carlos, a Deaf Catholic took the initiative to ask for something from the Church. Deaf people began to remove the obstacles. I informed him I would be happy to start classes if people were interested in them. Shortly after, Sunday classes began. Information is power! The classes gave Deaf people a sense of understanding their faith they were eager for more participation.

#### 3. Lectors:

The Deaf community decided to move into the pews in front of the main altar of the Cathedral. They were able to see what was happening in the sanctuary. The interpreters continued but not every Sunday. One Sunday when one of the regular interpreters was not present, I interpreted the Mass. It happened that a Deaf woman, Mary Essex from New England, USA was studying in Antigua, Guatemala at that time. She was visiting me and went to Mass with me. She was a lector in her parish in the States and I invited her to sign the readings at the same time the hearing person was proclaiming the

readings. This was the first time a Deaf person signed the readings. Right now we have a team of 8 Guatemalan Deaf people who can sign the readings and the responses at Mass.

#### 4. Retreat:

In October 1999, the Deaf Catholics had their first retreat day. Fr. Charlie Dittmeier conducted the retreat. Fr. Dittmeier is a Maryknoll missionary presently working in Deaf ministry in Cambodia. He is from Louisville, KY in the United States. Because I worked with Fr. Charlie while I was in Hong Kong, I was able to invite him to Guatemala to give this retreat. The theme was God's Love. As part of the retreat, the participants had the opportunity to go to confession. At the closing Mass everyone received communion. It was a graced experience for each participant. Another title was removed!

#### 5. Local clergy:

In December 1999, the Deaf Catholic community invited a Guatemalan Franciscan priest to celebrate Christmas Mass with them. His name was Fr. Dempsey Loarca, OFM. Shortly after, he met with some members of the core group every Thursday at Immaculate Heart of Mary Church in zone 12 of Guatemala City to learn Guatemalan Sign Language and to join planning meetings. He started celebrating Sunday Mass for the group once a month.

#### 6. Franciscan commitment:

Unfortunately, in April 2003, Fr. Dempsey moved to Haiti in order to work there. The Deaf Catholic community now has a Franciscan seminarian, Fray Jose Alberto, OFM who is learning Guatemalan Sign Language every Thursday when the core group meets on Thursdays. Presently, the core group is in touch with the Franciscan provincial in order to keep the Franciscans involved in Deaf ministry.

#### 7. Fr. Joe Bruce, SJ:

Through Mary Essex, the Deaf Catholic community found out about Fr. Joe Bruce, a DEAF priest. After discussing the need to a priest, they decided to invite him and he responded. He came!

Joe: The journey to Guatemala was a very interesting journey. After a long discernment process, I went to Guatemala. It was not easy. I found isolation the most difficult part. Lip-reading Spanish is still frustrating. After learning Guatemalan Sign Language through Maria Eugenia de Hernandez, a deaf woman for three months, I began to celebrate Sunday Masses in a small chapel at the Cathedral in Guatemala City. At first everything was chaotic because Deaf people did not have a sense of the Mass. As time went on, things improved and went more smoothly. I glossed the Spanish Sunday readings into Guatemalan Sign Language. As I gained more confidence in using Guatemalan Sign Language, celebrating the Mass became smoother and I think the Catholic Deaf community began to understand and experience the basics of the Mass for the first time. One example would be the sign for calling on God by taping His shoulder. Another sign

example would be lifting their hands during the offertory when the priest lifts up the

paten and chalice. The signs of the congregation became more poetic. The signs for advent and heaven are two examples of “new” poetic signs. The poetic signs help give a sense of the mystery and the divine.

Part 4: “Jesus saw and praised the faith of the friends of the paralyzed man.” (Mark 2:5)  
Jesus saw the faith and love of hearing people who reached out to the Deaf community and provided accessibility.

The teachers of the law did not believe that the paralyzed man’s sins were forgiven. Today there remains a lot of prejudice and misunderstanding about the ability of Deaf people to have full membership in the Catholic Church with rights and responsibilities.

Part 5: “Jesus forgives the sins of the paralyzed man and the encounter of the paralyzed man with Jesus.”(Mark 2:10)

This brings in the theme of liberation. Liberation from sin and isolation. It also brings in the theme of being a servant, being the least among the people Sr. Arlene and I serve.

The model Sr. Arlene and I use is the model of patient servants. We have a vision of the Church as a circle. (See the diagram on the transparency.) We are all called to be Church. Some of us are bishops. Others are priests and deacons. Some are community leaders. Some are lectors, response leaders and song leaders. Sr. Arlene and I are very aware that the faith is not taught and only caught. We try to be the best models of faith for the members of the Deaf community. We have a sense that the Messiah is present among us and treat everyone with reverence and awe. We try to provide opportunities and signs for expression of the religious experience in the classroom, during liturgical celebrations and during everyday interaction. We try to provide opportunities for crystal moments where something all of a sudden has meaning for the first time. We try to get people to use their sense of wonder. A sense of wonder helps to recognize the presence of the divine everywhere and in every person.

Finally we try to be communicative in a very non-communicative world. Communication among Deaf and between Deaf and hearing people is not always clear. Sr. Arlene and I try to let people know that we are open to conversation at all times. We know that Deaf people have many questions about many different things. We encourage them to ask us questions and to one another about anything.

We make it very clear that God is the God of life and He is the one who calls each one of us to life. We always try to have a smile on our faces. We even tell them that they are the light of the world within the culture of sin, impunity and corruption.

Most important of all, we keep repeating again and again: YOU CAN DO IT! You can pass on the faith. You can proclaim the faith. You can be Jesus for others. You can learn

and find out things about the faith. YOU CAN DO IT! You can do it together with the Church. After all Jesus said to the paralyzed man, “Take up your mat and walk!” Sr.

Arlene and I have been very clear on this. We will not be in Guatemala forever. We are Americans and not Guatemalans. We repeat again and again, “Be responsible and make your faith community accessible and a sign of the Good News!”

Because of health reasons I left Guatemala this past June. Sr. Arlene will teach some members of the core group to connect with me via e-mail and ask for what they need.

We still have dreams for the Catholic Deaf community. Sr. Arlene will share some of our dreams with you.

Arlene: Because we still have much work to do, I will share with you some of our dreams.

1. More intense leadership training.
2. More Biblical studies and catechetical training.
3. Train a few people to be Eucharistic Ministers.
4. Child and youth outreach.
5. Masses for Deaf children and their families.
6. Further outreach to Xela and other cities in Guatemala.
7. Dialogue with other Deaf Catholic groups in Central America.
8. Continuing to work on developing sign language for religious expression.
9. Working with hearing interpreters to standardize signs for the Mass and have become more involved with classes for the Deaf.

Right now we want to show you a five minute video which will show some members of the core group.

(After the video presentation.) Arlene: On behalf of the Deaf Catholics of Guatemala, we thank you for this opportunity to share our experiences and thoughts of our ministry with

the Catholic Deaf community of Guatemala. Now we would like to close with Archbishop Romero's prayer. Please join Fr. Joe and me in saying this prayer in your own language. (There will be copies on the transparencies in English and Spanish.)

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.  
The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is beyond our vision.  
We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise  
that is the Lord's work.  
Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying that the kingdom  
always lies beyond us.  
No statement says all that should be said. No prayer fully expresses our faith.  
No confession brings perfection, no pastoral visit brings wholeness.  
No program accomplishes the Church's mission. No set of goals and objectives  
include everything.  
This is what we are about. We plant the seeds that one day will grow.  
We water the seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.  
We lay foundations that will need further development.  
We provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our capabilities.  
We cannot do everything and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.  
This enables us to do something and to do it very well.  
It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity  
for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.  
We may never see the results,  
But that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.  
We are workers, not master builders, ministers not messiahs.  
We are prophets of a future that is not our own.

Amen.

Now is the time for questions and answers.

Questions for discussion:



1. Discuss why “the faith cannot be taught, but only caught.” And how do you provide opportunities for the faith to be caught by your Deaf group?
2. What is the role or involvement of hearing people in pastoral ministry with Deaf people?
3. What are the requirements of hearing people who want to be involved in pastoral ministry with Deaf people?
4. What obstacles have you encountered that prevent Deaf Catholics from having full and active participation in the life of the church?
5. Share one or 2 examples of how you have broken through these obstacles?
6. How can hearing clergy and religious be helped to become more aware of the needs of Deaf Catholics?
7. How have you encouraged or invited hearing clergy to become involved in the ministry with Deaf Catholics? How will you challenge them to include Deaf people in their congregations?
8. If you were giving a one-day leadership training program for Deaf Catholic leaders, what would you include in that workshop?
9. In St. John’s gospel (jn 3:30) John the Baptist said referring to Jesus, “He must increase and I must decrease.” Give examples of how you have decreased so that Deaf Catholics would increase.
10. Give some examples of how Deaf people are involved in pastoral ministry to other Deaf people?