

THE CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP IN THE GLOBAL DEAF COMMUNITY IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

Many Languages, One Faith: The International Pilgrimage of Catholic Deaf Peoples, Rome, June 2008

Introduction

I was born into a Deaf family and grew up within a Deaf community at St. Joseph's Mission to Deaf People, Manchester. I was educated at the St John's Residential School for the Deaf at Boston Spa, near Wetherby – many Deaf people fondly termed it as *Boston Spa*. Not only do I live in a Deaf world, I also live in a hearing world so I have firsthand experience of the daily struggles that are part and parcel of Deaf people's lives.

I have two sisters one of whom is hearing. The four Deaf members of the family attended the same school, in Boston Spa. When I left St John's school, I spent two years at Salford College. I then went to Sheffield University to do Electronic Engineering. However, during my first Christmas holiday, at the age of twenty, my mother died suddenly prompting me to think of the priesthood. For six years I trained at the English College in Valladolid, Spain,¹ and I studied philosophy and theology at the Augustinian University in the town. In 1982 I returned to Manchester and was ordained priest. I spent the first five years of priesthood in a parish in Oswaldtwistle, I was also part-time chaplain to Deaf people in the neighbouring towns of Blackburn and Burnley. In 1987 I went to Dublin and studied for a Diploma in Teacher of the Deaf.² A year later I returned to Manchester and began full-time ministry with the Deaf community in the Salford diocese. After a four year part-time course, I also obtained a Master of Arts in Deaf studies at Durham University.³

Early education: language – the gateway to life

St John's School was and still remains the only Catholic School for Deaf children in England. The teachers were qualified and experienced teachers of the Deaf using excellent resources available to them. However, when I arrived I already had a language, namely, British Sign Language, which I naturally imbibed from my parents. Many deaf children whose parents were hearing arrived at St John's possessing very little or hardly any grasp of the English language. I loved my time at St John's and I spent eight happy years from the age of ten till eighteen. Before the age of ten, I was placed in many different schools, partially hearing units mainstreamed with hearing schools, and at one stage I was placed in a hearing school with my hearing sister but I lasted only a few weeks. My mother fought with the Education Authorities insisting that I was not receiving the education that I deserved. In one unit I remember there was only one class for deaf children ranging from age seven or eight to sixteen. Most of the time was spent on learning to speak and write (which was really just copying what was on the blackboard) and playing games. The day I arrived at St John's School, Boston Spa, my eyes were opened: it was a literally a revelation to me as I eagerly and hungrily absorbed information and learning different things in a structured way. I still remember the first word I learnt on the first day: 'sky scraper'.

This paper is not intended to dwell on the methods and philosophy of education but it does touch on a very important part of what it means to be Deaf and all the important consequences, such as learning the catechism and becoming responsible citizens and Christians in the world today. St John's School still uses aural/oral method as it did years ago when I was a pupil. However, research and evidence from literature shows that strict aural/oral educational method is not a satisfactory or proven method, especially for those who are profoundly deaf; it advocates bilingualism. People

¹ 1976 – 1982.

² University College Dublin & Cabra School for the Deaf, 1987 – 1988.

³ Durham University 1991 – 1995.

might think I am being political about the methodology and pedagogy; crucially, it continues to remain for me, a moral issue. Language is a vital tool not only to achieve knowledge and pass examinations but also to obtain the university of life. Many profoundly deaf pupils leave school with a reading age way below the expected national average. They leave school with the conviction that anything related to sign language and the Deaf community are to be avoided. Many of them have never heard of, or are familiar with Deaf Centre/Church and Deaf community because no one told them about it or tried to introduce them to the Deaf community. Role models are important for them; they need to realise that vocation and/or a professional career is possible even as a d/Deaf⁴ person. This is also one of the reasons for the diminishing number of Deaf people coming to Church. At our signed Mass at St Joseph's Mission in Manchester, there is hardly any children apart from those who have deaf parent(s) or grandparent(s); the absence of twenty-somethings to thirty-somethings is clearly evident.

Hidden oppression – the hangover from the Milan Congress 1880

I was brought up in a multi-cultural world: my father was profoundly Deaf with very little English; British Sign Language was his only language. My mother was partially Deaf, or perhaps severely Deaf with good speech and lip-reading skills. I was born in 1955 and throughout the 1960s and 1970s the sign language of Deaf people was generally not accepted as the proper language – this only came about in the 1980s – 1990s when great strides were made in understanding the indigenous language and the cultural world of Deaf people. Before the advent of the new consciousness of sign language as a proper language, Deaf people generally accepted that the spoken and written English language was the target and superior language. Deaf people in Britain have always accepted the British culture as the dominant culture but in my parent's time anything that was deemed as the 'Deaf way' was not acceptable or respected and was very often discouraged. For instance, many Deaf people would not be confident of using their sign language in public places such as streets or shops. However, my father's stubborn and rebellious streak did not allow him to be discreet, often much to my mother's embarrassment. My mother tried to behave as a respectable citizen in public places and often managing to succeed because of her language skill and lip-reading ability but when she was at home she automatically and subconsciously 'switched over' to the Deaf mode. This was generally the attitude amongst the Deaf people themselves in those times. The 1880 Milan Congress⁵ banned the use of sign language because many teachers of the deaf and experts believed it discouraged deaf children and adults from learning to speak, write and understand English. They also believed that without recourse to English language Deaf people would remain immature and backward, and would never reach the level of maturity and morality expected of all responsible citizens.

Public places include Church, even *Deaf Church*. By *Deaf Church* I mean places or dioceses where chaplains have been officially appointed to serve and minister to d/Deaf people using sign language. In those days, the ministers would use sign language but would still use the official English texts or rites from missals and lectionaries. Sign language used by many priests/ministers was mainly *Sign Supported English* which is not a language at all, it is merely a sign system which borrows a lot of signs from the British Sign Language but constructed on the linguistics of English language.

Prayers and worship were offered in Sign Supported English, it was given from a centre point of a hearing world and with all the consequences such as accepting hymns with lots of poetic and very often archaic idiomatic expressions that would have been very difficult to translate and sign; music that was not very often appreciated by Deaf people; using words or sentences as 'Lord hear us' –

⁴ the term d/Deaf is a generic term: deaf with a small 'd' refers to all people who have all kinds of hearing losses ranging from a slight hearing loss to profoundly deaf and may be involved with the Deaf community or not; the capital letter 'D' denotes the cultural and linguistic minority of Deaf people, those who identify themselves with their language and culture. The capital 'D' is a political instrument in the struggle for re-empowerment and a new self-definition of the Deaf community and are positive about their identity.

⁵ International Congress for education and welfare of the deaf, Milan 1880

they focussed on what hearing people normally do, not what deaf people could do. Deaf culture was not taken on board at all. Important visual dimensions which ranged from simple practicalities such as using a high lectern which blocked the hands and body of a minister proclaiming the Word of God; candles, flowers, crucifix and book-stands that often blocked the sight-line; wearing highly ornamented and patterned vestments that did not afford good contrast for Deaf people to see the priest's hands. Simplification or shortening of prayers or even omission, ie not translating everything that was being said but only selected prayers or readings because of the perceived difficulty of complex English language which Deaf people would not be able to understand but which really was the inability of the ministers not competent enough to translate into sign language; ministers not directly facing the Deaf congregations and Deaf people having to stand, sit and kneel as according to the liturgical customs; ministers offering prayers from fixed or official position; Deaf congregation bundled in straight pews, and so on. Sermons and homilies were delivered in Signed Supported English and always with voice with the result that not many Deaf people really understood what the priest was trying to say. There were other opportunities and events such as confession, benediction, and even catechism that were merely 'tokenism' though no disrespect to chaplains and priests because they truly thought they were trying to do their job. Deaf people would not even think of asking their chaplains to incorporate the Deaf way of worship. Power, respect and status belonged to the hearing world, and especially the ordained ministers, because of their 'superior' language, spoken and written English.

In the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*,⁶ it says that 'buildings and requisites for worship, as signs and symbols of heavenly things, should be worthy and beautiful.' Deaf people who are the 'eye-people' will bring out those aspects that are truly important but which too often were relegated or not well used. They remind hearing people that it is not 'hearing' that is the vital part in any prayer and worship.

Personal liberation experience

In Salford diocese, St Joseph's Mission to Deaf people offered diocesan service to Deaf people and there was always a priest who was fluent in sign language. Canon William Hayward was the first priest who was deafened from meningitis contracted from the First World War. Following his footsteps was Canon Charles Hollywood who was thrown out of Maynooth Seminary because he was discovered to have *some* hearing loss – which wasn't much really; he was classified as Hard of Hearing. Charles Hollywood later returned to the seminary because Salford diocese accepted to incardinate him after his ordination on the proviso that he would work with Canon Hayward ministering to Deaf people.

The young Fr Hollywood worked with Canon Hayward for three years before the elderly priest died. Fr Hollywood soon realised the enormity of the task. He set about seeking help and support and he eventually established the six pastoral areas outside Manchester (within Salford Diocese) and he recruited Volunteers who began learning sign language. Fr Hollywood travelled to towns and places outside Salford diocese and eventually he also established a national organisation called The Association for the Catholic Deaf of Great Britain and Ireland.⁷ Fr Hollywood began to correspond with other bishops in other dioceses to help set up diocesan service to Deaf people.

From an early age, and especially when I left St John's School, I had access to the sacraments, the catechism and generally to the life of the Church at St Joseph's Mission to Deaf People. Fr Hollywood was truly a man of God – his love and care were clearly evident. I believe I would not have been ready to enter priesthood training in Valladolid had I not received the support and presence of Fr Hollywood especially during my teen years. After years of working with Deaf people, ministering to them, observing them, learning their language and trying to understand their world, Fr Hollywood truly understood the importance of the cultural aspects in the lives of Deaf

⁶ *GIRM* 1974 (n. 253).

⁷ in 1995 it was renamed the *Catholic Deaf Association*.

people and this without any formal studies and research before the eruption of literature and courses that became available in the 1980s.

In 1987 having completed five years of general parish work in Oswaldtwistle, I was appointed to work with Canon Hollywood and Fr O'Meara at St Joseph's Mission full-time. However, Canon Hollywood wanted me to complete a year's study of Diploma for Teacher of the Deaf in Dublin which I duly accomplished. In 1988 I then began the priestly ministry with Deaf people. After a couple of years, with Canon Hollywood's encouragement, I enrolled in a part-time MA studies on the linguistics and sociology of Deaf people at Durham University. It turned out to be a journey of personal revelation for myself. I learnt that no longer was it necessary (subconsciously) to view deafness from a medical viewpoint, and to view it from a sociological point of view – namely, that I was a Deaf person who could do many things but simply cannot hear; that British Sign Language was a highly complex and proper language with its own semantics and syntax and was no longer to be considered inferior but on an equal par to any spoken and written language; that the world of Deaf people had its own set of values which were perfectly meaningful, acceptable, and valid when viewed from a Deaf-centre. It is not possible to go into greater details in this paper but some of the implications have an important impact, not only on my own life but also the lives of Deaf people within the Catholic Church; indeed, for any Deaf person within whatever denomination. As a Deaf priest I learnt that it was okay to use BSL within the liturgy, this meant signing and using voice-over to relay what I was saying. The difference was remarkable. Proclaiming the Word of God became a lot more effective. I felt I was expressing myself as a Deaf priest at prayer effortlessly and that Deaf people not only understood me effortlessly, they immediately sensed the rapport and latched onto it with me. I was now able to be the child God created me to be and I encouraged them to do the same. The personality of a person cannot be separate from the social world in which s/he functions. There was no longer a dichotomy and struggle within myself, I was able to behave as a Deaf priest with a Deaf identity, and this gave respect to Deaf people acknowledging their background and where they came from. In short, I felt liberated. During priesthood training I had studied theology but always from a different centre point – from a hearing world. Now I had to learn to view and understand theology from a new angle.

Hannah Lewis published her work in *Deaf Liberation Theology*⁸ in which she stated that liberation would only occur from a theology that is true and relevant for d/Deaf people. What Lewis is saying is that liberation and emancipation will only occur if the theology respects and acknowledges where Deaf people came from, as well as the values and viewpoint from a centre point of a Deaf world. Liberation happened for me when I was studying and reflecting on my own identity as a Deaf person that God called me to be. No longer did I have to try and live with a 'survival mode' in a hearing world, I learnt to live and accept myself as a Deaf person living in a hearing world. Of course I remain a British citizen and I live the British way of life but no longer did I have to be discreet with sign language in public places, and more importantly I gradually learnt to pray as a Deaf person especially when leading liturgical services and I tried to encourage the others to do the same. I live in Manchester but I recall one Sunday when I celebrated Mass with the Deaf community in Westminster diocese. After Mass, a Deaf man came to me and he explained that he was late coming into the Cathedral and as he approached the congregation, he saw a priest who was signing the prayers, he was amazed to see that he could easily understand and follow his signing even at a distance. This never happened before; usually he had to come up quite close before he could see the priest clearly and then he would try and understand what the hearing priest was signing. What this meant was that a priest who was using Sign Supported English would come across to the congregation as a second language and many would have to really concentrate and try to understand. With British Sign Language which is their first language, they just absorb the language and understand the language in a relaxed way.

Respecting the language and culture of Deaf people is very important and it has serious consequences which I will now explore in some details.

⁸ Lewis, *Deaf Liberation Theology* (Ashgate 2007), p. 6.

Our indigenous language, our indigenous culture

The way we pray is influenced by our beliefs. *Lex orandi, lex credendi* is important because it means that the law of prayer is the law of faith; in other words, the way we pray must reflect what we believe⁹. Therefore, good theology is essential because what we worship and how we worship show what we believe.

Proclaiming the Word of God in sign language is one of the important responsibilities of any minister. We also proclaim the kingdom of God by our example, good deeds and love. As both British Sign Language and English are two distinct languages; attempting to read and sign the text and simultaneously use voice, is extremely difficult; it often causes conflict and renders the meaning either totally meaningless; or worse still, sometime completely changes the meaning of the source language. An example will illustrate this point:

Eucharistic Prayer III: On the night he was betrayed, he took bread and gave you thanks and praise. He broke the bread, gave it to his disciples, and said...

If a priest were to speak and sign the above sentence, what invariably happens is that in Sign Supported English, back-translation will show he is saying: 'on the night Jesus betrayed *someone*, he took bread and...' 'Someone' is implied naturally in the signed sentence. This is heretical. Priests who are not really skilled in sign language should avoid using Eucharistic Prayer III but avoiding Eucharistic Prayer III is not really a solution to the problem; the core of the problem lies in using Supported Sign English whether signing the gospel, the homily or the Mass prayers. Grammatical conflicts occur often and frequently.

It is not only cerebrally challenging for a priest to offer signed Mass in word *and* sign, he is also dexterously and spatially challenged as well. Using Sign Supported English is to operate in *two different languages simultaneously* which is a very tall order indeed which very few in the United Kingdom, even if any, are capable of executing. Ministers with lack of training and experience do not give respect and honour to the Word of God, nor do they respect and acknowledge the Deaf community as a minority community with their own language; and ultimately, the Word of God is not being presented clearly, correctly and reverently.

Training of doctors and surgeons is long and their medical course involves learning incredibly complex information and techniques, but they do not speak the same language when they actually see their clients and discuss their illnesses with them. Likewise, priests, chaplains and ministers who are involved in ministry with Deaf people are obliged to know something about BSL grammatical structures, the culture and the sociology, so as to appreciate the cultural world of Deaf people. Yet ministers are not keen to come to training sessions, especially if the contents focus on the linguistic principles and the cultural world of Deaf people; due to constraint of time and energy, they only want to learn, practice and polish their signing.

Knowledge of social, cultural and religious background of Scripture texts is necessary. Also important is the attempt to preserve the originality and the effectiveness of the message and encode it in the culture and the idiomacy of the target language. The hermeneutics of the Scriptures (concerning the interpretation of the literary texts of the Scriptures) is a unique discipline. It also refers to a process that goes beyond the mechanical equivalent of words and enters into the issue of transference from one culture and world view to another. The challenge we are faced with is to understand the meaning of the content and to present a translation that is clear, unambiguous, and immediately comprehensible to Deaf viewers so that they do not have to mentally re-interpret what they see.

Very few have the skill, knowledge and experience of liturgical or scriptural signing. The responsibility of a minister of the Word of God is not to explain the underlying message or meaning of the biblical texts, but to encode them in the presentation of our language. This is a very difficult

⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Geoffrey Chapman 1994), n. 1124.

and esteemed task, and in order to achieve this, we need to have the service of both disciplines: linguistics and scriptural hermeneutics. Correct theology is vital, and we servants are the channels through which Deaf people have access to the Word of God.

I am currently involved in the BSL Bible Translation Project where we are attempting to translate Mark's gospel into BSL. Deaf and hearing people with sign language skills and who understand the linguistics of BSL come together regularly to work on translating Mark's gospel. We have a professor on biblical scriptures from Chester University whose knowledge on Greek language is invaluable. Work began recently and it is an encouraging and much needed venture where the gospel of St Mark, and eventually other books in the Bible, will be available on DVD to the Deaf community in the United Kingdom.

Signed Mass or interpreted/integrated Mass

In the twenty-first century, one of the phenomena in the Catholic Church is the dwindling of vocations, closure or amalgamation of parishes, and priests taking on more responsibilities. Training a priest to learn to use British Sign Language takes years; time and energy are now precious commodity for many priests and it may be unrealistic to expect diocesan bishops to appoint a priest to be a full-time chaplain to Deaf people.

It is tempting to ask a Parish priest to learn sufficient signs to be able to sign Mass with the Deaf community once a month. This is actually the situation in many dioceses in the United Kingdom today. In fact, the idea has certain appeal and even corroborates with the theological principle that the Deaf community is actually part of the wider Church. One of the principles behind the rationale is that a special signed Mass, or what is generally termed as the *Deaf Mass* (which has the same meaning as the *Deaf Church* explained earlier) where Deaf people come from all over the diocese and come to a central venue with a priest who has been officially appointed to minister to the Deaf community is viewed as a 'segregation' especially where a regular Sunday parish mass already provides a perfect opportunity to be fully part of the Catholic community at prayer. Several factors have to be carefully considered.

There is a whole world of difference between those who are hard of hearing and those who are Deaf and are culturally related to a Deaf world. For the former, amplification such as loop systems and a copy of the Mass booklet and homily would be sufficient; as for the latter they use British Sign Language and with Deaf culture taken on board.

There is a *huge* gap between service and provision for ordinary parishioners and Deaf people. For many Deaf people, they have Mass once a month. Many parishioners do not have to travel far, and they often have two, three choices and can choose which mass to go to every weekend, whereas a lot of people in the Deaf community travel many miles simply to attend Mass once a month. When I began work on Signs of God Lectionaries for Deaf people, I attempted to encourage Deaf people to learn how to proclaim the Word of God. The general practice was that they chose one of the two readings, usually the easier one. I challenged them that if they wanted to have full access to the Mother Church, they would have to do both. There was to be no more shortening or simplification of anything in the liturgical celebrations, all that was necessary was a good translation. Of course, the problem is that the source material is nearly always in printed English. The solution points even more to a good bilingual education for d/Deaf children.

A lot will depend on the Deaf person's varying levels of proficiency in English language. Think about immigrants who are struggling to understand English; of course, they have a choice to learn the English language but this choice is not even possible for Deaf people.

If *Deaf Mass* is not possible, and if a parish wishes to welcome Deaf people, for a true celebration to happen, everything must be accessible. The Parish priest could seek to find someone who can offer competent communication support. It is not sufficient to offer a summary of the homily, every word *must* be translated, even a short introduction at the beginning of the Mass. As anyone will know, the sense of belonging to the community at the Eucharistic celebration is vital and goes a long way in enabling the person to feel a part of the community. Sometimes it is not helpful to give

a text or a copy of the homily especially if the Deaf people concerned are uncomfortable with English language. Providing competent communication support is a vital ministry but it is often beyond the scope, the means and the finance of any parish.

Deaf Mass has many advantages. *Deaf Mass* will benefit *all* people, both Deaf and hearing. We always ensure that when a person is using sign language, voice-over will be available so that hearing people can follow and participate fully. Too often Mass is just a verbose celebration, we need to focus on other aspects of praying not just with ears and mouths but with our senses and learning to pray with our whole body in a holistic sense. Hearing people have often found it helpful and it has enabled them to celebrate their faith in a renewed sense. It is easier for Deaf people to be a gift to others within the Church than if they went to a local parish and try to fit in. Full inclusion and participation would include sharing the responsibility as Ministers of the Word or Extraordinary Ministers of the Eucharist etc, and this rarely happen in a local parish or at an interpreted Mass. Mass is not just a gathering of individuals but members of the Church, the body of Christ. How can Deaf people feel they are members belonging to the Church if the majority of the parishioners are not able to communicate and understand sign language, there will be very little interaction and the small group of Deaf people will not feel they belong to the community, they will remain spectators or passive observers. For a genuine celebration to occur, there has to be a dynamic relationship within the congregation.

In *Deaf Mass*, the focus will naturally be on a signing priest. With interpreted Mass Deaf people will be looking at the interpreter or someone who is relaying what is being said in sign language. They will miss all the important liturgical actions and gestures that are associated with certain prayers throughout the Mass. Deaf people are the eye people and to miss most of the visual dimension of the liturgy is akin to asking a wine taster to taste soft drinks.

Of course, pragmatism calls for a realistic appraisal as to what is possible in each specific community. One of the ways forward is for the priest(s) and the local community to come and conscientiously work together with Deaf people. A good example is St Philip Evans,¹⁰ a parish in south Wales. The Parish priest was previously a chaplain to Deaf people before being appointed to the parish. He has achieved a good level of signing skill. The Deaf community from many parts of south Wales go to that parish and there is an officially appointed diocesan Pastoral Worker who liaise with the Parish priest, the parish and the Deaf community. Regular meetings and events help to bridge the two communities – Deaf people and the parish – together. The infrastructure is also available (hall, meeting room, kitchen, office) which help the communities to gel even further.

Another distinctive aspect in the *Deaf Mass* is the ‘Prayer of the Faithful’. For years Deaf people had to sign bidding prayers that were written on a piece of paper by hearing people. They always struggled with illegibility, poor writing or typed words far too small to read, and especially in a language that could be considered as a foreign language to them. Soon after I began full-time ministry with Deaf people I began to explore to see how we could celebrate the Eucharist in ways that were more natural, accessible and more dignified. We soon came across the method that worked a treat: I would invite anyone from the congregation to offer a prayer in sign language and I would then immediately relay it to all. We found that if they all came queuing up, positioning themselves on the sanctuary and sign to the congregation it would take far too long. Here I would like to add what Hannah Lewis said about this: ‘sometimes these stories and conversations can be experienced as a profound interaction between the members of the congregation, the people they are praying for and God. Sometimes they go way off the point and can be experienced as a waste of time, although such examples are still affirming of the sense of community, and as such as to be welcomed. Whichever way it goes, intercessions in the Deaf Church take a long time and are very lively – a distinctively Deaf way of prayer that is disconcerting for the hearing visitor used to quiet “prayerful” intercessions.’¹¹ God is not looking for beautifully executed prayers but rather prayers

¹⁰ St. Philip Evans, Llanedeyrn Drive, Llanedeyrn, Cardiff, CF23 9UL.

¹¹ Lewis, *Deaf Liberation Theology* (Ashgate 2007), p. 167.

offered from the heart. This is the only opportunity during the whole Eucharist where Deaf people can truly feel that it is their own prayers that are being offered and the fact that they are offered communally, it strengthens the bond of the belongingness within the community.

Another important distinctive of the cultural world of deaf people is story-telling and the way Deaf people converse with each other. Sermons in the *Deaf Mass* often creates for an interactive relationship between a minister and the congregation. Whenever Canon Charles Hollywood preached, he would often ask questions or even invite members from the congregation to offer comments or opinions. Lewis said, ‘another difference experienced by Deaf preachers who preach in both hearing and Deaf churches is the increased interaction with the congregation during the sermon. Rather than simply sit back and “listen”, they will join in with questions and comments made to the preacher and to each other. In hearing culture, talking during the sermon is indicative of not paying attention; in Deaf culture, it can show that they are listening to and interested in what you have to say.’¹²

The debate on whether it is better to have signed integrated Mass, interpreted Mass or *Deaf Mass* will continue. Integrated signed Mass with the parish will never be truly ‘integrated’ because the number of Deaf people is nearly always 1% to 5% of the congregation consisting mainly of hearing people who do not know them and know nothing about the cultural world of Deaf People. Suffice it to say that realistically, signed integrated Mass or interpreted Mass is better than nothing at all. In fact, the title of this paper ‘the call to discipleship in the global Deaf community in the United Kingdom’ will only happen once all the criteria or conditions that I have described above are satisfactorily met and it is my strong belief – gleaned from twenty-six years of experience as a priest observing many different Deaf communities throughout the United Kingdom – that signed Mass or *Deaf Mass* is the only one that will easily enable all those conditions to be met.

One of the objections often raised is that the number of the Deaf community is small. Can time, energy and resources and money be justified for such a small community? This was a question from one of the senior Church leaders, and one of the religious Sisters who spent years as a Pastoral Worker offered a reply: ‘would you like to go and re-write the gospel of the ninety-nine sheep and the lost sheep?’ This Sister was right to challenge what is often termed as a numbers game. Specialist ministry among Deaf people is often considered a luxury, an option that can be cut when resources are short.

Participation of grass roots members of Church – empowering Deaf people

*Baptism is birth into the new life in Christ. In accordance with the Lord’s will, it is necessary for salvation, as is the Church herself, which we enter by Baptism.*¹³. Through baptism, God calls us to a life of holiness and to be active Christians.

In 1998 a document entitled *Valuing Difference*,¹⁴ the foreword by the late Cardinal Hume said, ‘The dignity of the human person is at the heart of Catholic teaching. Each and every person is to be valued as God’s creation. The Church’s vision is firmly rooted in the example of Jesus who turned no-one away, but made himself available to all.’

Valuing Difference explains very clearly that when developing services necessary for people with disabilities we should be ‘working with’ rather than ‘doing things for’ people with disabilities. In order to offer good practical and caring services, dialogue is necessary because only through communicating with people with disabilities will we know what kinds of services they require for equal access and participation. However, *Valuing Difference*, makes a typical mistake and has not understood the importance of Deaf people as a linguistic minority and how catechesis is done in the

¹² Ibid., p. 168.

¹³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Geoffrey Chapman 1994), n. 1277.

¹⁴ *Valuing Difference: people with disabilities in the life and mission of the Church* (Department for Catholic Education and Formation 1998).

Deaf way. The document says ‘those who are deaf or hard of hearing, with the assistance of an interpreter, could take part in the parish confirmation programme.’¹⁵ Deaf people and all those who are experienced chaplains or Pastoral Workers with Deaf people will say it is a simplistic solution, mixing Deaf children/adults with parishioners. Deaf children are educated in schools or units that are not within the parish, and to expect priests/catechists to be able to enable Deaf people learn without any real knowledge and experience of Deaf people’s language and culture, even if a competent sign language interpreter is available, is simply way above their skill and ability.

The Church needs to realise that Deaf people have a lot to offer but it does mean learning to listen and communicate with them. However, the Church must also realise the consequences of the after-effects of Milan Congress Milan 1880 and ‘oralism’ – the power of speech and English language – Deaf generally believed hearing people knew better. The Deaf community needs a shepherd who is confident in explaining Church teaching on morals and the sanctity of life. A significant factor in any individual’s spiritual maturity, growth and development is the freedom of one’s life experiences and the meaning of those experiences within ones relationship with God. Deaf Theology, or liberation theology, will firmly put the practice of the pastoral care of Deaf people on the agenda which demands that Deaf people have full access, and be treated like everyone else, except that they cannot hear.

Because of scarcity of priests, and with their increasing commitments, it is necessary to shift the focus onto the Deaf community. There are resources yet to be tapped and utilised. They have certain advantages over many priests, many of them are natural BSL users. Learning BSL is like learning any other spoken language, it can take time, sometimes years. However, certain Deaf people who have natural leadership abilities and skills still need training in theology before they can be truly empowered to take an active part within the Church and take up their role of shepherding the Deaf community. With this in mind, we have developed two courses – *Visual Faith* and *Catholic Certificate in Religious Studies*. The latter is an accredited course approved by the Bishops Conference of England and Wales.¹⁶ It is imperative for Deaf people to have full access to the Church, and to participate as full members of Christ’s kingdom in the Church and society. We must not substitute charity for justice.

Deaf people as ministers can be really effective when they minister to other people like themselves. Deaf people share the same language and culture; they understand the experience of isolation and the struggle to integrate within the hearing world’s Church. They are often reminded of their daily lived injustices, and feelings of indifference and oppression, even today. Deaf people are visual-dependent; the kaleidoscopic world comes through their eyes and is processed into their brains, but the images that are imparted to the brain need to be explained, made meaningful and understood. Catechesis is not just explaining about faith in God or memorizing what we learn from the Scriptures, it is to ensure that their ‘house is built on a firm foundation’ that would not be buffeted and shaken by the storms of fundamentalism, sensationalism, secularism that bombard us from television, media, newspapers and society.

St Paul said that the Spirit gives us all different kinds of spiritual gifts.¹⁷ He also said that if people receive the grace for teaching, administration, and to serve, then they should use the gift.¹⁸ Deaf people have the same rights as everyone else to be truly enabled to progress on their faith journey towards God *as* Deaf persons.

¹⁵ *Valuing Difference: people with disabilities in the life and mission of the Church* (Department for Catholic Education and Formation 1998), p. 28.

¹⁶ cf. <http://www.cesew.org.uk/standard.asp?id=94>.

¹⁷ 1 Corinthians 12:1 – 11.

¹⁸ Romans 12:3 – 8.

What is necessary is an understanding of how we should deconstruct incorrect theological understanding of disability and the whole concept of suffering, and seeing deafness in a negative light and using the language of the cross as a redemptive means to make up for our sad lives. In *Deaf Liberation Theology*, Lewis gives an interesting insight in how the different constructions of disability have continued to oppress Deaf people (Deaf People Constructed in Theology),¹⁹ and (Deaf People Constructed in the Church as an Organization)²⁰, Lewis explained that the only model that would truly liberate Deaf people is the one that allows Deaf people to become the agents of their own destiny and the voices of their own experience. This involves reaching an understanding of how power works and where power is to be found and that the grass root members' participation is the key to becoming full members of the church.

Church, the Body of Christ

The *Face of Christ*²¹ photographic image appears to be a composition of many small mosaics; a closer examination of the mosaics one can see that they are images of different portraits of many people. St Paul said that Christ is like a single body, which has many parts; it is still one body, even though it is made up of different parts.²² Referring to the image of Christ the King as the whole body of the Church, if one mosaic is removed it will leave a small gap or hole in the image. If one person is left out or 'lost' as in the lost sheep parable,²³ the image of Christ the King would be incomplete. So if a diocese does not offer a diocesan service to Deaf people, Deaf people will remain forgotten and excluded from the Church, and as such the Church will be the poorer for it. The Vatican Conciliar document on the Constitution of the Sacred Liturgy states that the Church encourages full, conscious, and active participation by all people in liturgical celebrations; and furthermore, that participation is not considered as an extra prerequisite but is their right and duty by reason of their baptism.²⁴ Liturgical celebrations with Deaf people can enrich the whole mystical Body of the Church. St Jerome said that 'ignorance of Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.' It is my belief that 'ignorance of the existence and presence of Deaf people and their needs/rights is ignorance of service to the Body of Christ, the Church.' In other words, if there is no diocesan Deaf service, the Church as a whole will be the poorer for it.

For true and meaningful dialogue to occur we need to be prepared to enter into understanding deafness, its implications and awareness of Deaf culture and respect for the language. The Catholic Deaf Association is set up not only to provide service to Deaf people but also to provide opportunity for Deaf and hearing people to share their faith and worship together. Not all dioceses have official diocesan service to Deaf people but it is our hope that one day all Deaf people will have full access to the sacramental life of the Church.

The Catholic Deaf Association has always been an association of Deaf and hearing people but this needs qualification. It is not just a lumping of d/Deaf and hearing people as one might expect such as at an integrated Mass or interpreted Mass. Canon Charles Hollywood, who realised so very early on in his ministerial priesthood with Deaf people, the importance of working and getting people to work and support each other, was absolutely spot on when he said that hearing people were always welcome as long as they realised and accepted that everything must be Deaf-orientated. In other words, one must accept the 'Deaf-way' This is more than just respecting Deaf people's language

¹⁹ Lewis, *Deaf Liberation Theology* (Ashgate 2007), pp. 61 – 84.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 85 – 104.

²¹ *Face of Christ* – it is a photographic image which was created using photographs of people from all over the world who visited St Paul's Cathedral, London, during the month of October 1999 and forms the central panel for the exhibition 'in a word' situated in the North Quire Aisle. Design and photography by Timothy Guy & Andy Bullock.

²² 1 Corinthians 12:12 – 30.

²³ Matthew 18:12.

²⁴ Flannery OP, *The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents of Vatican Council II* – 'the promotion of liturgical instruction and active participation', (Dominican Publication 1975), n. 14, p. 7.

and culture, it is to accept the fact that they have a voice in how things are done and be allowed to do things the way they want. Lewis explained that d/Deaf people should no longer be the objects of charity where their needs are met on a superficial level but become active agents in all shared decision-makings and be allowed to participate in what Lewis called ‘development model’ rather than a charitable work. ‘This shift in power relationships is more than a different use of words or change of mind; it involves a whole ‘paradigm shift’ or a ‘conversion experience’ in which a whole way of relating to the world is changed.’²⁵ So, for Catholic Deaf people, the starting point is from Christ’s command ‘Go out to the whole world and proclaim the Good News to all’.²⁶ It is just a simple command with no conditions attached, no excuses or exemptions. Discipleship is a call to service and is always of a communitarian nature; diversity will enrich the global Church community.

Deafhood

Paddy Ladd²⁷ came up with a new term ‘Deafhood’ to replace the word deafness. According to Paddy Ladd: ‘Deafhood is not a static medical condition like “deafness”. Instead, it represents a process – the struggle by each Deaf child, Deaf family and Deaf adult to explain to themselves and each other their own existence in the world.’

Paddy Ladd explained that the term ‘deafness’ is unsatisfactory because it tends to be medically oriented. Let me explain: the height of the door is usually 6’8” and the cutlery is usually 8 inches long; they are the norms due to the average height of people and the size of their hands; they are not absolute. Unfortunately when it comes to hearing, the world and the Church often forget and even ignore the needs of people who are Deaf and those who have some hearing loss. We are people who are created in the image of God, we were born into a world that is imperfect and illness is a part of human process of growing and coping in the world. Deafness is just another one amongst other conditions such as bunions, bronchitis and bursitis. They do not make us any less human but sadly evidence tells us that educators, psychologists, ministers and others, have attempted to ‘normalise’ us and make us speak and behave like hearing people.

The story of the healing of the deaf man²⁸ is not simply about the restoration of hearing but about restoring the deaf man’s rights and dignity, bringing him back into the community that had rejected him, as well as making the community accept the deaf man and to treat him as a human being like themselves. When I die I will still remain as a Deaf person but of course in heaven communication will be perfect. Jesus appeared to his disciples and showed them his wounded hands, feet and side²⁹ – in his resurrected body, the wounds did not disappear. My deafness will not be taken away from me, it has shaped my life and made me the Peter as people know me. My deafness has coloured me in a unique way. Perhaps the deaf man in the gospel had normal speech and hearing in his early life before disease, illness or accident that made him deaf. We will never know what happened. It is inconceivable that Jesus would obliterate his personality and character and change him from a profoundly deaf person who had never heard a sound into a hearing person with clear speech. This would have made a mockery of human science and nature that we all grow from being a baby into a fully developed person according to psycho-social periods; it would also put into jeopardy the theology of incarnation and kenosis – that Jesus gave up being God, emptied himself and being born in human likeness.³⁰

²⁵ Lewis, *Deaf Liberation Theology* (Ashgate 2007), p. 103.

²⁶ Mark 16:15.

²⁷ Ladd, *Understanding Deaf Culture: in search of Deafhood* (Multilingual Matters Ltd 2003), p. 3.

²⁸ Mark 7:31-37.

²⁹ Luke 24:36 – 43; John 20:26 – 27.

³⁰ Philippians 2:6 – 8.

Nancy Eiesland said that ‘Resurrection is not about the negation or erasure of our disabled bodies in hopes of perfect images, untouched by physical disability; rather Christ’s resurrection offers hope that our nonconventional, and sometimes difficult, bodies participate fully in the imago Dei and that God whose nature is love and who is on the side of justice and solidarity is touched by our experience’.³¹

It is not only history also tells us that there have been many attempts to cure deaf children and people, many Deaf people have actually personally regaled stories to me of how they have been subjected to humiliating attempts to be healed of their deafness, and when nothing happened they were told that it was their lack of faith or even because of sins that caused them to remain deaf. I am always interested in the fact that Jesus took the deaf man aside in private, away from the crowd. The deaf man realised that this Jesus took the trouble to consider him worthy of attention and treated humanely. The word ‘epiphatha’ means ‘to be opened’ – not to ‘hear and speak’. Of course, hermeneutically, it is open to many interpretations but it is very significant to many Deaf people. Lewis wrote ‘...this exegesis can be criticized as not being consonant with the biblical text, but it is a brilliantly, unapologetically liberating reading of this text. Jesus as the teacher, the man of authority who takes notice of the Deaf man who is being ignored by everyone else, is the man who can help transform Deaf people’s inner self, damaged by oppression.’³² In my ministerial priesthood serving Deaf people, I have encountered so many who have said they had great memories of ‘St John’s, Boston Spa’, they absolutely loved their time there. However, one can also detect deep-seated anger and resentment towards ‘St John’s, Boston Spa’. So, where does the anger come from and why? In many of my conversations and careful listening and often, confidential sharing, it is quite clear that their happy memories were because of the camaraderie they enjoyed with other deaf children using sign language (ten per cent of deaf children had Deaf parents, and ninety per cent of deaf children came from hearing parents so even at home they experienced exclusion); the anger, deep-seated resentment were because of their experience of being treated cruelly and unjustly, not being respected as Deaf children with their own language and culture, and being misunderstood, ignored, excluded and often punished. Those who had profound deafness and those who really struggled with speech often bore the brunt of the merciless ‘oralism’ with the result that they left school not only with poor achievement, below average skill in reading and writing English but also with very low self-esteem, lack of confidence and generally with the belief that the best they could succeed would be to hold manual/mental jobs. The teachers³³ – and from my own experience I can vouchsafe there have been many of them – were very good and they did their best under the circumstances. It is the educational psychologists, the strategists and the authorities who created the system of oralism, which in my opinion, is morally unacceptable, especially when there is proven evidence that bilingualism offers a far better option. It is ironic Deaf people needed healing of those unhappy memories, not deafness.

Deaf people are realistic – they know what it means to be deaf, they experience ignorance, marginalization, oppression, and injustice in their lives – but they get on with their lives and they are happy. They know they can do anything but hear. They accept deafness and are even proud of their sign language and culture. This is part and parcel of our life. We do not idealise deafness because we know it is an impairment but we have turned it into a gift, it is incorporated in the on-going process of self-actualization, maturation and holiness in our life journey towards God.

Lewis summed it up in a nutshell: “Jesus can identify with both the negative and positive sides of being d/Deaf; with both the anger and frustration and pain of only having partial information, of being mocked for not knowing what is happening, and with the pride and joy of being able to say ‘I

³¹ Eiesland, *The Disabled God: towards a liberatory theology of disability* (Nashville, 1994).

³² Lewis, *Deaf Liberation Theology* (Ashgate 2007), p. 148.

³³ St John’s School, Boston Spa, believed in auditory/oral method but I am unaware of their current practice and the philosophy and method they now use.

have had a hard time, and I still can't hear, and I still get frustrated, but it doesn't matter, if you can't accept me, it's not my problem, but yours."³⁴

Conclusion

The Deaf world will always be a small world, and the Catholic Deaf community will even be smaller. The hierarchy will ask if it is worth the time, energy, resource and money for such a small community. We have already seen that the photographic 'face of Christ' image shows that the Church must include everyone and if one is missing, she will be the one who suffers. People, whatever gender, race or disability, are treasures or jewels hidden in the ordinariness of life, in the way they have to struggle with daily living. The call to discipleship is nothing fanciful or romantic. The beatitudes are an affirmation and encouragement of all we are all trying to do; far from being a private moral booster, the beatitudes is also a call to 'walk justly'.³⁵ In the early centuries the Church was strengthened by the blood of the martyrs; today the Church is strengthened and blessed by Deaf people, blind people, and people with disabilities. The Church will do well to listen carefully and respectfully and put into action what is right and just.

Empowering Deaf people is the way forward. However it must be genuine empowerment which means that Deaf people are involved in any decision making. The development model that Lewis refers to is based on the full involvement of Deaf people in realising their baptismal call – God calls and they, they alone, respond. It is like a treasure³⁶ hidden in a field that Deaf people bought, not with money but with patient tears, putting up with injustice and oppression, and overcoming them, utilising their gifts for the good of the whole community, and the Church – the body of Christ.

Rev. Fr. Peter McDonough

³⁴ Lewis, *Deaf Liberation Theology* (Ashgate 2007), p. 138.

³⁵ Matthew 5: 1 – 12.

³⁶ Matthew 13: 44.