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The Call to Discipleship in the Global Deaf Community

A Conference for Deaf People and Pastoral Leaders
In the Catholic Deaf Community

I grew up in Wisconsin, USA. Both of my parents were Deaf. I am the youngest of four children and the only one with a hearing loss. I was able to communicate with my parents because I learned sign language before speech. Because there was an age gap between me and my siblings, I felt like I grew up as an only child. What I was taught about my Catholic faith while growing up is somewhat different than what I know now. My parents went to St. John's School for the Deaf, a private Catholic school in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Both of them have taught me everything they learned about God and our Catholic Faith the best way they could. They were very traditional Catholics; they followed their faith rigorously by going to church every Sunday and Holy Days during the pre Vatican II when everything was in Latin. I read my mother's Daily Missal to understand the Mass. I never asked questions of why we go to church or why we practice our faith the way we do because their answer was "it's always been that way." My parents chose not to send me to a boarding Deaf school instead they placed me in a local Catholic school. It was there that I received my formal Catholic education and Sacraments – Confession, Communion, before Vatican II and Confirmation after Vatican II. I attended Mass everyday until Vatican II when

then I only had to attend Mass once or twice a week and on Holy Days or special occasions. I did not have an interpreter or note taker in my classes; the only special help I got was a weekly speech class. One of the memories I had was when I was in fifth grade where the whole class had to sing in Latin at Mass and I had no idea what the songs meant. While the changes were happening during Vatican II, it also changed the way how my religion classes were taught. I attended a regular High School and went to CCD classes. We had a weekly group discussion with our assistant priest. I was always uncomfortable with group discussion because I could not follow what was being discussed. Many times I would just sit there looking at the clock and waiting for the classes to end. There was a time when the priest called upon me and asked me to say a prayer but I freaked out. Because of the tension of having to say something in front of class, I tried to say the words but I couldn't and was so embarrassed. I stopped going to classes due to frustrations and embarrassments.

In the early years after the Vatican II, there were a lot of confusion going on such as change of the altar facing the people, Mass was spoken in English language and a tremendous explosion of lay ministries. Even though my parents did not understand what was happening, they remained faithful. I watched and understood how important the Catholic faith was to them and it was through their actions that it was instilled in me to accept my Catholic faith.

I went on to college and earned a B.A. degree in Special Education. After I finished college, I ended up working in a factory where my father worked. A few months later, a friend of my mother's gave my name to the Wisconsin Green Bay

Diocese program director and I was hired to work in their Deaf Ministry program. I tried to do the best I could without any formal training in Pastoral Ministry. During my first year of working with the Deaf Ministry, I attended my first Midwest conference in St. Paul, Minnesota, International Catholic of the Deaf conference in Omaha, Nebraska and the Deaf Cursillo #16 in Kansas City, Kansas. This Cursillo had a big impact on my life and made me closer to God. I was so inspired by it that I wanted others to have the similar experiences. I coordinated a Cursillo program in Milwaukee and I have encouraged people to go the Cursillo elsewhere. I still feel that the Cursillo program was and still is very beneficial for the Deaf. The Cursillo program is a short course in learning more about God and our Catholic faith. A few years later, I was laid off due to lack of funds. Currently, I am getting my training and education from Ministry Formation Program (MFP) in Chicago, Illinois and getting my Master degree in Pastoral Ministry for the Deaf from St. Thomas University (STU) in Miami, Florida. Each program has its own purpose. The goal of the Ministry Formation Program is to train Catholic Deaf and Hard of Hearing adults who wish to serve as active lay ministers in their area. MFP allows me to search for myself and find my calling in where I would be of service. The goal of Institute of Pastoral Ministry at STU is to provide students with competence in ministering with the Deaf. STU provides more of administrative perspective of what to expect while ministering.

Few months ago, I finally found a job working with the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Ministry Program in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee which was something I longed for after I lost my job in Green Bay. I hope the training and education

that I am getting now will help me to do a better job of servicing and reaching out to the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Catholics in the Archdiocese area. I continue to learn more and more about my Catholic faith that I did not know while growing up. In the past, we did not have a pastoral worker because they had the St. John's School for the Deaf which was the place where the Deaf went to Mass, social gatherings and ICDA meetings. When St. John's school closed in 1983, it became a center for the Deaf with a full time pastoral worker. In 1991, the center closed and the pastoral position moved to the Archdiocese office. We are also affiliated with the National Catholic Office for the Deaf which sponsored an annual conference to offer education and support for the pastoral workers. It seems that most, if not all, pastoral workers are hearing and not enough Deaf and Hard of Hearing people qualified for the position. Unfortunately, many of the positions for pastoral workers throughout the United States are disappearing due to lack of on-going training and financial constraints. We need to stand up and speak out for our needs and our place in the Catholic Church.

We are also fortunate to have the State School for the Deaf where the Catholic students can have their religion class every two weeks which provides for their sacramental needs and religious education. Because of various reasons, mostly due to lack of funds, our ministry program had not been able to offer as many services as we would like such as retreats, signed and interpreted Mass, religion and Bible classes. I am doing the best I can to provide those needed retreats. Recently, I planned a Day of Recollection and Prayer retreat. Many people from the deaf community participated and really enjoyed it and they

would like to see more retreats in the future. I enjoyed planning these events and getting speakers for the workshops, presenters for the retreat, etc. I became so eager and enthusiastic to provide as much services as possible for the Deaf community. As being involved in the ministry, it was very rewarding to see the people happy, enjoying each other's company and also learning about their Faith and God.

Not every church or parish is able to meet the needs of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community. Some churches are able to provide interpreters depending on their budget. In most churches that have interpretative Masses, there are just a few people from the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community who attend. I am planning to do some research on why the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Catholics in Archdiocese of Milwaukee are not going to Mass and what can I do to be of service to them. So far, I've seen a mixture of behaviors within the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community, from a lack of interest and participation, to real involvement and commitment, to learn about the Catholic faith.

My greatest joy of working in the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Ministry is to be able to share my Catholic faith with others, especially with people who are willing to listen, learn, understand and share their Catholic faith. In addition, it is a great joy for me and for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community to have presentations by priests and religious leaders who can use sign language and help us understand the different aspects of our faith. We are proud and excited to have a Deaf seminarian and looking forward to his ordination. Hope he will help us to spread awareness to the Archdiocese that there is a need for the Deaf

and Hard of Hearing Catholics in the Church. It would be difficult to meet all the Sacramental needs of all Deaf and Hard of Hearing if we don't know where they are. We need to provide training, information and support services for our Deaf and Hard of Hearing Catholics.

The International Catholic Foundation for the Service of Deaf Persons (ICF) could help us by offering more standardized materials to help train the interpreters, Deaf Catechesis and Deaf ministers. We all need to deepen our understanding of our Catholic faith. It is very important to provide the opportunities for continued formation and training for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing and the ability to share with other pastoral workers or ministers are among the best ways to assist us. The Deaf and Hard of Hearing community is diverse in many ways. I would like to see the ICF continue to work with the International Catholic Deaf Association (ICDA), the Catholic Office for the Deaf (NCOD) and other religious organizations to better serve the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community. We need to understand that Deaf and Hard of Hearing people have lived through many frustrations and changes. The hearing community does not always understand what our lives are like and often are unable to meet the needs of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community. This is not something that happens because people want it to happen; they just don't share the same experiences. But all are call to discipleship, and have valuable experiences that need to be respected and valued. I would like to encourage the ministry program to find ways to inspire those who are isolated and to disciple by example in the best way I can. I strongly believe that this is what God wants me

to do. It is important to provide training and education to teach the truth, spread the good news, learn to be a holier person and learn to be a good Catholic person. We need to show by examples and explain the importance of using both the mind and heart of a true Catholic discipleship. From *The Call to Discipleship*, Dr. Richard J. Krejcir stated that "... We are to become His disciples! We are to be disciplined! We are to disciple others so they can, in turn, disciple others. If you are a pastor or church leader, you can't lead others to know and grow in Christ unless you are growing in Christ yourself. We are called to mentor and instruct others in the faith for Christ's glory!" Pope Benedict XVI addressed to the young people and seminarians in New York with this statement: "... Christian discipleship is marked by a sense of wonder. We stand before the God we know and love as a friend, the vastness of his creation, and the beauty of our Christian faith."