

“Tell John what you see and hear!”

by Peter Geisser

Thirty some odd years ago, a priest at St Michael’s Church asked me if I would sign Sunday’s liturgy for a two-year-old in our parish who had just been diagnosed with a bilateral hearing loss. To my great surprise, this priest was totally open to filling the needs of even this two-year-old. He asked me where would be the best place for an interpreter to stand in the sanctuary, did he need to speak differently and what could he do to make our liturgies more welcoming to Deaf people. He had done his research on deafness and found that language acquisition was the great problem for children who are deaf and it is essential for children to see language from the very earliest years. This priest was also wise in his humility to know that people who work with the Deaf may know more about these issues than a parish priest. Note: “deaf” with a small “d” refers to deafness as a medical condition of not hearing, “Deaf” with a capital “D” refers to Deaf culture and a whole community with its language and culture.

Parish sacramental celebrations should be accessible to persons with disabilities and open to their full, active, and conscious participation, according to their capacity. Pastoral ministers should not presume to know the needs of persons with disabilities, but should rather—before all else—consult with them or their advocates before making determinations about the accessibility of a parish’s facilities and the availability of its programs, policies, and ministries. Full accessibility should be the goal for every parish, and these adaptations are to be an ordinary part of the liturgical life of the parish.

US Catholic Bishops Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities Revised June 2017, General Principle #3

The relationship that Deaf people have had with the Church is rather unique. Through the centuries it often depended on the adherence to Church rules or the following of scripture. Even here St. Paul in Romans 10:17 “But it is in that way faith comes, from hearing, and that means hearing the word of Christ.” There were serious theologians through the centuries who deduced that since faith comes “from hearing,” the deaf can’t possibly have faith! Though we are hopefully more enlightened, our everyday judgments on the role that people with differences should have in the Church still leaves much to be desired. The 2000 census put the RI population at about 1,011,960 people with 87,028 of these being deaf or hard of hearing according to the RI Commission on the Deaf & Hard of Hearing. With Rhode Island being one of the most Roman Catholic states in the US you would think that our parishes would all have at least one mass in sign language every Sunday. No, the fact is that the number of Deaf and Hard of Hearing practicing Catholics in Rhode Island is very small. With 90% of Deaf and Hard of Hearing people born of hearing families, children who are deaf are as likely as hearing siblings to be exposed to the Church from birth.

Today, more than ever, there are many options that are available to our children who are deaf. It was believed that they had to learn lip-reading and speech, to the point that teaching with sign language was forbidden in Massachusetts and Rhode Island until the 1970s! Today’s theories indicate that children learn best with ASL, American Sign Language, first and English and other languages as second languages. There are Cochlear Implants, which amazingly can restore functional hearing to some people, but not for all. Whatever, mode of communication and language the Deaf person uses, it is a

given that only they can know what is their best mode of communication. To make this more complicated, unlike people in wheelchairs, or on crutches, no one “looks” deaf.

There are many reasons for our failure to serve our Deaf and Hard of Hearing Catholics. In 50 years of serving Deaf and Hard of Hearing as an artist, teacher and inadequate interpreter at Mass, I have been constantly amazed by our ignorance to see the needs of the deaf. Whether through lack of knowledge or understanding, the Bishops Guidelines are rarely used. In each parish, the pastor arbitrarily decides what, if any, access is given to people.

The biggest failure of priests, like the failure of many professionals, is the assumption that they understand the needs of a person though they have never talked to them or studied their uniqueness. There is a mantra in special education that if you know something about a given disability, and you meet a person with that disability, this person is not the disability and their disability is likely not a textbook version, each person is unique and has unique needs that rarely respond to a “packaged solution.” Parishioners are often offended by variations in modes of communication and different ways of serving people’s needs. Pastors can ask for tolerance but this is far from the law of love that Jesus commands. There are people who use hearing aids, people with cochlear implants, people who use American Sign Language, ASL, and people who use signed English to name only a few modes of communication that Deaf people use. Each mode has a reason and each mode should not be tolerated but accepted by priests and the community. Sign Language is a beautiful language and many hearing people find it as efficacious as beautiful music at Mass. My priest back at St. Michael’s understood that to lead people with special needs you must listen and serve.

Vatican II spread the priestly mission to all members of the Church, but it is not an easy thing for laypeople, priests, and bishops to realize that the power of the Holy Spirit is with all Christians and especially for those with disabilities and their advocates. There have been so many situations where Deaf folk have been denied full access to the sacraments. Most of the time it is out of fear and ignorance. “I don’t see any deaf people at Mass,” “Interpreters are a big distraction to the rest of the congregation,” “It’s okay to sign, but you’ll have to do it over in the corner so people don’t see you and complain,” “I am the pastor and I know what my people need.” One parish I signed in, the pastor was not wanting the interpreter to be “too visible,” because some “important” parishioners were distracted. I spoke to one of these people and asked if they could close their eyes for the entire mass so they wouldn’t be distracted. This was a little outrageous, but for the several Deaf in the congregation, not a word is spoken if they cannot see it signed. Hearing people can see and hear the words of the Gospel but the Deaf can only see it. Are you still distracted? Turn the volume off on your television for an evening and experience another way of distraction. Ideally, the interpreter stands right at the altar with the priest so the words and actions of Mass are one. That Sunday, there were about five children in the choir loft, following and signing with me every sign I made. The Deaf in the community loved this understanding and spontaneity. Hearing children signing the language of the Deaf shows hope that our Catholic children may do what we have failed to do. In my fifty years of work for universal access the best example of this lack of insight is: “We don’t need a wheelchair ramp because we don’t have people in wheelchairs in our parish.”

Jesus said to them in reply, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them. And blessed is the one who takes no offense at me." (Matt 11)

No ritual, practice or leader of the Church, clerical or layperson, is above this mission that Jesus has given us all. Pope Francis in our time calls the Church a field hospital and calls the world to Love and service. This Love has the courage to take no offense in the least of us. In 1970, I began teaching at the Boston School for the Deaf where an extraordinary woman from RI was giving a workshop on the new and revolutionary RI School for the Deaf language curriculum. I was totally in awe of this woman but amazed at how many older teachers nodded politely, "knowing" that there was nothing new to be learned. At the end of her talk this woman who had spent her life looking for better ways to address the needs of children who are deaf, said: "People think we are so very patient because we dedicate our lives to teach the deaf..." All cynical heads bobbed up and down in approval. "It takes no patience to teach the deaf..." She let incredulous silence sink in and then continued... "But to BE deaf. This takes patience." We are simply asked to listen, to serve, to seek justice, live with kindness and walk humbly with our God, who is manifest in millions of unique ways.

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