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**Ephphata: Be Opened. The Sacred Narratives of Deaf People:
Cross Cultural Opportunities in Religious Education and Praxis.**

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Introduction.

Within the Deaf-World there exists a depth of lived experience much different from what is seen from outside this world. If we enable the narratives to be shared from the Deaf community, the reality that is revealed opens us beyond experiences of marginalization to a depth, a hope, and a challenge to the broader community. One of the primary needs within the Deaf Church is for the education of leaders within Pastoral Ministry, who are then able to take up leadership roles within their communities. St. Thomas University in Miami has pioneered a first and one of a kind program to provide a Master of Arts in Pastoral Ministries with the Deaf taught with American Sign Language (ASL) as its primary language. The majority of the students are and have been deaf themselves. The partnership of St. Thomas University (under the direction of Dr. Mercedes Iannone) Iannone) and local Deaf Ministry (represented by Dr. Ian Robertson), in conjunction with a team of national experts in Deaf ministry has proved a successful model for others to follow.

Personal Narrative.

Each narrative is sacred¹; it contains the life history and journey of individuals who have in a variety of ways been touched by God's call and the experience of living. There are times when this call seems insurmountable or the experience of living too unbearable and painful, yet the response and the living out of this call is the heart of the sacred narrative that is then told and written.

The Deaf Experience: A Historical Insight.

Approximately one hundred and twenty years ago, when the issue of (religious) education for the deaf was being discussed and planned for, many of those involved were clergy and religious from a variety of Christian denominations. Many of these religious (i.e. clergy) owned and operated schools for the deaf throughout Europe, they gathered in Milan, Italy for a Conference. What came to be called the Conference of Milan took place in 1880. This was a major turning point not only for the education of deaf children but also for all deaf people for the next two centuries. One of the decisive outcomes of

¹ McTaggart, Fred. Wolf That I Am: In Search of the Red Earth People Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976, 13.

this conference was to assert that the spoken word was paramount and that sign language was to be eradicated. Indeed the resolutions of the Conference stated:

- 1 The congress, considering the incontestable superiority of speech over signs, for restoring deaf-mutes to social life and for giving them greater facility in language, declares that the method of articulation should have preference over that of signs in the instruction and education of the deaf and dumb.
- 2 Considering that the simultaneous use of signs and speech has the disadvantage of injuring speech, lip-reading and precision of ideas, the congress declares that the pure oral method ought to be preferred.²

There were over 164 delegates at this conference, mostly from Europe (mainly France and Italy). Perhaps the most staggering statistic is that only one participant was deaf!³ What is also troubling is that many of the participants at the congress came from a religious background and were involved in both the education and religious formation of deaf children and young people.⁴ Indeed one of the Conference participants, a Catholic priest (of which there were many in attendance) declared that ‘the mutes must speak.’⁵ We must also realize that this was a minority, albeit strong and vocal, within the deaf education narrative. In the United States at this time there were twenty-six schools for the deaf and ASL was the language used in all of them. These schools also had many deaf adults employed as teachers; and provided strong and good role models for their students.⁶ Harlan Lane recounts that some ten years after Milan the number of such deaf teachers had fallen by some twenty five percent and fell even more as the years went on.⁷ By 1907, there were 139 schools for the deaf in the United States and ASL was allowed in none of them!⁸ In twenty-seven years, all progress had ceased. Another reality of this conference that directly affects this portrayal of the Deaf community is an example of what Ladd and others⁹ have recounted as the strong influence of religious concepts about who Deaf people are. What comes out of this Conference is that Deaf people are only fully human if they speak.¹⁰ Harlan Lane¹¹ is joined later by Paddy Ladd¹² in identifying such approaches as resulting in over one hundred years of oppression and lack of education for the Deaf community, still being experienced in many ways today. The influence that this conference has had has been

² Lane, Harlan. A Journey into the Deaf-World. San Diego: Dawn Sign Press, 1996, 61.

³ Ladd, Paddy. Understanding Deaf Culture: In Search of Deafhood. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2003, 120.

⁴ Ibid, 123.

⁵ Ibid, 121.

⁶ Lane, Harlan. The Mask of Benevolence: Disabling the Deaf Community. San Diego: Dawn Sign Press, 1999, 113-114.

⁷ Ibid, 116.

⁸ Ibid, 113.

⁹ Ibid, 113-120.

¹⁰ Ibid, 124.

¹¹ Ibid, 121.

¹² Ladd, Paddy. Understanding Deaf Culture: In Search of Deafhood. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2003, 7.

immense; indeed, it would seem true to say that this was the beginning of what is called the colonizing of the Deaf community.¹³

A Current Understanding.

Fr. Peter McDonough, a deaf priest from England stated in his presentation at a recent International Conference on Deaf people in the Church:

When we try to serve Deaf people, and enable them to develop their spirituality, it is essential that we get rid of the common misconceptions or myths that Deaf people's lives are impoverished, that they have limited language or understanding of the world, are unable to grasp complex ideas or abstract notions, and that they are unspiritual. The first thing that we have to do is recognize that Deaf people already have *their* own language, it is usually ourselves who are unable to communicate with them using their language. It is a stark fact that nothing short of becoming fluent in sign language will do this is one of the reasons why the best ministers to minister to other Deaf people are Deaf people themselves. We must acknowledge their wealth of life experience, and even more spiritual experience. We must utilize this as a starting point¹⁴

We need to be very aware when entering into the experience and spirituality of another culture and community that we do not seek to impose on them our own ways of being, our own understanding of what language, culture, ministry and spirituality are.

Core Values of Deaf Culture.

What are the core values of Deaf culture? In the research I have conducted within the last twelve months, using a methodology of in-depth qualitative interviews in a number of urban Catholic Dioceses in the United States I have identified five core values that pertain to this pastoral issue.¹⁵ These core values are: language, ability v. disability, education, family, and rapid cultural change. Language involves the importance and acceptance of ASL as a language and as the language of the Deaf community here in the United States. Ability not disability refers to the value that those who form the Deaf community see the Core Values of Deaf Culture issues of deafness in the context of language and culture, not in terms of disability. Though there are many who continue to insist that deaf people are disabled and in need of 'fixing', that is not the predominant image within Deaf culture. Third, the immediate need for equal opportunity and access to education at all levels. The history of the Deaf community in education spans the range of almost no education, to use of ASL in education, to mainstreaming efforts. The fourth core value is the influence of family: deaf parents, the challenges of having

¹³ Ibid, 114.

¹⁴ McDonough, Peter Rev. Collaborative Ministry in the Deaf Vineyard. Paper presented at ICF International Conference, Mexico City, August 2003)

¹⁵ Robertson, Ian. The Sacred Narratives of Deaf People with Implications for Renewed Pastoral Practice. Doctor of Ministry Thesis, Barry University, Miami Shores Fl. 2007.

hearing parents who have never experienced the world of the Deaf before, those who celebrate Deaf culture and those who resist it. The fifth core value is community, with all the multiplicity of relationships and commitments that the word implies.

Deaf Culture as a Way to Access Theology from the Margins.

The journey thus far has given a glimpse of the ways in which deaf people are in the world. It is a world that is predominately hearing and therefore different and at times experienced by those who are deaf as somewhat hostile or at best uninformed. The question that arises is how best can the Deaf community exist and thrive as a minority community within the hearing world and what in reality is a hearing church? The Deaf narrative can stand alongside other narratives of communities and people who face similar challenges and share experiences of living and worshipping as minority communities living within a dominant 'other' community. It has experienced the oppression of colonization, of misunderstanding and neglect similar to many other marginalized groups and peoples. There are lies/myths with regard to the Deaf community that are perpetuated, many times out of ignorance, as is true with most minority communities.

The Deaf Sacred Narratives.

The following excerpts from the narrative interviews I conducted can only be brief and give some insight into the current reality. I undertook to interview six deaf people whose first language is American Sign Language (ASL). I used a qualitative in-depth series of interviews that were conducted in ASL, recorded voice translation by Sign Language interpreter and then transcribed into written English so they could be recorded for use such as this paper. These interviews took place within two major urban Catholic Dioceses in the North East and Mid West. In looking at language, church, religious education and the challenges, joys and hopes of the Deaf community through these brief insights we will be able to build some of the principles for ministry that need to be stated. Reflecting on language in regards to church and ministry one of the interviewees shared the following:

Q: What is your experience of language in the church community?

A: I don't want to talk about the building itself, but the group of people, and the assortment of people here, mainstream with interpreters, you still miss a lot. You can still watch the interpreter, but sometimes there is no relationship with God going through this interpreter. You know, you want to be able to watch the Eucharist being served. You know, "Lord, I am not worthy"...you're going through the interpreter, sort of like there is no connection. I can't focus on the Mass itself and on the tradition. But when the priest can sign, I am so much more connected than going through an interpreter. But if it's a full deaf church, like here at our church, it's everyone. It's 100% satisfactory. You know that Jesus is there. Jesus is signing, the readers are signing, the Eucharist is inside.

Church, God, together...everybody is signing. I feel much more a part of the Church. The communication happens here. It's real.¹⁶

One of the integral realities for deaf people and their place within the church is language. This doesn't seem surprising, but the actual experience of many deaf people and their involvement in the worshipping community of the church today within the United States is that this is an alienating experience of language. For example, in the seven dioceses within the entire state of Florida, there is not an assigned priest in any of the dioceses who celebrates Mass or any other sacrament with the Deaf community. This means that every deaf person who wants to have access to the celebration of the Eucharist in his or her own language must travel hundreds of miles to do so! Given the significance of language for effective Church/worship experience, a common thread with each of the persons interviewed, is it any wonder that there are approximately ninety five percent of deaf people not involved with the church?

Religious Education and Deaf Children.

One other area of concern within education is that of religious education for deaf children and teens. We have noted previously that pastoral ministry with the Deaf is happening in a fewer dioceses within the United States. This effectively means that intentional religious education on a diocesan level is also lacking where such pastoral service is not in existence, although there may be some areas where this is taking place in an isolated parish or within families. It remains a concern for many in leadership in the Catholic Deaf community; if children and teens are not being exposed and educated in our faith at this age, where will they be as they grow older? Will the church be where they belong, or even know to belong, when it has literally failed in one of its most basic actions of education? One of the narratives gave insight into this challenge:

One minute...to go back just to what you said about being Catholic in school...during my elementary and middle school years, the Catholic deaf students would go to Religion class at a Catholic high school taught by Catholic high school girls who had minimal sign language skills. They would teach us the Our Father and Bible stories. At the same time, the Lutheran minister was able to sign very well and beautifully and had a deaf wife. And then there were the Catholics. And the deaf church had pretty strong groups in both the Catholics and the Lutherans. But one day they cancelled Religion class for the Catholic students and we weren't sure what we were going to do. And the house parent...the man from the school...asked the Lutheran minister is it OK if we ask the Catholic students to join us. And the Catholic kids didn't want to go...we didn't want to go. So, the Lutheran minister said, "You're Catholic; I'm Lutheran...do you believe in Christmas? Do you celebrate Easter? Me, too! We're not going to tell you anything that the Catholic religion is bad; we'll be very positive...if you'd like to come over." And he signed and we were fascinated to watch him...we were just fascinated by his stories.

¹⁶ Interview 1. This interviewee was a woman who is deaf and has been involved in the worshipping Deaf community for many years. Spring 2007.

And then I changed my attitude towards the Catholic Church. And I thought...we have a Catholic priest who is responsible for the Catholic students...didn't really roll up his sleeves and get right in there and take responsibility to the high school that was providing the education classes.¹⁷

Conclusion and Recommendations:

A. Education and Formation for Ministry.

While it is good to evangelize within the Deaf community, it is not enough. The road must lead towards the education and training of Deaf people to be leaders within their own communities. It has been evident within the narratives and within my own experience that one of the greatest challenges to the Deaf community has been and still is the place of education. However, within this section it is important that we focus a little on some positive contributions that are being made to truly educate and form Deaf people for ministry. If we are to take seriously the expressed needs of the Deaf community raised in the narratives then this education for ministry must inculturate such things as language, culture, and learning styles. It must not assume what the experiences of those involved have been. Oppression, lack of acceptance and the poor education of the past can no longer be what are experienced

. The Deaf community itself must have an active part in this education. There is a need for real partnership and mutual learning. The goals and vision of such education and formation should not be limited to being happy with just something a little better than what has been previously on offer, the education for ministry must enable those who are involved to stand alongside hearing people confident in their education and ministerial achievements whether that be through graduate degrees or lay ministry formation programs. There is no place here for watered down education.

B. Pastoral Recommendations.

Resulting from the interviews and the current reality with Deaf Ministry in the United States today it is appropriate now to make the following recommendations for a renewed praxis of and for ministry with the Deaf community:

- i. That Sacred Scriptures continue to be translated into ASL, and where possible carried out as an ecumenical collaboration.
- ii. That appropriate and linguistically competent Religious Education materials be developed beyond the scope of those currently available from the National Catholic Office for the Deaf. Programs need to be developed that would address the needs of adult religious formation as well.
- iii. That the growth and development of such programs as St. Thomas University be seen as a successful model for ministerial education with Deaf people. Thus taking into full account the linguistic and cultural learning needs of Deaf people.
- iv. That vocations to Priesthood and Religious Life be encouraged and that culturally competent formation be developed for those wishing to follow that

¹⁷ Interview 5. This interviewee was a man who is deaf, recently retired and who has had a long and active role within the Deaf communities he has belonged to. Spring 2007.

calling. Deafness should not be seen as an obstacle to these vocations but as a gift to whole community of the Church.

- v. That Offices of Religious Education in the United States seek ways to develop training for local catechists who can provide this important ministry within the Deaf community.

‘A Final ‘Sign.’

It would be right to end with one of the interviewees, not reflecting back on experiences but looking forward to what can and should be the true reality of Deaf people in the Church. Indeed this hope is one hope I dare to say that we **all** share:

A: I do hope that the Deaf Church...that the Catholic Deaf Church, especially... continues to flourish, because I have a deaf daughter and I want her to grow up and have a good Catholic experience. I want her to have what I had in the past, but right now, this generation is a little bit different. But I still hope that she’s going to be able to experience it differently...OK...but that there would be a good deal of resources out there for her so that she could become a good deaf Catholic as well. And I think that is possible...challenging and hard...but possible. Maybe one thing that would require a lot of work on the Church’s part...but, the Church is willing to modernize things then I think that that would really help bring back the younger generation into the Church. I’d like to see how that can happen...I think I’d like to start people...maybe, you know, if they’re Catholic, too...you know, if they’re going to church...if the Church is willing to deliver, then we’d be able to bring in the people into the Church. But the Church has to make the place...maintain them...and be able to keep them coming back. It’s wonderful...thank you...thank you.

Q: What would be your hope coming out of this?

A: I think that’s good, because I think that the deaf kids, children that are out there who are going to benefit from access to the Church is a very important part of their lives. I think that is a very important tool for them to have for their lives. It would be very nice if they would have the opportunities and experiences within the community and that exposure as well...if they had that chance.¹⁸

¹⁸ Interview 6. This interviewee was a young deaf woman who has grown up within an all deaf family, is married with a young child, and who also works within the professional field . 2007

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