

Our week began with two recurring themes: “BEING OPEN” (“EPHPHATHA”) and “BEING ON A JOURNEY”. This "Journey to Ephphatha" (Openness) began last year as over 1,000 deaf and hearing pilgrims came to Rome to remind the Church of our needs, frustrations, hopes, and dreams. The journey might have ended at that point, if it were not for the "openness" of Archbishop Jose Redrado and later Archbishop Zygmunt Zimowski. The journey might have been delayed or postponed if not for the perseverance of Archbishop Patrick Kelly, and the combined efforts of the Pontifical Council for Health Care Workers and the International Catholic Foundation for the Service of Deaf Persons. In all of this, there was a powerful sense that the Lord was with us on this journey.

During these amazing days, the dual themes of “OPENNESS” & “JOURNEY” have continually been a part of our discussions, presentations, and shared experiences. For many of those present, this was literally the journey of their lives, coming to Rome from places and pastoral situations greatly removed from well-equipped meeting rooms and professionally trained interpreters and staff. Many of us in attendance are here because others accompanied us as we ventured into pastoral ministry with deaf persons, and opened their hearts and shared their wisdom with us. For some of us, it was the experience of deafness itself or our family histories that made this journey a necessity. And when we arrived, what did we find?

An incredible warm and welcoming message from our first encounters with the people of the Vatican, assuring us of their openness to hear, see, and understand our concerns and challenges. We have been exposed to a number of presentations documenting the incredible journey of deaf people in so many aspects of life. The journey of deaf people seen medically as broken, limited, to a new identity as people who can make their own decisions about their health needs. The journey of deaf people seen, at one time, as incapable of learning to this day when deaf people with doctorates can help us understand the depths of a consciousness both similar and unique to that of hearing people. The journey of deaf people whose language was once considered incoherent arm-waving to a recognition of a language able to express beauty, humor, and inspiration in surprising ways. The journey of deaf people once, and even up to these days, denied the right to marry or have children who now model effective, Christian parenting to the modern world. The journey of deaf people once considered incapable of understanding the Faith and therefore not able to participate in the sacramental life of the Church, now living out ministerial, pastoral, and priestly roles in the Body of Christ.

Through all of this, there has been laughter, encouragement, frank discussion, and shared prayer in an atmosphere of open dialogue, the discovery of common bonds even as we struggle to understand each other's communications, and a lively spirit of mutual respect. EPHPHATA indeed!

None of this makes the serious and troubling issues we still confront invisible. 80% of our deaf brothers and sisters have almost no access to justice under the law, appropriate education, honest employment, and, in many cases, safety, food, shelter, and medical care. In many countries, even so called developed countries, many dioceses fail to provide even for the minimum spiritual and pastoral needs of deaf Catholics, and fail to evangelize those deaf who hunger for knowing the Lord Jesus Christ. The long list of needs reported during these days are well recorded and demand a response from our Church. No one leaving here to continue this journey can believe

that our few days together will tear down the barriers that continue to divide deaf people from the larger hearing world.

Yet, our hearts have truly been opened to a new reality by everything from the smiles of the Vatican workers, the blessed weather, good food, and Gelato of Rome, to the amazing witness of our Holy Father to his concern, and the Church's concern for our issues, our struggles, our dreams. The journey continues. We know we are not alone. We have been blessed by our being together, and the promise of our continued contact with each other and prayers for each other, are sustenance for the journey. As we learned so well yesterday, "The Body of Christ presumes a place for everyone. The Gospel demands a place for everyone." To that end, let us continue this marvelous journey with hugs, smiles and hearts open to the joy promised by God's Holy Spirit.

Fr. Joseph Mulcrone