

Ephphatha! The Deaf Person, Herald and Witness of the Gospel Proclamation

Adult Faith Formation within the context of Deaf Ministry.

Introduction

I would like to begin my talk today by thanking Archbishop Zimowski for his invitation to be part of this conference. I am honoured by the invitation and happy to accept the opportunity to share some of my experience and thoughts with this group this afternoon on the topic of Adult Faith Formation within the context of Deaf Ministry.

I am a priest of the Archdiocese of Dublin and was ordained twenty three years ago this month. Most of my priestly ministry over these years has been in chaplaincy ministry in schools and university and I have also worked in a parish in the suburbs of Dublin. I have been involved with the Deaf community for nearly three years.

I was appointed by the Archbishop of Dublin Dr. Diarmuid Martin as director of the Chaplaincy for Deaf People (NCPD) in Ireland in 2007 and I am based in Dublin. There are four members in our Chaplaincy team. There is one priest and three lay pastoral workers. One of whom is based in the North of Ireland and one in the South. The Chaplaincy is supported financially by the Archdiocese of Dublin, the National Conference of Bishops, the Catholic Institute for Deaf People and by members of the Deaf Community.

I often remember the advice Archbishop Martin gave me when he appointed me to work with the Deaf Community. He told me to learn the language and to become familiar with the distinct culture of the Deaf by immersing myself in it. It is vital, in order to minister effectively within a culture that is not your own that you take the time to attain a fluency in its language and to understand and appreciate its culture. I took his advice very seriously because I knew he was speaking from his own experience.

So I now understood what I was being asked to do; learn the language and immerse myself in the culture in order to minister to and be a herald and witness to the Gospel proclamation among the Deaf Community (in the hope that they in their turn would become herald and witnesses to the Gospel of Jesus Christ).

I began my appointment in August of 2007. It felt, at first, that I had been thrown in the deep end of the swimming pool without knowing how to swim and I had to learn very quickly. My first priority was to learn how to celebrate Mass using sign language. I started doing this with the help of a Deaf Man, Hugh Buckley, a man who was very kind and also very patient. I learned much more than just vocabulary. With Hugh's help I came to understand the history, meaning, significance and symbolism of the religious signs I would need.

I also came to appreciate the deep faith and love of this man and of the many years of service and involvement he had had in the life of the Deaf community, of which he was very much a part. Among his many achievements as a deaf husband and father, he had completed a diploma in Adult Education to help him become a teacher of Sign Language. He and other members of the Deaf

Community were among the first Irish members of the Catholic Deaf Association. He had been actively involved in the founding of the Irish deaf Society and had campaigned for the social inclusion of Deaf People, the legal recognition of Irish Sign language and the provision of equal access to Education and Social Services. Most importantly he was a true herald and witness to the Gospel and a great example to others in his community.

Much of the vocabulary I learned from Hugh to enable me to celebrate the sacraments would be classed by some people as Sign Support English, or Signed Exact English. This was because many of the texts used for the Rites of the Church are known as 'frozen texts' and do not change. Although Hugh himself would contest that much of this vocabulary has been assimilated into the lexicon of ISL (Irish Sign language) and should be accepted as such.

I also had the very good fortune to be accepted into the Centre for Deaf Studies in Trinity College Dublin as a full time student for two and a half years. Many of the lecturers and tutors were deaf and many were actively involved in the campaign to have Irish Sign language recognised as one of the indigenous languages of Ireland.

I have been told that it takes over 10,000 teaching hours or at least 6 years immersion in appropriate cultural context to become fluent in a second language.

Every member of the Chaplaincy Team has a very high standard of signing and two of the team are accredited interpreters.

It was while I was studying in the Centre for Deaf Studies that I came to appreciate the importance and effectiveness of learning a language within its cultural context. Here I not only learned Sign Language but began to appreciate its richness of expression, its history and linguistic structure. I also learned the fascinating history of the Deaf Community both in Ireland and internationally.

I became aware of the struggle of the Deaf Community for acceptance and access to full participation in general society. I recognised the importance of the campaign for language recognition and the other initiatives that began many years ago and are continuing to the present day for full social inclusion supported by legislation, adequate support and services.

Perspective Deaf Culture

As an outsider, someone coming into a community to minister or work with a community that is not one's own, how does one get to know this community and come to a deep and meaningful appreciation of its culture? How can one evangelise and empower and encourage members of that community to do the same?

One must learn and appreciate the distinct history of the community, understand its values, come to see what is important to that community and how its culture finds expression. One must join with this community as it lives learns, plays and as it worships and prays.

Deaf culture has been communicated and transmitted effectively within the community itself, but it has not always been as successful in communicating its values and the richness of its culture to the wider community.

I have come to appreciate how important it is for so many members of the Deaf Community to participate in sports, drama, storytelling and social gathering. This is also true of the daily weekly liturgies and particular Deaf Liturgies. With the rapid development of communication technology, such as text messaging, social network sites such as 'Facebook', many deaf people are in daily communication with friends and family and have easier access to the wider international Deaf Community. These new modes of communication offer tremendous opportunities to the Chaplaincy service to reach out in a new and innovative ways to the Deaf Community.

The Chaplaincy team recently translated, distributed and posted onto our Website an ISL translation of the Pastoral Letter written by the Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI to the Catholics of Ireland.

In most societies, cultural norms and values and faith are transmitted vertically. That is from one generation to the next. In families it is passed down from grandparents to parents to children. To some extent this is also true within the Deaf Community. However it is important to understand how, within the Deaf Community, cultural norms and values are transmitted horizontally. They are from one member of the community to another to a great extent than in general society.

Many members of the Deaf Community are the children of hearing parents. Historically much of their education took place in boarding schools or special schools for the Deaf. It was important for our team to realise this and to recognise the strong bonds of friendship and identity which exist within this community. The level of communication within the community is potentially more profound, of a deeper and freer level than that communicated through a second language or from someone coming from outside the community. To ensure access to authentic expression of faith and the development of faith formation, it is vitally important for the Chaplaincy team to understand this. This indeed must be our starting point.

To initiate an engagement with the faith and the gospels, any efforts at Adult Faith Formation must of its very nature take into account the particular structure of the Deaf community, the importance of its language and the unique interaction among its members to ensure meaningful access to the truths of the faith and the proclamation of the Gospel.

It follows then, that for faith formation to be truly effective, members of the Deaf Community must not only be involved but must become leaders in partnership with the chaplaincy team and supported by the resources of the chaplaincy service.

Faith Formation Initiatives

I would now like to share with you some of the projects the Chaplaincy Team has been involved in. I am sure that some of the projects will be familiar to you from your own circumstances and perhaps some may be new to you. I will begin with our involvement in the preparation of our young deaf

children for the sacraments of First Holy Communion and Confirmation. At present in Ireland practically all the schools attended by deaf children are catholic schools. The chaplaincy team are involved on a regular basis in the children's sacramental preparation and in the supporting of the teachers and parents of the children. There are regular Masses and prayer services, retreats and confessions during the school year. We also encourage parents (Deaf and Hearing) to participate in our Family Mass which takes place each month. The importance of co-operating and supporting parents as they try to pass on the faith to their children is something we take very seriously.

Where marriage preparation courses are concerned the chaplaincy team work with the Diocesan Marriage and Family Support Agency (Accord) which provides training for couples and clergy who conduct the marriage preparation courses.

We run our courses, in co-operation with Accord, for Deaf couples and members of the Deaf community are very involved in the delivery of these courses.

I have heard it said that a faith Community that is not familiar with the Scriptures will not be a community mature in its faith. The Deaf Community in England Scotland, Wales and Ireland are blessed to have their own approved Lectionary and Missal for the Celebration of Sunday Mass. Members of the Catholic Deaf Association were responsible for this achievement and it has proven to be a wonderful resource.

There is at present no approved Weekday Lectionary for Deaf Liturgies and this is also a long term project that members of the chaplaincy team begun researching and compiling for future approval.

I know that there are many Deaf communities throughout the world actively engaged in the translation of the Scriptures, the Word of God, into their own national sign languages with the help of scripture scholars and translators. This is a long, difficult but worthwhile project with Deaf and Hearing people working together to bring it about.

There is also a commitment to regular Scripture study groups where scripture scholars and professional interpreters give their expertise and time to facilitate the community having access to the study of the Word of God.

We are also working in co-operation with members of other churches on an approved series of Faith programmes, the Alpha Programme. These programmes have been recorded and we are in the process of providing Signed translations which will be available on DVD and which can be used to accompany the discussion groups.

To ensure the highest standard of understanding and competence in religious sign among interpreters, the chaplaincy team have produced a DVD with all the Sacraments signed as well as a dictionary of religious signs. This DVD comes with the English text for each sacrament included in booklet form.

We have recently conducted a successful workshop on Religious Signing for interpreters, trainee interpreters, ISL teachers and lecturers. This was done so as to teach, improve and support the development of a high level of competency and confidence among interpreters in religious signing.

We hope that this group would see the chaplaincy service as a resource to which they can come for assistance and support and we look forward to developing other projects to co-operate on.

Members of the chaplaincy team are also members of the other international groups including the **ICF** (International Catholic Foundation) and the **CDA** (Catholic Deaf Association).

Membership of these groups has been very enriching and rewarding in the sharing and development of ideas and resources. These groups have Deaf and Hearing members and are committed to support and promote the religious formation and pastoral care of, with and by deaf People within the Catholic Community.

The international Catholic Foundation offers support to chaplains, pastoral Workers and Catechists and seeks ways to bring the riches of their vocation with others in the Church and society so as to achieve a fuller expression of Eucharistic communion.

Conclusion

On his recent Papal visit to Portugal to visit the Shrine of Our Lady of Fatima, His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI said, "Often we are anxiously preoccupied with the social, cultural and political consequences of the faith, taking for granted that faith is present, which unfortunately is less and less realistic.

Perhaps we have placed an excessive trust in ecclesial structures and programmes, in the distribution of powers and functions; what will happen if salt loses its flavour? ... In order for this not to happen, it is necessary to proclaim anew with vigour and joy the events of the death and resurrection of Christ...."

I would like to finish my intervention by telling you about one of the most exciting projects the NCPD has been involved in. It is a community development project taking place in Dublin. The Catholic Institute for Deaf people have led this project and there has been an unprecedented level of discussion, consolation and co-operation between a large number of Deaf organisation, societies and service providers.

The project entails the building of a Deaf Campus or Village. Based upon the current timescales it is anticipated that work could commence on the development of the new Community Village by end 2010 with a likely completion date of 2015.

The proposal envisages the Village being completed in three phases with Phase one delivering the Administration, Sports, Social, Religious, Heritage and Centre for Deaf Education facilities.

While being aware of the many challenges involved, this project offers wonderful opportunities for co-operation and to fully engage with faith and culture in a way that has not happened before in the Deaf Community in Ireland.

Fr. Gerard Tyrrell
25th May 2010

