

Catholic Ministries Serving Deaf Parishioners

Kristine M. Meurer, Ph.D.

“It is rare for deaf people who sign American Sign Language [ASL] to receive direct communication from a priest at all. Many go their entire lives without being able to participate in [catholic] Mass or understand prayers, readings, or the homily.” (Portolano, L., *Gallaudet University's New Deaf Priest a Sign of Renewal*. U.S. *Catholic Faith in Real Life*.)ⁱ According to the International Catholic Deaf Association – U.S. Section, June 2019ⁱⁱ, there are only 34 Deaf priests in the world, 10 of which are in the United State. Currently there is no registry for Deaf deacons or hearing priest or deacons who sign. It is speculated that Father Don Pedro Ponce de Leon, in the 16th Century was the first Deaf Priest. He was known for teaching Deaf to speak, but he utilized sign language extensively as his first language. Father Thomas Coughlin was the first Deaf priest in the United Statesⁱⁱⁱ. Father Coughlin helped many Deaf men become priests. One priest, Father Min Se Park, connected with Father Coughlin. Father Coughlin pointed Father Park to Gallaudet. After he graduated in 1999 from Gallaudet, Father Coughlin encouraged Park to study theology in New York. Park struggled, at first, in seminary because he had to read each lecture. Later he was provided an ASL interpreter which made it easier. Park finished his Master of Divinity degree and returning to is home Seoul, Korea. He was ordained to the priesthood in 2007 by the Archdiocese of Seoul^{iv}.

The mission of the National Catholic Office for the Deaf (NCOD) is to *Spread God's message through the support of the deaf and hard of hearing pastoral ministry so that we may all be one in Christ*^v. There are multiple ways NCOD carries out this mission, one way is to provide an annual pastoral conference. On January 26 to January 29, 2023, NCOD held their annual conference in Santa Fe, New Mexico. During this conference I was able to interview five (5)

men who provide ministry for Deaf parishioners across the country. One was a Deaf Priest, Father Shawn Carey (Father Shawn)^{vi}, three were hearing priest who know and utilize ASL, Reverend Thomas Dustin (Rev Thom)^{vii}, Father Joseph McLagan (Father Joe)^{viii}, and Father Adam Zawadzki (Father Adam)^{ix}; and one Deaf Deacon, Deacon Patrick Graybill (Deacon Pat)^x. During my interviews with these men, I asked three primary questions. 1) How did you know you wanted to become a priest/deacon? What is your calling story? 2) What is a struggle you have had, especially working in Deaf ministry? and 3) What is a success story? Although each man's answer to the question were unique, there were similarities among them. I found three areas of similarities when asked the interviewees about their 'calling' to Priesthood or Diaconate.

The first similarity was that all five men indicated that the 'calling' is a journey. For Deacon Pat the beginning of his journey was during an 8-day retreat with Father Ray Monty in Canada. Deacon Pat originally went to the retreat to see a Deaf priest sign a homily. He got more than he had planned. At the retreat Father Ray's assigned Deacon Pat to focus on a bible verse for 24 hours. Deacon Pat thought that assignment was "crazy". But he kept at it and by the fourth day of the retreat Deacon Pat said, "I felt carefree, I felt 4 years old. Like a baby again. So carefree. I was like wow!" He didn't want to go home. On the last day of the retreat, Father Ray asked him if he had thought about become a deacon. "Father told me that the old deaconate program is going to start up again. 'There is less priest in the church. You are a skilled teacher, skilled actor, work 10-20 hours a week, you should become a liaison sharing with the Deaf community in the catholic church.' I said OK..."

The second theme I heard was that someone in each of these men's life encouraged them to become a priest/deacon. In the cases of the Deaf Priest/Deacon it was a Deaf person. For Father Shawn one person who helped him understand his 'calling' was a Deaf woman named

Mary. Mary sat in the front row during Mass, and she would always tell Shawn, “You need to become a priest” ... Father Shawn explained, “and on her death bed she [Mary] looks up at me and said, ‘Shawn you will be a good priest.’ And then she died. I was like, O My God, wait what?!? OK— alright God you win!”

Rev. Thom first felt his calling in sixth grade, but it was not until he went to college and was asked to teach religious education that he began to think, again, about becoming a priest. He went to the chapel at college and two different priests gave homilies about how they became a priest, and both said: “you know if you are thinking about that [becoming a priest] you can come talk to me.” Fr. Thom made an appointment and later applied to the diocese and to seminarian. He was accepted to both.

The third theme was that each knew God wanted them to become priest/deacon.

Each man had their own plans, but God had a different plan for them. For example, Father Joe was sure he was going to go to college to become a teacher, meet the right woman, get married and have a family. For Father Adam, he thought he felt a calling since high school and people in his life encourage him to become a priest. However, he felt he was not disciplined enough until he went to a two-year program at the Indiana School for the Deaf to become an interpreter. “It was when I was in that program that I started thinking about priesthood. I was being called to more than just an interpreter. I thought God would not call me to priesthood without using what I had learned over the last 2 years. So, I thought I need to look for something related to Deaf ministry.”

When asked about their struggles, two themes emerged. The first theme was from the Deaf priest and deacon. Both had struggles that caused frustration. Father Shawn, although from Boston, did not go to Seminary there. The Seminary in Boston did not have the supports

for a Deaf seminarian. Instead, he went to a Seminary in California that had supports for the Deaf, interpreters, closed captions, and other resources. However, because he was stationed in Boston, and did not go to the same Seminary with the other priest it was a little difficult. “The priest in the Archdiocese of Boston all went to seminary together so they had that kind of collegiality and I feel I’m a little bit out of the loop.” In addition, he had difficulty because he was the only Deaf priest in the Archdiocese. For Deacon Pat his frustration was when he became a Deacon. “I thought I would save the Deaf world. I was wrong! It took about 30 years then I understood I am not God I am serving God. Jesus is the savior of the world.”

Finding ways to communicate with the Deaf was a theme that came from the hearing priests. Father Joe who is still learning sign language. Indicated that his biggest challenge was getting the trust of the Deaf people he serves. Specifically getting trust in administering the sacrament of confession “I know I can absolve them, and I know they know that because I’m a priest I can absolve them, but they may take years [to trust me].” Father Adam was hit with a big communication problem when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. “The challenge was how to do ministry in a pandemic world?” He was able to overcome this challenge through livestreaming Mass that was interpreted by him. For Father Thom a long-term struggle for him was becoming more fluent in ASL and limited in his being able to provide an ASL Mass. “The younger deaf in my area prefer ASL.” With four different ministries, “there was never a [good] time I could provide an ASL Mass.”

The third question was about successes. The priest I interviewed all work with both hearing and Deaf members in their congregations. A shared success is working as a team with another priest or deacon. Father Shawn works with a hearing priest to serve their community. “I’m assigned with Fr. Jeremy St. Martian. He’s there as well he’s a hearing Priest and co-

administrator of the parish. And he's the former director of the Deaf apostolate. So, it's a team ministry model. It's been going really well so far. And from the perspective of the presbyterate [the primary minister] in Boston it seems like we are doing good work." Farther Joe works with a fellow deacon to serve his church community. "The successes are for myself and my fellow deacon, part of his apostolate is the care of the community. He and I work well together."

Father Thom was inspired by a Deaf woman to learn ASL. This same woman is now reaching out to set up an Alpha Course (space where people come to discuss life's big questions) with Father Thom. Deacon Pat connects through retreats and conferences. "For about 20-25 years I was able to do retreats."

For Father Adam a success he shared was his ability to turn a pandemic, that left people in isolation, into live video streaming that was inclusive of his community, Deaf and hearing alike. "[during the pandemic] we went from 20-30 on a weekend down to 2 people. Video was a game changer."

Deaf people are left out of many things, the Catholic church is not an exception. It is organizations like NCOD that help to grow the supports for the Deaf in the Catholic church. However, it is critical that we do not lose sight of the fact that although some feel the 'calling' to minister to the Deaf, most do not answer the call unless another person steps in to gently nudge (or in some cases push hard) so the person takes that leap to become a minister to Deaf Catholics. According to Farther Joe "The success is the desire of all the clergy who are willing to and wanting to communicate in ASL."

References

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- ^{vi} Father Shawn Carey, Director of the Boston Deaf Apostolate, Archdioceses of Boston; Church Administrator, St. Jude Parish, Waltham, MA; Parochial Vicar, St. Francis of Assisi Parish and St. Clare Parish, Braintree, MA. Ordained May 23, 2009. Interview by Kristine Meurer January 27, 2023.
- ^{vii} Reverend Thomas Dustin, Pastor, ST. Mary Parish and St. Peter Parish, Rochester, NH. Ordained 1992. Interview by Kristine Meurer January 28, 2023.

^{viii} Father Joseph McLagan, Pastor, St. Joseph Parish, Lakewood Colorado, Ordained May 16, 2015. Interview by Kristine Meurer January 27, 2023.

^{ix} Father Adam Zawadzki, Parochial Vicar, Our Saviour Parish, Jacksonville, IL, Ordained May 26, 2018. Interview by Kristine Meurer January 27, 2023

^x Deacon Patrick Graybill, Retired, Emmanuel Church of the Deaf, Rochester, NY. Ordained April 17, 1982. Interview by Kristine Meurer January 28, 2023