

# Praying as One with the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing: From Accommodation to Inculturation

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## A CULTURALLY DEAF LITURGY

It was the morning of Easter Sunday at St. Mark's Deaf Catholic Church.<sup>1</sup> Parishioners streamed through its doors, occasionally stopping to wave at friends as they settled into their pew of choice. By hearing standards, the chapel was quiet—I heard intermittent whispers, a thud from a falling kneeler, and some shuffling feet. But this was a deaf church, and by deaf standards, this chapel was bustling with activity. Animated hands and faces abounded in lively conversation, often across pews. The deacon and an altar server, dressed in albs, were repositioning the chairs in the sanctuary to face the altar. A burly middle-aged man carried a bass drum from the sacristy to the front of the sanctuary while a woman directed him to move it slightly, so as not to obscure the view of the altar. A young woman approached the back wall of a side chapel and straightened a hand-drawn painting of St. Francis de Sales and his friend, Martin, a deaf man whom St. Francis had taught the faith. The chapel was filling up quickly, so more folding chairs were brought in to accommodate the larger-than-usual crowd. Then at ten o'clock sharp, the lights above the sanctuary brightened, indicating to the congregation that Mass was about to begin.

The entrance procession was led by two lanky teenage boys, a thurifer who was clearly having a great deal of fun with the thurible, and a crucifer whose face displayed slight apprehension as the thurible swung too close for comfort. They were followed by an entourage of five women dressed in blue choir robes, a lector, a deacon, and the priest.

"In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," signed the priest as he began the introductory rites. He then crossed himself as the congregation followed suit. With a big smile on his face, he signed a modified form of *Lord* in American Sign Language (ASL), one that moved the *L*-shaped hand from the left shoulder diagonally upward (toward heaven) rather than downward to the hip (as if one were tracing the shape of a diagonal sash). Gathering together the tips of his fingers on both hands, he drew his hands close to



The art at St. Francis of Assisi Deaf Catholic Church, Landover Hills, Maryland, draws on deaf culture. This stained glass window portrays Abbé L'Épée and twin girls who taught him to sign. The three are making the sign for *faith*.

his chest. And in one swift motion, he flung his fingers open and arms outward, as if tossing confetti into the nave. On cue, a voice interpreter seated in the front row chimed in, "The Lord be with you. And with your spirit," completing the people's response a second ahead of the people's signs. A few voices responded softly, trailing milliseconds behind the interpreter.

Soon after, a man positioned himself by the bass drum while the choir ascended the steps of the sanctuary. The drummer rested his left hand at the top of the drum to hold it steady, then picked up the mallet with his right. When everyone was in place, he cued the Gloria as he beat the drum with pounding passion. His face was beaming. Vibrations could be felt throughout the nave. The drum (and drummer) had been resting during Lent; today, they were resurrected to announce Christ's resurrection. The faces of the congregation lit up with delight.

## WHAT IS DEAF CULTURE?

Much of United States' society understands deafness solely as the lack of hearing ability. Seen in relation to the majority's hearing experience, assumed to be the ideal norm, this view is sometimes referred to as the medical model of disability. This model suggests that deafness is a personal tragedy that ought to be rectified by medical intervention or rehabilitation. It is the responsibility of deaf people to acquire hearing aids or cochlear implants, undergo speech therapy, and train themselves to lip read. The result is that deaf people must pass as hearing people to be part of society.

The sociocultural model of disability provides an alternative view that enables an equalizing and pluralizing way to view deafness by situating it as a disability caused by society. The way that social norms are constructed—not the inability to hear—is what causes suffering and exclusion from daily life for deaf people. These norms include negative attitudes toward ASL—the false notion that sign languages are incapable of full communication, and the insistence on speech as the ideal mode of communication. These biases create social barriers to education, jobs, and access to wider society for many deaf people.

When seen as a sociocultural phenomenon, deafness becomes part of human variation, not deviation. It is then that deaf culture—a set of values, language, history, art, and architecture stemming from the experience of deafness—is celebrated and cherished, and is a contribution to the world at large. In this view, deaf culture is equal to other cultures, and the deaf community is akin to other ethnic groups. Whereas the medical model reduces a person to their disability diagnosis, the sociocultural model urges a more expansive view of the human person and God's creative intent.

The ethnographic introduction of this article, which is based on observations of several deaf Catholic congregations, exemplifies the adoption of the sociocultural model of disability in its approach to deafness in liturgical ministry. At St. Mark's,

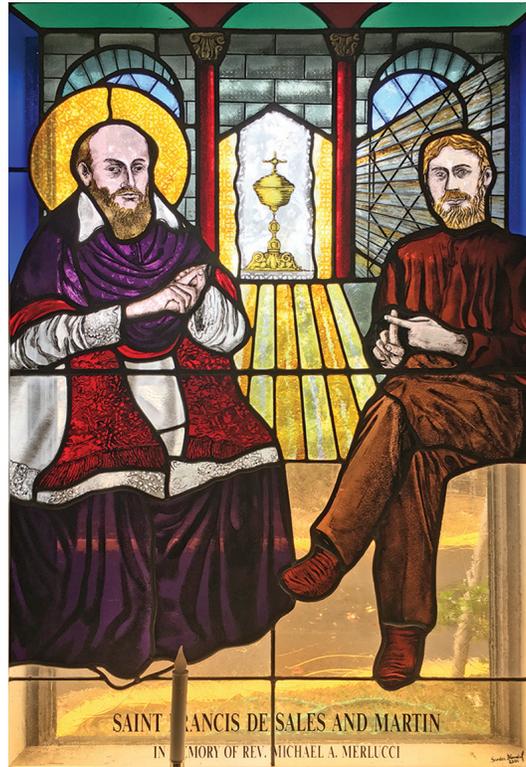
the liturgy is flavored with elements of deaf culture. Mass is celebrated in ASL. All liturgical ministers are deaf. The liturgical space maximizes visibility from all angles—it is completely open with no structural columns that can block a person's view; the sanctuary is raised and brightly lit; pews and liturgical furniture are positioned to face the altar. The walls are dressed in art that express the community's deaf Catholic heritage and language.

The liturgical musicians do not sing; rather, they sign the psalms with a rhythm that accents the meaning of the words

much like Gregorian chant does as a form of sung speech. The bass drum, located in the front of the church, is as much a visual spectacle and tactile instrument as it is a producer of sound. Often, the drum is used to express festivity and celebration during the *alleluia*. At other times, it is used to mark a degree of solemnity at specific moments of the Mass. For instance, a low drumroll may accompany the descending hands of the priest during the epiclesis. At the institution narrative, a drum roll may also accompany the showing of the bread and wine, mimicking the ringing of bells that are traditionally used at hearing churches. While everyone may not hear a drumbeat, even those who are profoundly deaf can be moved by its vibrations and the intentions communicated by the drummer's hand movements and facial expression.

The deaf Catholic community is a close-knit one. During the sign of peace, it is customary to take the time to exchange the sign of peace by waving "I LOVE YOU" to everyone. After Mass, parishioners linger to mingle and chat with one another over coffee or a meal. Goodbyes are long—another trait of deaf culture.

The prioritization of deaf culture does not mean that all who worship at St. Mark's are deaf. There are hearing children of deaf parents, hearing parents of deaf children, other hearing people who are non-verbal, hearing signers, and even non-signers who are members of this church. For those who do not know ASL, a voice interpreter who interprets from ASL to spoken English is available to accommodate them. However, prioritizing deaf culture is a way that the parish recognizes that deaf people live in a predominantly hearing world and need a space where they can express and be formed in the faith on their terms and through their culture. Just as a community of Chinese immigrants may desire to celebrate the liturgy in Mandarin or use musical instruments and art inspired by Chinese culture, deaf people treasure the opportunity to employ culturally deaf elements in their liturgical celebration as a form of liturgical inculturation.



A stained glass window portrays St. Francis de Sales and a deaf man signing *friend* in American Sign Language.

Photo by Audrey Saah / Stained glass window design by Sander Blondeel



St. Francis of Assisi signs *Jesus* in American Sign Language.

Photo by Audrey Seah / Stained glass window design by Sander Blondeel

## LITURGICAL INCULTURATION IN THE DEAF COMMUNITY

*Inculturation* is a theological neologism first introduced by Roman Catholic missionaries in the early 1960s and popularized shortly after the Second Vatican Council. The term is defined as the process by which the power of the Gospel is brought into the very heart of cultures. The way that this process takes place is summed up in Pope John Paul II’s April 26, 1979, address to the Pontifical Biblical Commission in which the word *inculturation* appeared in a papal speech for the first time. On October 16, 1979, Pope John Paul II used the term again in his apostolic exhortation *Catechesi tradendae*, in which he encouraged catechists and missionaries to learn a culture’s “most significant expressions” and “respect their particular values and riches” in order “to offer these cultures the knowledge of the hidden mystery and help them to bring forth from their own living tradition original expressions of Christian life, celebration and thought” (53). The assumption is that cultural elements are important traditions that can aid Christians to come to a better understanding of the faith as Christianity is always incarnated

in the flesh. However, the goal of inculturation is not to allow Christianity to find expression through cultural elements. Rather, as Pedro Arrupe, SJ, articulates in his 1978 letter to the Society of Jesus, “On Inculturation to the Whole Society,” that cultural expressions are only a means by which inculturation’s ultimate goal is attained—for the Christian message to become a “principle that animates, directs and unifies the culture, transforming it and remaking it so as to bring about a ‘new creation.’” The *telos* of inculturation is therefore reconciliatory and eschatological.

At churches like St. Mark’s, practices of liturgical inculturation indigenizes the liturgy, allowing its members to enter the Christian mystery through their cultural heritage. At the same time, these practices transform the sacramental world of the congregation into one where deafness need not be eliminated, where hearing is not the norm or ideal (especially when there’s a loud bass drum), and where ASL is used by both deaf and hearing as a sacred language. Animated by deaf culture, deaf and hearing differences are reconciled and transformed while the congregation’s imagination of the kingdom of God, already and not yet, is expanded.

## FROM ACCOMMODATION TO INCULTURATION

Accommodation is often the approach taken in efforts to include people with disabilities in liturgical celebrations. The hope is that accommodations will lead to belonging as access to liturgical participation increases. Accommodations act as a bridge between the disabled and nondisabled, by allowing disabled people access to the liturgy. While well-intentioned, this is rarely the case. Two assumptions ground the accommodations approach: first, that the able-bodied way of celebrating liturgies is the universal ideal norm; second, that disabilities are fundamentally about a lack or loss of ability, emphasizing the medical model of disability.

An accommodation approach toward inclusion for deaf and hard-of-hearing people views deafness fundamentally as a form of hearing loss. Efforts to include them, therefore, aim to provide access to the *hearing experience* of the liturgy. Accommodation appeals the most to late-deafened individuals who desire to partake in the hearing experience that they lost. Installing hearing loops in a church that work with those who use hearing aids are one of the best ways to support these parishioners in accessing the liturgy. Providing missals and written access to other spoken texts is another way to support them.

Deaf and hard-of-hearing people who primarily communicate with ASL often note that they did not “lose” their hearing. This does not mean that they do not appreciate being accommodated at a Mass that uses a spoken language, but that the hearing church must realize that providing access to the hearing experience of the liturgy is only the bare minimum, as it does not fully meet the spiritual and social needs and desires of the deaf. When the accommodation approach is the only possible option, it must nevertheless be done with care. The preface of the 2017 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ (USCCB) document *Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities*, revised edition, which employs the

accommodation approach, rightfully directs attention to the lack of provision of sign-language interpreters and captioning for those who are deaf as a means of accessing the liturgy. However, recommending the provision of an ASL interpreter alone belies the complexity involved in interpreting a hearing liturgy. For a deaf person to access a hearing liturgy in its fullness, ASL interpreters require adequate preparatory materials. These include the lyrics of hymns, English translations of non-English texts, texts of readings and prayers, a transcript of the homily, and texts of the announcements. Interpreters are trained to interpret what they hear. However, research has shown that a large percentage of information can be lost through interpretation. Providing written texts as a handy reference helps interpreters mitigate the loss of information. Priests or pastoral ministers should also check in with the interpreter and offer to clarify meaning of texts, such as biblical metaphors, before the liturgy—this is particularly helpful to interpreters who are new to theological interpreting. Lastly, it is necessary to consider where an interpreter is placed. The interpreter should always be situated in view of the altar so both the interpreter and the liturgical actions at the altar are fully visible to the deaf. Since backlighting and glare can obscure vision, avoid placing interpreters in front of windows.

Having acknowledged the limitations of an accommodation approach, I propose that an inculturation approach can be used at hearing churches that host interpreters for deaf Catholics. The result would benefit both deaf and hearing people since inculturation generates a new creation for all, enabling a fullness of communion in ways that recognize and share the experiences and cultures of both communities. Here are five ways this could be done:

The first is to foster the use of ASL among the hearing community the same way two languages are used at parishes with Spanish and English speakers. For example, the congregation may sign simple parts of the Mass such as the “Lord have mercy,” “Alleluia,” and the Lamb of God. This works best if the priest, cantor, and choir lead by example. Encouraging all to use ASL during the sign of peace is also a sure way to foster a stronger sense of communion among all who are present.

Second, invite a deaf lector to proclaim the readings in ASL beside the hearing lector or have them take turns so that at least one reading at Mass is proclaimed in ASL and voice interpreted into English. In parishes where this is practiced, a shorter lectern is usually placed beside the regular ambo used by the hearing lector. Since ASL is a language that uses bodily movements, an ambo that has a lower height ensures that the lector’s signs are fully visible. For parishes that wish to adopt this prac-

tice quickly, an easy and temporary solution could be to place a music stand beside an ambo.

This approach emphasizes the status of ASL as a sacred language, equal to any other spoken language, and establishes the parish as a multilingual one. This practice benefits both the deaf and hearing community. Hearing people who are visually oriented often comment on how a simultaneously voiced and signed reading enhances their attention and comprehension of the text, adding dimensions to it that escaped them before. For the deaf community, being able to proclaim the Word of God and seeing the readings directly proclaimed from the ambo allows for more direct and active participation. The opportunity for deaf people to be lectors also allows them to fulfill a baptismal call that they are usually deprived of under an accommodation model.

Third, select music with sensitivity to the experiences of deaf people and nature of ASL. For instance, a melismatic “alleluia” may emote festivity and delight to a hearing audience but generally feel tiresome for deaf people. This is because prolonged hand movements are unnatural in ASL. Using an accommodation approach, interpreters typically adapt by repeating the sign numerous times, sometimes shifting the sign from left to right to visually communicate the piece’s musical qualities. While deaf people appreciate the attempt to include them in the musical experience, this prolonged visualization of the alleluia does not move hearts the way music does for hearing people. Likewise, long instrumental introductions cannot be interpreted into ASL, but only described—an interpreter would make the sign for “music” or the name of the instrument that is being played, and perhaps indicate the mood of the music. While the rest of the music plays, there is nothing more for the interpreter to describe, introducing a disconnect from the hearing experience. When instrumental music is played, deaf people often allow their eyes

and mind to wander as they wait for an indication from the interpreter that it has ended. For this reason, long instrumental introductions and extended codas, especially without accompanying ritual actions, inevitably interrupt the flow of the liturgy for the deaf. Prioritizing the selection of musical pieces that work with ASL without compromising the hearing experience is therefore the more culturally inclusive approach. In general, short introductions and simple cadences with no repeated texts and prolonged syllables are preferred.

Fourth, make space for temporary and permanent expressions of deaf Catholic heritage in the liturgy. These show that deaf Catholics belong. Options could include sacred art in the nave, worship aid, or bulletin, all of which deaf Catholic parishioners can contribute to. Artwork may feature saints who are part of deaf



The banner at St. John’s Deaf Center, Detroit, Michigan, depicts the signs for common words in a Christian’s vocabulary.

Photo by Audrey Seah



Photo by Audrey Seah

The cross at the home of a deaf Catholic parishioner portrays the sign for "I love you."

Catholic heritage, such as the deaf Jesuit North American martyr, St. René Goupil, or be inspired by ASL. A pew card with images of ASL signs to teach non-signers how to sign select parts of the Mass ordinary, such as those suggested earlier, could also be a way to mark the presence of the parish's deaf community.

Fifth, celebrate *Ephphatha* Sunday, traditionally known in the deaf Catholic community as the Sunday during which the Gospel of the day is from Mark 7:31–39. As the only passage in which Jesus encounters a deaf person, this text holds a special place in the heart of deaf Catholics. Preaching on this day must be done with sensitivity to deaf culture. Deaf people find profound meaning in Jesus' one-on-one visual and tactile interaction with the deaf man, a detail that hearing homilists often overlook. For many hearing Christians, the ability to hear and speak is the miracle of the passage; for deaf Christians who are so often excluded from society, the miracle is found in the deaf man's restoration to community. To understand the fullness of this passage from a deaf perspective, preachers should seek out deaf Christian interpretations when preparing the homily.

With all that has been discussed, it is necessary to recall the slogan of the disability rights movement: "Nothing about us without us." It is important to remember that liturgical inculturation can only be done well when it is done by those who know and are a part of deaf culture. What is offered here are mere suggestions; local desires and expressions must always take precedence. The slogan is also a reminder that in hearing-major-

ity spaces, liturgical inculturation of a deaf minority culture must always begin with personal relationships. It is from these relationships that an invitation to create a transformative space of belonging for all can emerge. Belonging to a parish requires an opening of spaces for deaf people to participate, share gifts, and serve in all the same ways that hearing people are called—serving as altar servers or within other liturgical ministries, partaking in adult faith formation programs, serving social justice ministries, on parish councils, and in other ways. It is only then that a parish can truly be a home.

## BREAKING THE BARRIERS

**Communicate on deaf terms.** Communication is the barrier that most hearing people face when interacting with a deaf person who uses ASL. Instead of expecting a deaf person to lipread perfectly, write messages on paper or type them out on a phone to give to the deaf person to read. Written communication is used by deaf people daily to navigate the hearing world and minimize misunderstandings.

**Learn about deaf culture and deaf Catholics.** *Be Opened! The Catholic Church and Deaf Culture*, by Lana Portolano, PhD, details the rich history of the global deaf Catholic community.

**Connect with deaf Catholics, including deaf priests.** The National Catholic Office for the Deaf hosts an annual pastoral conference and provides resources for supporting deaf and hard-of-hearing people in parishes. ♦

### Notes

1. This is an ethnographic description from the combined observations of two Deaf Catholic churches originally published in Audrey Seah, "Signs of Hope: Narratives, Eschatology and Liturgical Inculturation in Deaf Catholic Worship," PhD diss. (University of Notre Dame, 2020).

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