

## FAITH IN DEAF CULTURE

MARCEL BROESTERHUIZEN

*[Deaf people often have been outsiders in a hearing Church. The message of the Church has not reached Deaf people because the language, symbols, culture of the traditional Church, and the view of Church people on deafness were remote from the culture and daily life experiences of Deaf people. In several countries, new developments are going on. Deaf people are themselves playing the central role, as full participants of all the gifts inherent to baptismal priesthood. Typically hearing views on deafness are left behind, deafness is discovered as a strength, Deaf lay persons build up the Church; Sign Language becomes a sacral language. In this liberating development Deafhood is a locus theologicus, a source of knowledge about God: it is a matter of enculturation and indigenization of Christian faith in Deaf culture. Faith discovers the positive values, the "seeds of the Word" in Deaf culture and thereby enriches the universal Church.]*

### A SMALL GROUP OF DEAF BELIEVERS

**A** SUNDAY MORNING in a multicultural working-class city in the Netherlands. A Deaf <sup>1</sup> club gathers as they do every first Sunday of the month, for a social event and a celebration of the Eucharist. Until

MARCEL BROESTERHUIZEN studied clinical psychology at the Catholic University of Nijmegen where in 1992 he finished his Ph.D. dissertation on the social-emotional development of Deaf children. He has worked as a psychologist with Deaf people since the beginning of his professional career. Since 2001 he has taught as associate professor in the Faculty of Theology, at the Catholic University of Leuven, where he holds the chair for Pastoral Ministry with the Deaf and Partially Hearing, established jointly by the Catholic University of Leuven and the International Catholic Foundation for the Service of Deaf Persons which supports Deaf pastoral ministry in several countries.

<sup>1</sup> For people not acquainted with the Deaf community the terms "deaf" and "deafness" may seem politically incorrect and potentially offensive. They would prefer the terms "hearing impaired" or "hearing challenged." For modern Deaf people this is just the opposite: they do not see themselves as impaired versions of people with normal hearing, nor as people with a disability or a challenge, but as a minority with its own language and culture. They do not want to define themselves in terms of a thing they lack, but in terms of the positive aspects of their language and culture. For them terms such as hearing impaired or hearing challenged are typical of the disempowering and oppressive language use of hearing society. They define themselves as Deaf, just in the same way as others define themselves as belonging to the Italian, Irish, or Arab community. Peter McDonough, priest, Deaf

recently they had found a priest who was willing to conduct their services, a former missionary who had worked with the Deaf in Kenya. In these celebrations sometimes a Sign Language interpreter was present; sometimes one of the Deaf people translated the texts of the liturgy book into Sign Language. Unfortunately, the priest informed the club some days before the celebration that he would not be able to come anymore. A young Deaf woman, who plays an active role in the club, had tried everything in order to find a priest willing to celebrate Eucharist for the Deaf. The diocese had different priorities, however: immigrant people. Now, they had to go forward without a priest. The young woman had prepared a Service of the Word, with a reading and a sermon. She had chosen a reading from the Gospel of Saint John—"Who do people say that I am?" She improvised a translation of it into Sign Language. In her sermon she stated that many people think they do not need God. They see faith as a set of rules of the Church to which people have to comply, while the Church is so far from their minds. People do not understand the Church; they would prefer to know what are Jesus' rules. But without a priest who will tell the Deaf community about these rules? Perhaps the only solution, she continued, is for us to start thinking about the meaning that faith has for us and about the rules that Jesus teaches us.

After this talk her boyfriend formulated a prayer, in Sign Language, but, unusual for communication in Sign Language, with his eyes closed. After the service some young people sat and talked about how to go on with their group. They decided that in the first place they should look after the formation needed to be able to offer something to other people. Without that formation a time would come when they would have nothing to offer. Then people might drop out or yield to the attraction of sects.

---

son of Deaf parents, who grew up in Deaf culture and as an activist in Deaf liberation, has stated: "I know that hearing people were appalled when I said that deafness . . . is not a big thing, not because we conquered deafness but because we accept it. It is no wonder that we deaf people prefer the term, 'Deaf', with a capital 'D', rather than the term, 'hearing-impaired', which carries negative connotations" (Peter McDonough, "Recalled to Life—through Deafness," in *Eye People Ministering* [Manchester, UK: Henesy House, 1991] 43). For the Deaf sociologist Paddy Ladd, internationally a leading person in the Deaf liberation movement, the use of the word Deaf with a capital "D" is a political instrument in the struggle for re-empowerment and a new self-definition of the Deaf community after a long period of oralism and suppression of Sign Language. The term Deaf is a means for gaining equal recognition and respect for Deaf people as a disempowered group in society (Paddy Ladd, "In Search of Deafhood," paper presented to the Deafhood Conference, London, July 12–14, 2001; Paddy Ladd, *Understanding Deaf Culture: In Search of Deafhood* [Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2003]). For this reason in this article I use the term Deaf for those people who define themselves as belonging to the Deaf community.

During the months following this Sunday the Deaf club organized its own services of the Word. After some months, one of the young Deaf people wrote:

Last Sunday we were in the Deaf service . . . My husband did a prayer and I had prepared a sermon. It was fantastic to do that. The group was very enthusiastic. I kept the sermon very simple. I correlated the Bible story with some situations relevant for Deaf people. They understood very well. I told everything in Sign Language, which was appreciated strongly by the group . . . We discovered that in the past many people had not understood completely the Bible stories. Religious services were different in that time. They told that they did not understand anything in the past. Now, finally they understood and the fact that it had a relationship with the here and now was a real revelation for them.

Would it have been different in a group of hearing people? They were a group of normal people, and as Deaf people among themselves not at all disabled. Like hearing people they had used in a natural way their own language, namely Sign Language. In no time, however, the central issues of Deaf pastoral ministry became clear: (a) Deaf people's outsider position in the "hearing Church"; (b) Deafness: disability or positive way of being different; (c) the role of Deaf lay persons in building up the Church as a community; (d) Sign Language as a religious language; and (e) Deafhood<sup>2</sup> as a context for faith development and theological reflection.

### DEAF PEOPLE'S OUTSIDER POSITION IN THE "HEARING CHURCH"

Depending on the criteria used, one out of a thousand to five thousand people have such a hearing loss from birth or early life on that without early intervention they do not acquire the spoken language of their environment.<sup>3</sup> Even then part of them will not acquire spoken language at a level useful as a means of communication.<sup>4</sup> They run the risk of marginalization in hearing society and of becoming outsiders who can maintain themselves only by forming self-contained communities of Deaf people.<sup>5</sup> Most of them prefer Sign Language for communication.

<sup>2</sup> "Deafhood," a term invented by Paddy Ladd (see n. 1) is the way in which culturally Deaf persons describe and explain their way of being in the world for themselves and others. As such it is the counterpart of a medical audiological definition of deafness.

<sup>3</sup> Arthur N. Schildroth & Michael A. Karchmer, *Deaf Children in America* (San Diego: College-Hill, 1986) 10-14; Petrus C. M. Breed & Bernardine C. Swaans-Joha, *Doven in Nederland* (Amsterdam, 1986) 18-19, 96; Michael Krüger, "Häufigkeit (Statistik)," in *Handbuch der Sonderpädagogik* (Berlin, 1982) 37-43, at 39.

<sup>4</sup> Marcel Broesterhuizen, "Dove peuters leren spreken," in *Stem-, Spraak- en Taalpathologie* 6, 2 (1997) 86-100.

<sup>5</sup> See Paul C. Higgins, *Outsiders in a Hearing World: A Sociology of Deafness* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1980) 22.

In the Christian community Deaf people have often been outsiders. Probably in former centuries deafness was more common than nowadays. It was a time when hearing aids did not yet exist and persons who could function as hard-of-hearing persons with hearing aids were functioning as deaf, which is still the case in countries with poor audiological care. The question about how the Church should deal with people who do not communicate through spoken language seems to have been more urgent then than in modern Western countries.

From the first centuries of its existence the Church held that Deaf persons who were able to indicate by means of clear signs that they understood their meaning were admitted to the sacraments. This was first stated at the First Council of Orange in A.D. 441. Regarding contracting a marriage, this is still explicitly permitted in Canon Law.<sup>6</sup> Yet practice often was different. In times when most Deaf children did not receive school education, Deaf people were often deprived of knowledge of the faith and they were not admitted to the sacraments. Two centuries ago, with the advent of Deaf school education, this was often by a pastoral motivation, namely providing Deaf people with a means by which they could acquire knowledge of faith and Church doctrine. However, the opinion of some that before that time the Church had not been interested in the Deaf,<sup>7</sup> is not accurate. This is indicated by the fact that in the lexicon of modern Sign Languages remnants are found of signs used by monastic orders where silence was obligatory such as the Benedictines and the Cistercians. These monastic orders provided school education for Deaf individuals.<sup>8</sup>

Although school education has made faith more accessible for Deaf people, their participation in the faith community has remained far from easy. In spite of the improvement of Deaf school education Deaf people's knowledge of faith is still rather limited. This is also true for Deaf youth who are actively involved in pastoral projects. Therefore, pastoral projects for Deaf youth do not concentrate only on community building and liturgy, but also on catechesis.<sup>9</sup> Deaf youth's lack of knowledge about the Church and faith is not a recent phenomenon. It was found already in the 1970s, a

<sup>6</sup> Canon 1101 §1 and Canon 1104 §2.

<sup>7</sup> See Harlan L. Lane, *When the Mind Hears: A History of the Deaf* (New York: Random House, 1984); and his "The Medicalisation of Cultural Deafness in Historical Perspective," in *Looking Back: A Reader on the History of Deaf Communities and Their Sign Languages*, ed. R. Fischer & H. L. Lane (Hamburg: Signum, 1993) 479–94.

<sup>8</sup> See Patricia Raswant, "The Spread of Benedictine Signs beyond the Monasteries," paper presented at Deafway II, Washington, D.C., July 8–13, 2002; Marilyn Daniels, "The Benedictine Roots in the Development of Sign Language," *The American Benedictine Review* 44 (1993) 383–402.

<sup>9</sup> Anthony J. Schuerger, "Church Programmes for Deaf Teenagers," in *Eye People: Working Models of Church* (Manchester, UK: Henesy House, 1989) 123–54.

period when secularization was less strong than nowadays.<sup>10</sup> Church and faith are remote from the experiential world of many Deaf people, especially young Deaf people. The language, symbols, and cultural background of the Scripture stories and Christian tradition are so strange to the culture of Deaf people that they cannot correlate them to their own life experiences.<sup>11</sup>

An important reason for this is that the Christian stories are drawn from the perspective of hearing people and in a way adapted to hearing people. For hearing people it seems logical that the Gospel story of the healing of the deaf man is about charity extended to an unfortunate person. The message contains the idea that deafness is a less complete, deviant, and unredeemed form of humanity which awaits healing and salvation. No space is afforded for liberating the Bible stories from the perspective of the views on impairment and disability dominant in the cultural context when the Gospels were written.<sup>12</sup>

Adaptation to Deaf people's experiential world is not only often absent in the content of Christian stories, but also in the language through which they are transmitted. People who are involved in catechesis and faith proclamation, often take for granted that religious language is a language of symbols, metaphors, and figurative meanings. Even where concrete action and objects are used as a symbol, much explanation is needed before a symbol can be understood. The step from water as the liquid that comes out of the faucet to Jesus as the living water requires not only familiarity with the symbol, but also a verbally abstract and complicated explanation through a real dialogue.<sup>13</sup> Often the assumption seems to be made that concrete symbols and verbal symbolism, metaphors, and figurative language are not only the material in which the Christian message is wrapped but are part of its very essence, for which Deaf people, in spite of their supposed language problem, are to be prepared.<sup>14</sup> For many Deaf people these symbols and verbal symbolism lack a character of reality. They are verbal distractions with an "as if" meaning that make the message esoteric, abstruse, and inaccessible. The orientation on symbolism and verbal ab-

<sup>10</sup> Anthony Russo, *The God of the Deaf Adolescent: An Inside View* (New York: Paulist, 1975) 156–60.

<sup>11</sup> William Key et al., *Eye Centered: A Study on the Spirituality of Deaf People with Implications for Pastoral Ministry* (Silver Spring, Md.: T. J. Publishers, 1992) 15.

<sup>12</sup> See Nancy Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994) 74–75.

<sup>13</sup> Jan van Eijndhoven & Monika Verdoes-Spinell, *Verkündigung bei Hörgeschädigten in Sint Michielsgestel: ein Praxisberichtsgebiete der Seelsorge* (Heidelberg: Median-Verlag von Killisch-Horn, 2001) 83–87.

<sup>14</sup> Antoine van Uden, "Language Acquisition and Religious Education," in *Towards a Living Eucharist* (Manchester, UK: Henesy House, 1983) 33–74.

straction make faith even for Deaf people grown up in a Catholic environment something exotic in which they do not participate.<sup>15</sup>

Nowadays, for Deaf people, liturgy, stripped of visual symbols, is distant, static, and lifeless because of its lack of movement. For Deaf people, liturgy often means staring at slowly moving mouths and expressionless faces singing a song so slowly that the words cannot be lip-read, an obscure delight for hearing people. For Deaf people such a liturgy is not a place where they enter into dialogue with God and fellow human beings.<sup>16</sup>

Not only do Deaf people not participate really in the symbolic and liturgical world of faith in a hearing culture, their integration into the Church community is also defective. Many Deaf people do not feel at home in their local parish and they lose their contact with the Church if they can rely only on their local parish.<sup>17</sup> Where integration into the local parish is achieved, that is in most cases for individual privileged Deaf people with a high frustration tolerance in a community with an extraordinary willingness to adapt communication to these Deaf persons.<sup>18</sup> Even in religious communities, isolation and seclusion seem to be an unavoidable consequence of deafness.<sup>19</sup>

Because of their lack of integration into the Church community and their isolation from communication, much information about Church life does not reach Deaf people. They do not take notice of many aspects of Church renewal<sup>20</sup> and they may continue to foster a limited, concrete, and traditional vision on Church and faith. At the same time, the experience of God

<sup>15</sup> Vitucci wrote about his first experiences with liturgical celebrations with Catholic Deaf persons: "After a while I began to feel more like a witchdoctor presiding over some jungle superstition than a priest of Jesus Christ" (Jim Vitucci, "Searching for Community among the Deaf," in *Eye People: Working Models of Church* [Manchester, UK: Henesy House, 1989] 160).

<sup>16</sup> "... [L]iturgy is a place where people can enter into conversation with God, themselves and others. That can lead to an existential encounter, in which the human person is transformed and lifted above him/herself. Where the ... conditions for such a conversation are not met, ... the salutary effect of the liturgy will not be reached" (Marianne E. L. Verburg-de Waard, "God in beeld?" Unpublished Master's Thesis, Faculty of Theology, University of Utrecht, The Netherlands, 1999, 130).

<sup>17</sup> Terence O'Meara, "To Meet and Form Community," in *Religious Education of the Deaf: A Practical Approach to the Eucharist* (Manchester, UK: Henesy House, 1986) 134-46, at 141-42.

<sup>18</sup> Karin Bürgerhoff, "Wo, wenn nicht hier, in einer Pfarrgemeinde?" Meine Einbindung in die hörende Gemeinde als Kind, Jugendliche und junge Erwachsene," in Stockhausen, *Verkündigung bei Hörgeschädigten* 301-7.

<sup>19</sup> Veronie Franken, "Celebrating the Presence of God—A Personal Testimony," in *Eye People Ministering* 27-34, at 34.

<sup>20</sup> Augustin Yanes Valer, "Fraternity in the Pastoral Service of the Deaf in Spain," in *Ministering Where No Birds Sing* (Manchester, UK: Henesy House,

is an experience of loneliness, isolation, and distance. The Church is the very place where God is present, but it is a place where as a Deaf person one cannot follow what it is all about, where one can only read in a booklet what is spoken by other people, or where, in the most positive case, a Sign Language interpreter indicates what is happening beyond the bounds of one's senses. Heaven and God are indicated in many sign languages by a sign that is not made within the signing space in front of the body, but that removes itself from the body, assuming easily a connotation of "far away." God is a distant God who seems not to understand Sign Language, who cannot divide his attention over all people on earth, not to mention that he might be able to occupy himself with the Deaf.<sup>21</sup>

For many Deaf people, Church and faith are something for hearing people, like Bach and Handel, remote from Deaf people's daily life and from communication and culture in the Deaf community. For them the Church speaks a foreign language, a strange language. The Church is a hearing Church incapable of entering into a real dialogue with Deaf people and of reaching them within the context of their own life. The goals of the Church are too ethereal for the Deaf, too much belonging to a different world. Therefore, the churches are empty and the Deaf clubs crowded.<sup>22</sup>

### DEAFNESS A DISABILITY?

Some people consider the Church's problems in reaching Deaf people as a consequence of the disability of deafness. What is, however, a disability and is deafness a disability? The anthropologist Patrick Devlieger distinguishes four models by which impairment and disability can be approached: the moral, medical, social, and cultural.<sup>23</sup> I describe here three of these models.

The moral model attributes the cause of impairment and disability to God. Disability has to be reconciled with God's goodness and justice: it is punishment or gift, but the ultimate cause of human beings' illness, impairment, and imperfection is evil. Control over disability is looked for with religious rituals. This religious view on disability has a strong marginalizing effect, as has been shown by physically disabled theologians like Nancy Eiesland.<sup>24</sup>

For the medical model the origin of disability lies in the individual's

---

1998) 145–52, at 149. Yanes Valer, himself Deaf, states that no Deaf persons are involved in the new movements in the Church.

<sup>21</sup> Key, *Eye-Centered* 56–57 (see n. 11 above).

<sup>22</sup> Vitucci, "Searching for Community among the Deaf" 158 (see n. 15 above).

<sup>23</sup> Patrick Devlieger, "Handicap, kosmologie en revalidatie," paper presented for the Liliane Foundation and the Dutch Coalition on Disability and Development, Den Bosch, The Netherlands, November 29, 2002.

<sup>24</sup> Eiesland, *The Disabled God* (see n. 12 above); Nancy Eiesland, "Things Not

biology. The primary question is which biological processes lead to disability and how these processes can be changed. Disability is a measurable defect that has to be controlled by professional help and scientific methods.

The cultural model sees disability as the consequence of culture-specific values and ideologies about differences among human beings. These values and ideologies make a person's being different normal or deviant. Disability regards the label that people give to those forms of being different that are not accepted as normal and the social processes to which these labeling leads. In this model the approach of disability takes place by changing the cultural values that have a negative influence on the social development and outgrowth of people labeled as disabled. These values have to be substituted by alternative social, political, and spiritual values that give more opportunities to the identity development and social emancipation of people who are different.

Seen from the perspective of hearing people, deafness is a defect that is approached from the moral and medical model. Although Christian theologies have long held that illness and impairment cannot be seen as consequences of sin, remnants of a past in which such views predominated still exist. Illness and impairment are seen as signs of the brokenness of humans, the consequence of original sin. Impairment must be a source of unhappiness and disgrace which makes a person either a pitiful victim or a heroic bearer of one's own destiny, but never a normal person who enjoys life. Impairment is regarded as a sign of loss of original happiness.<sup>25</sup>

In the medical model deafness is the defect of the sense of hearing. Because of hearing impairment, various skills and functions develop by intensive intervention: speech, spoken language development, sound perception. This has far-reaching consequences: communication problems, Sign Language instead of spoken language, limited cognitive development, limited academic development and a handicap in participation in society. In this model deafness is a serious impairment that has to be compensated for with intensive intervention: early assessment, early hearing aid fitting, cochlear implantation, and oral school education. Communication in Sign Language is seen as a failure of treatment.

In the moral-medical model of hearing people deafness is a form of mutilated and unsaved human existence, a disability, an impediment on the

---

Seen: Women with Disabilities: Oppression and Practical Theology," in *Liberating Faith Practices: Feminist Practical Theology in Context*, ed. Denise M. Ackermann and Riet Bons-Storm (Leuven: Peeters, 1998) 103–27; N. Eiesland & D. E. Saliers, *Human Disability and the Service of God: Reassessing Religious Practice* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998).

<sup>25</sup> See Jacqueline Kool, *Goed bedoeld: levensbeschouwelijk kijken naar handicap en ziekte* (Zoetermeer: Uitgeverij Boekencentrum, 2002) 63.



way toward full self-realization and happiness, and taking away the consequences of this disgrace as much as possible is the duty of human society. Deafness is a nonvalue, invalidity.

For Deaf people it is quite different. They too experience the limitations that are a consequence of deafness. Deaf children can be very rebellious when they realize that they never will be hearing, not even as adults. But, at the end, deafness can be dealt with. It is not such an awful reality as to be called a disability. Deafness brings suffering with it, but many Deaf people will say that this suffering is not a consequence of deafness itself, but of the oppressive way in which hearing society treats deafness, namely by the dynamics of exclusion.<sup>26</sup> Hearing people, offended by such a view, defend themselves by saying that this exclusion is not intended and not purposeful. To this Harris's answer is: intended or not, the effect is the same. It is about societal and cultural processes characterized by the inability to take into account the visual and communicative needs of Deaf people and to give them full access to human society.

There are Deaf people for whom hearing loss is only a secondary aspect of their life. When they are with fellow Deaf people, the experience is not depressing like self-help groups for "fellow-sufferers." Rather it is being with one's own people. With *this* people they share common experiences of communication problems and isolation (and with it also a special sensitivity for the quality of relationship and contact), a common language (Sign Language), and their own way of life in a world filled with thinking in visual images. In this community with other Deaf people the concept of "disability" is far removed from their daily life experiences and is not a suitable description of their life. A Deaf woman pastor, Elizabeth Von Trapp Walker, wrote about the passage in Psalm 139:

For me, one of the most transformational moments was in struggling with the words in Psalm 139:13–14 "For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works."

I would ask God, how? How could I be fearfully and wonderfully made if I were less than whole? Why did He knit me together in my mother's womb and forget to give me perfect hearing? And on and on . . . I would shake my fist at God.

I further struggled with this very issue in my Theology for Ministry class at seminary, in particular when we discussed the Exodus 4:11 passage where God says to Moses "Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?" On more than one occasion in class we pondered these words, where God plainly seems to admit Divine responsibility for many things we count as defects in human makeup. This does seem inconsistent with God as the "good Creator."

<sup>26</sup> Jennifer Harris, *The Cultural Meaning of Deafness Language, Identity and Power Relations* (Brookfield, Vt.: Avebury, 1995) 46 ff.

Referring back to Psalm 139:13–14, do these words only hold true for those who are born free from defects of any kind? Does this then mean, that I was not fearfully and wonderfully made, that somehow God “messed up?” Am I less than whole, damaged goods, and somehow not so loved by God because of this? . . .

Have I personally suffered as one who is deaf in a hearing world? Yes, and with great intensity. Is that suffering because I was malformed by God in my mother's womb? Is my suffering God's fault? Unequivocally, NO! The majority of my suffering has stemmed from ongoing insensitivity of the hearing world, the cruelty of children during childhood, and the loneliness of functioning in our hearing world. God did not malform me in my mother's womb.

Let me tell you what God has done for me in my “defective” state. He has created me with ears that hear what people REALLY say, for in my intensity to hear I listen not just with mechanically assisted hearing. I listen with my whole body. My eyes see the joy, pain and sorrow sometimes hidden in the words as the ears of my heart listen and read the body language of the speaker. I look and see the whole person as they speak because this defective person God created must use her whole person to hear them. I am totally present to another in my strain to listen. I do not believe this would be the case if I had been born whole and without blemish.

These are gifts and talents that I have, and I have them because I could not hear! Ergo, my deafness can be looked at as a gift from God! . . .

Which leads more to a sense of wholeness and positive self-esteem? Feeling proud and positive that God knew EXACTLY what he was doing in creating me, that I am precious in his sight and fearfully and wonderfully made, just as I am? Or that I will never quite measure up because I can't hear, that I am less than whole, and certainly not fearfully and wonderfully made?<sup>27</sup>

In a comment on Von Trapp's statement Carver, member of Deaf Community Christian Church, writes:

Many Deaf Christians rejoice over their deafness in the knowledge that God has singled them out for a special purpose. God has given them the ability to listen with their eyes and to perceive the beauty of His creation in a different light. They may not be able to hear leaves rustling in the breeze, but they can see them quiver harmoniously with each breath. They may not be able to hear birds sing, but they can be just as captivated by their rhythmical twitching. They are able to perceive how other persons are thinking or feeling just by looking into their eyes or at their body language. They view Sign Language, an extraordinarily beautiful and complex visual language, as a gift from God. God wanted to show that human beings, His ultimate creation, are capable of doing anything; He created them in such a way that if they were lacking in something, they would be able to make up for it. Indeed,

<sup>27</sup> Elizabeth von Trapp Walker, “Is Disability a Gift from God?” [http://www.satcom.net/mariposa/gift\\_or\\_nov.html](http://www.satcom.net/mariposa/gift_or_nov.html), August 23, 1999 (accessed November 25, 2001).

God made it possible for people to communicate without requiring sound or hearing.<sup>28</sup>

More than one world separates this view from the assumptions of a moral-medical model. In this view, deafness is wanted by a good God, not by a revengeful God who still now is punishing people for crimes committed in a remote past, nor by a sadistic pedagogue who inflicts tragedy upon people in order to advance them in their religious life. Deafness is one of the variants of normal human life. The factual reality of created life is that there are differences among people, as regards strengths and weaknesses, differences that have nothing to do with good and evil, being less or more human as differences in color of skin and eyes, physical beauty, or gender. The cause of suffering does not lie in these differences but in the cultural prejudice that again and again relates individual differences to good and evil or to the value of human existence. Two physically disabled female theologians, the Dutch Jacqueline Kool and the American Nancy Eiesland describe with painful precision that the evil of the prejudices of the moral-medical model has deep roots in Christian society. For people with an impairment the good news was formulated in such a way that it was not a message of liberation since the message itself had to be liberated. Eiesland states that people without an impairment are shocked when they do not see suffering, struggle, or rebellion in people with an impairment.<sup>29</sup>

The Deaf Catholic priest Peter McDonough writes that deafness was a terrible disability for him during his younger years, but later in his life it became a source of spirituality, in his personal life and in his relationship with the Deaf community. He writes about the richness of Deaf culture with its feeling for concreteness and incarnational faith.<sup>30</sup> The Deaf religious sister Veronica Franken writes about Deaf people's special feeling for relationship, by which the bond with other people becomes a source of experience of God, the pillar of cloud that accompanies us in our exodus from the land of slavery and oppression.<sup>31</sup> In and through deafness, McDonough says, a spiritual treasure is tapped that might also be an enrichment for the hearing Church: the ability to deal with difference, the feeling for the quality of relationship, the sense of true practical living of Christian faith, the expression of being Christian into true humanity.<sup>32</sup> In comparison

<sup>28</sup> Roger J. Carver, "Deafness: a Gift of God?" *Mennonite Brethren Herald* 40 no. 8 (2001).

<sup>29</sup> See Kool, *Goed bedoeld* 85 ff. (see n. 25 above).

<sup>30</sup> Peter McDonough, "Recalled to Life—through Deafness," in *Eye People Ministering* 42–43.

<sup>31</sup> Franken, "Celebrating the Presence of God" 31–32 (see n. 19 above).

<sup>32</sup> McDonough, "Recalled to Life—through Deafness" 43 (see n. 1 above).

with this view the concept of “disability” is a poor rhetorical construction.<sup>33</sup> Disability is an image between my (hearing person’s) ears: a timid boy with a big hearing aid and a raw un-understandable voice, more *what* than *whom*,<sup>34</sup> whom I (a hearing person) am staring at, counting the blessings in my own life, with eyes full of horror, at a secure distance from myself, far removed from private life.

This deep-rooted moral medical view on impairment is the major obstacle for active participation of Deaf people in the life of the Church, not so much on the level of small services like making coffee and vacuuming but on the level of leadership. This is true also for people with other impairments. A Church that celebrates in Eucharist a Disabled God<sup>35</sup> ought to be a sign for the world in this way. But impairment in Church leadership is still always an absurdity, not less than in the past. Impairment continues to be a matter of guilt and penance: when Deaf people do not mourn about their existence this is still always a shame for hearing people. It becomes even offensive when Deaf people dare to reject the blessings of medical science like cochlear implantation, when they dare to be proud about their own deafness and even regret that their children are not deaf but hearing.<sup>36</sup> Such hearing people do not have a message for Deaf people.

### DEAF LAY PERSONS’ ROLE IN BUILDING UP THE CHURCH AS COMMUNITY

Young Deaf people have struggled out better from this oppressive view on impairment than older Deaf people. Older Deaf people were educated in residential schools for the Deaf, where—certainly often with caring love—they were treated as impaired people. In the Church it was a time in which lay persons were the lowest stratum of the ecclesiastical pyramid, people without a vocation to Christian perfection, spectators of the faith but not actors.<sup>37</sup> Giordani, author and politician, foresaw a worthy, full role of lay persons in the Church, “the proletarians of the Church who ‘deproletarized’ themselves from the bottom up by a self-igniting fire—the Holy

<sup>33</sup> “Rhetoric is the use of means at a person’s disposition with which boundaries can be constructed between cultures, communities, and disciplines, and, by consequence, between the selves of human people” (Brenda J. Brueggemann, *Lend Me Your Ear: Rhetorical Constructions of Deafness* [Washington: Gallaudet University, 1999] 2–3).

<sup>34</sup> See Jet H. P. Isarin, *De eigen ander: moeders, deskundigen en gehandicapte kinderen—filosofie van een ervaring* (Budel: Damon, 2001) 133 ff.

<sup>35</sup> Eiesland, *The Disabled God* 107 ff. (see n. 12 above).

<sup>36</sup> Jane Dillehay, “Impact of Genetics Research and the Deaf Community,” presentation on Deafway II, July 8–13, 2002, Washington, D.C.

<sup>37</sup> Igino Giordani, *Le due città: religione e politica nella vicenda delle libertà umane* (Rome: Città Nuova, 1961) 467.

Spirit.”<sup>38</sup> Vatican II brought a new view of the Church: whereas since the Counter-Reformation the ordained and the sacraments administered by them had been central, *Lumen gentium* described the Church first of all as the living community of all baptized people, the sacrament of unity of all baptized people with each other and with God.<sup>39</sup> Only secondarily to this union of the faithful is a distinction between ordained ministers and lay persons, but a distinction not of worth,<sup>40</sup> but rather a distinction in a diversity of hierarchical and charismatic gifts with which the Holy Spirit guides his Church.<sup>41</sup>

A growing awareness in the Church saw that primarily and preceding its objective and hierarchical profile it has a subjective, charismatic, and prophetic profile. This profile of personal and collective commitment expresses itself in movements from below that manifest themselves during crucial periods in Church history when the hierarchical aspect of the Church seems not to come up to the mark, such as the Franciscan movement in the 13th century and the new movements in our time.<sup>42</sup> Because lay persons with their charisms for the consecration of the world fully participate in this profile, the Church can be present in all corners of human society as a place of living presence of the Resurrected Lord in the midst of human people.<sup>43</sup> The construction of a living Christian community is vocation and charism of each baptized person.

In a striking manner, young Deaf lay people in various places in the world, do not wait until the “hearing Church” appoints a minister for the disposition of the Deaf community; rather they put their shoulder to the wheel, and give life to the Catholic Deaf community.<sup>44</sup> This can be called without exaggeration a new movement in the Church.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 460.

<sup>39</sup> *Lumen gentium* no. 1.

<sup>40</sup> “Everything that has been said above concerning the people of God is addressed equally to laity, religious and clergy” (*Lumen gentium* no. 30).

<sup>41</sup> See *Lumen gentium* no. 4.

<sup>42</sup> Ian Ker, “New Movements and Communities in the Life of the Church,” *Louvain Studies* 27 (2002) 69–95.

<sup>43</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Der antirömische Affekt: Wie läßt sich das Papsttum in der Gesamtkirche integrieren?* (Freiburg: Herder, 1974) 170; English trans. *The Office of Peter and the Structure of the Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986); Joseph Ratzinger, “I movimenti ecclesiali, speranza per la Chiesa e per gli uomini,” lecture given at the opening of the World Congress of the New Movements in the Roman Catholic Church, Rome, May 27, 1998 (Vatican City: Pontificium Consilium pro Laicis); Miroslav Vlk, “Die katholische Kirche in den postkommunistischen Transformationsprozessen Mittel- und Osteuropas,” lecture given at closing symposium of the research project: “The Churches in the Post-Communist Transformation Processes,” October 25–29, 2000 (Osnabrück, Germany: Institute for Catholic Theology, University of Osnabrück, 2000) 10–11.

<sup>44</sup> See the forum discussion at the conference “The Gospel Preached by the

Young Deaf people are growing up in a time when Deaf organizations make themselves strong for emancipation of Deaf people who claim the right to be full members of human society. That translates itself into participation in social life in places that were unthought-of for Sign Language users in the past: teacher, medical doctor, lawyer, scientific researcher, governmental official.

Also in the life of the Church, Deaf people are ready to take their full place, not resigning themselves to the role of the disabled who are allowed to take silently their place at the banquet if they behave themselves properly.<sup>45</sup> The fact that in a Christian view deafness cannot be regarded as a damaged human being because of sin and doom implies that Deaf people have the same birthrights and the same baptismal priesthood as all other baptized people. They also possess the same variety of priestly, prophetic, and kingly functions resulting from the priesthood of all baptized people.<sup>46</sup>

At a time of shortage of priests—which has a positive side too, because it allows the charismatic profile of the Church to become more manifest<sup>47</sup>—the role of Deaf lay persons is extremely important to give the Church access to the Deaf community. Hearing pastors specialized in communication with the Deaf and Deaf pastors will be rarer. Only through active involvement of Deaf lay persons within Deafhood can birth be given to a living local Church with its own identity and Christian “empowerment.” That local Church of Deaf people can contribute to the “variety of local churches with a common aspiration that is a splendid proof of the catholicity of the undivided Church.”<sup>48</sup> The time of spiritual colonialism is over during which dependence was supposed and fostered. Deaf ministry by Deaf people themselves, ordained and not ordained, “peer ministry,”<sup>49</sup> is the only way to let Deaf people produce their own religious culture in places where Deaf people meet one another. Some even ask for a Deaf bishop with personal jurisdiction.<sup>50</sup>

---

Deaf” held on May 19, 2003 at Leuven, Belgium, and contributions on the International Conference of Catholic Deaf at Mexico City, August 2–7, 2003 (Irene and Pedro Alvarez, “Evangelisation in Venezuela”; Jassodra Bedasie and Kenwyn Philbert, “Evangelisation in Trinidad and Tobago”; Magdalena Valero Weeke, “Comunidad de Sordos en México”).

<sup>45</sup> Thomas Coughlin, “The Best Kept Secret for Our Church: The Deaf Vocations,” in *Ministering Where No Birds Sing* 29–42, at 36 (see n. 20 above).

<sup>46</sup> See *Apostolicam actuositatem* no. 10.

<sup>47</sup> Vlk 11 (see n. 43 above).

<sup>48</sup> *Dei Ecclesia* no. 46.

<sup>49</sup> Michael Byrne, “Peer Ministry in the School for the Deaf,” in *Ministering Where No Birds Sing* 99–122, at 103.

<sup>50</sup> “The Vatican Council and the new code of canon law have shown real openness for new ministries in the Church. The diocesan bishops are given power to

## SIGN LANGUAGE AS RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

Deaf ministry by Deaf people has immediate consequences for the language used in pastoral ministry, religious communication, and liturgy. The choice of language for Deaf people has been decided upon for a long period of time by hearing people in Deaf education. In Deaf education a long-lasting preference has existed for monolingual education in spoken language (oral education). Oral education was seen as the only way to integrate the Deaf into their families and society. This unmistakably led to improvement of the academic level of Deaf people.<sup>51</sup> It is far from clear, however, that oral education leads also to social integration of Deaf people. The majority of Deaf people that have undergone oral education are more oriented toward Deafhood than toward hearing society.<sup>52</sup> Research studies about the effects of oral education and modern technology such as cochlear implantation never take into account the way in which especially informal communication with the environment is experienced, the *phatic communion*, the emotionally satisfying conversation that seems to deal with nothing, but is a crucial means for people coming onto the "same wavelength."<sup>53</sup> It is just that lack of informal communication that is mentioned in self-reports of Deaf people when they talk about negative experiences in a hearing environment: conversations in family meetings, communication problems within the family, often at moments that are crucial for family life. This led a well-educated Deaf person from a hearing family in Western Europe to make the following typical statement: "In fact, you might say that as a little child I was part of the family in the same way as a pet. It seems hard to say that, but yet I think it was like that. People who love their pet, take care of it very well, but they do not have conver-

---

initiate new ministries in their dioceses. Also the Bishops' Conference has got the power to creatively extend the ministries according to the need. If Rome can come forward to consecrate a deaf priest as bishop and if he could be appointed as chaplain for the whole deaf community of India with personal jurisdiction, he can influence the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) to execute the various pastoral plans for the deaf people in all dioceses" (Baktrinabath Russel Raj, *Thou Fillest with Fresh Life: A Pastoral Guide for Ministering to the Hearing Impaired Children in the Indian Context* [Nagercoil, India: Anbu illam, 2003]).

<sup>51</sup> Guido Lichtert & Dirk Verdonck, "Fifteen Years of Education with the Maternal Reflective Method: A Reflection on the Results," paper presented at the International Conference about Education of the Deaf, Tel Aviv, Israel, 1995.

<sup>52</sup> Breed, *Doven in Nederland* 153 (see n. 3 above).

<sup>53</sup> See Philip Riley, "How Small Do You Like Your Talk? Language and the Negotiation of Social Identity," *British Association of Applied Linguistics* 2000; Günter Senft, "Phatic Communion," in *Handbook of Pragmatics*, ed. Jef Verschueren, Jan-Ola Östman and Jan Blommaert (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1996).

sation with them, surely no deep conversation, they do not give information to the animal.”<sup>54</sup>

Almost the same statement was made by a Deaf man grown up without school education and as the only Deaf person in his family in a small village in Nepal: “I have to say sincerely that there were times that I felt myself more a pet than a member of the family. Since Sign Language was still underdeveloped when I was a child, good communication between me and my relatives lacked. They gave me food and clothes, and ... I know they took care of me, but I knew also that something was lacking in our relationship.”<sup>55</sup>

Much as there are Deaf people who regret they did not learn to communicate with Sign Language in their hearing family, there are also Deaf people who acquired Sign Language as their first language that regret that they did not acquire spoken language better. In regard to communication, young Deaf people are far more pragmatic than their hearing educators who tend to consider either oral communication or Sign Language as the only truth.<sup>56</sup> This pragmatism is found also in the Claggett Statement, a declaration about liberation theology formulated by Deaf people from several American churches:

Communication together was never simple. We used two languages—American Sign Language (ASL) and spoken English. That is, some people signed ASL while interpreters spoke English for those who didn’t understand ASL. Those who didn’t know ASL well enough spoke English, and the interpreters signed for them. One deaf woman, a theologian and pastor who had never learned to sign, spoke for herself and “lip-read” the speakers or interpreters. We took great care not to exclude anyone - even when we became excited and then needed to repeat our comments or slow down. We grew to love one another. We shared our fears and our common suffering, the suffering of oppressed deaf people and of those who choose to stand with them. We rediscovered that the promises of Scripture are promises of freedom, liberation, and salvation. And that when oppressed people learn of that Scripture, they know it is meant for them.<sup>57</sup>

Deaf people’s own choice of communication has automatic consequences for the language used in faith proclamation, religious sharing, and liturgy. Until now at liturgies it depended on the abilities of the minister, especially in places where there are no Deaf ministers. Most ministers to

<sup>54</sup> Mieke Van Herreweghe & Myriam Vermeerbergen, *Thuishoren in een wereld van gebaren* (Ghent: Academia, 1998) 153 and 155–56, 188, 196–97.

<sup>55</sup> Irene Taylor, *Buddhas in Disguise: Deaf People of Nepal* (San Diego: Dawn Sign, 1997) 131–34.

<sup>56</sup> Susan Gregory, Lesley Sheldon, and Juliet Bishop, *Deaf Young People and Their Families: Developing Understanding* (New York: Cambridge University, 1995) 275.

<sup>57</sup> Charlotte Baker-Shenk, ed. “Breaking the Shackles: Liberation Theology and the Deaf Community,” in *Sojourners* (1985) 2.



the Deaf are hearing and not always very skilful in communicating with the Deaf. In places where most Deaf people use Sign Language, hearing ministers will try to learn as quickly as possible at least the standard formulas of liturgy in Sign Language and to acquire a basic Sign vocabulary in order to be able to hold a simple sermon in Sign. Because of the communicative variety of their audience, this will often be more like Sign supported spoken language than real Sign Language. In places where Sign Language has a low status, the minister will use almost no signs, but will use visual means such as slides, transparencies, Power Point, and booklets, and occasionally a Sign Language interpreter. There are, however, places in which liturgy takes place in Sign. In England there is a Eucharistic Prayer in Sign officially approved by church authorities. These signs seem to follow, however, the structure of spoken and written English, and typical aspects of Sign Language such as localization, visualization, and the use of classifiers are lacking. The use of true Sign Language in liturgy is very rare, although it was recommended by Vatican authorities already in the 1960s as the true vernacular for Deaf people, in a declaration however that still recommended that the minister should say the Creed in sign supported spoken language, because of the supposed difficulty of translating it into Sign Language.<sup>58</sup>

In several countries standard prayers and religious texts have been or are being translated into Sign Language. Often these translations took place from the language of the dominant culture, but recently more and more initiatives are undertaken to make translations directly from the original languages. In the United States the working group "Christians for the Liberation of the Deaf Community" that published, as we have seen, the Claggett Statement in 1985, gave an impetus toward the translation of the Bible into American Sign Language from the original languages. A variety of persons are involved in this translation: Deaf pastors belonging to various churches, a sign linguist, a biblical scholar, and specialists in the original languages. A special problem with these translations is that until now it has not yet been possible to write Sign Language in a way that can be used also by people without basic knowledge of linguistics. The translation has to be recorded on video tapes. At the present time, only the Gospel of Luke has been finished. The recording that includes a tape explaining the translation process takes five video tapes of 90 minutes each.<sup>59</sup> The Swedish Bible

<sup>58</sup> Xaverius Ochoa and Andreas Gutiérrez, *Leges ecclesiae post Codicem Iuris Canonici editae, collegit digessit notisque ornavit Xaverius Ochoa* (Rome: Institutum Claretianum, 1972) 4936–37.

<sup>59</sup> Patrick Graybill et al., *The Gospel of Luke: An ASL Translation*, five video-tapes (Burtonsville, Md.: Sign Media, 1996).

Society has finished translations of the four Gospels, the Acts, and the book Jonah into Swedish Sign Language, edited on DVD.<sup>60</sup>

In such a translation process many problems have to be overcome. One example is the translation of acclamations that are frequent in the Bible. An acclamation, shouting a person's name in order to get his attention, is something typical for spoken languages. In communication with Deaf people, a person's attention is not got by signing his name, but by means of movements, knocking on the table, stamping on the ground, switching the light on and off. Salutations using a person's name are known to Deaf people only in letters, e-mail and chatting. An acclamation is not translatable into Sign Language. One might circumscribe it, but that will cause a problem if a biblical translation is to be faithful to the original text.

Another problem is found in places where until recently Sign Language had been used only for simple, daily conversation. Consequently the vocabulary of such sign languages will have lacunae for concepts that are not communicated in daily life. In places where Deaf people do not communicate in Sign Language about religious topics, a restricted vocabulary of religious signs will exist. This can make a good translation of Scripture quite difficult. Sometimes this problem is solved by having Bible stories retold, often at the same conceptual level as children's Bibles. Video tapes and DVDs with such Bible stories have been published in most countries.

A more creative solution is the formation of working groups that draw up a list of existing religious signs and invent new signs hoping that the Deaf community will use them. An example of this is the project of a working group formed by a Dutch foundation that made proposals about several hundreds of religious signs, such as name signs for books, places, and persons in the Old and New Testament. When names have to be finger-spelled, names become lengthy, and by consequence a Bible text containing many names will be difficult to read. This can be irritating especially for users of those sign languages, such as Sign Language of the Netherlands that prefer to limit the use of finger-spelling as an influence of the language of the dominant culture. Biblical name signs were partially borrowed from other sign languages, such as Danish and Israeli Sign Language, and were partially invented according to the rules by which name signs are created in sign languages.<sup>61</sup> In this way, the sign for Peter is based upon the sign for "stone," the sign for Abraham shows a fist ready for

<sup>60</sup> Information on <http://www.bibelsallskapet.se> (accessed December 18, 2003).

<sup>61</sup> Name signs often reflect a marked characteristic of a person or a place, e.g. the Eiffel Tower for Paris, the wounds in the hands for Jesus. See Ted J. Supalla, *Naming in American Sign Language* (Eden Prairie, Minn.: Harris Communications, 1992).

stabbing being stopped, the sign for David is the Star of David made on the chest.

The use of Sign Language as religious and liturgical languages raises questions that require careful research instead of speculation. Hearing authors often speculate that Sign Language is not suited for the expression of religious concepts.<sup>62</sup> They point to the fact that Sign Language is an iconic language, i.e. that many signs have a visual similarity with their referent. So the sign for book represents an opened book, whereas the spoken word "book" does not have the similarity with a book. They fear that by the use of strong depicting visual means thinking does not detach itself from the visual image and will by consequence remain limited. Other authors consider iconicity as a strength of Sign Language, giving it more depicting possibilities than spoken languages.<sup>63</sup> In the case of religious language depiction might cause a problem.

For example, in many sign languages the sign for God is made somewhere next to and above the head. In this sign the hand can take different shapes, for example the extended index or an open hand, and different movements, for example slightly moving around or no movement. It is one of those few signs that are made away from the body. This can make that the sign has the connotation of "God there above us, far away." The hand slightly moving around can depict a cloud—God as something abstract, elusive, remote.

Iconicity plays a role in the way people recite a prayer. When a person is addressed in Sign Language, he/she is looked into the face. In sign languages that are less influenced by the dominant cultural language, "you" is expressed by pointing to that person and by looking toward his face. When the addressed person is the object of a verb, the verb sign is made toward that person. How then God will be addressed to in Sign Language? He must be given a place within sign space, the syntactical space that is created during signing;<sup>64</sup> otherwise it is not possible to address Him. When God is located somewhere near the place where the sign "God" is made, does not that mean that something absurd takes place: putting into space

<sup>62</sup> Antoine Van Uden, "Language Acquisition and Religious Education," in *Towards a Living Eucharist* 33–74.

<sup>63</sup> Mary Brennan, "See What I Mean? Exploiting BSL Visual Encoding in Teaching and Learning," paper presented at Empower '97, International Conference on Deaf Education, 1997.

<sup>64</sup> The use of space near the body plays an important role in Sign Languages, especially those that have undergone less influence of the dominant cultural language. Sign space is used to tell, for example, about persons who are not present. An experienced Sign Language user attributes to these persons a place in space (localization) and lets them be, from that localization, subject or object of actions. In his further discourse s/he has only to point to the place where the referent has been localized. In this way localization has a pronominal function (Myriam

the one who is *beyond* space and time? Does a prayer signed in this way not have its origins in childlike conceptions of God or lead to childlike ideas about God—God who looks down upon us from heaven? Hearing persons might think it logical to close one's eyes during prayer, making the signs just before oneself, as did the young man described in the introduction to this article. For hearing people this might seem preferable since we cannot look into the face of the invisible God. But here there is a notable sign linguistic problem: closing one's eyes means breaking the dialogue with the other person—there is no more “we,” “you,” or “he.” The sign compels a depiction of God and our relation to God and the way in which it is depicted seems to correspond with outdated conceptions. In reality the use of sign space in addressing God is at the same time iconic and highly symbolic.

If Sign Language would really lead to concrete and perceptually bound thinking, it might have an influence on faith development. Anthony Russo found that Deaf adolescents spoke in very concrete terms about their faith.<sup>65</sup> They did not understand the esoteric language used in catechesis. One should ask oneself if this is a consequence of the use of and thinking in Sign Language, or a characteristic of a certain stage in faith development. Literal interpretation of faith symbols can be characteristic for a certain stage in faith development, the mythical-literal faith.<sup>66</sup> If Sign Language leads to concrete and literal thinking, a mythical-literal faith style would be more frequent among the Deaf than among the hearing. William Key and his colleagues found, however, in a sample of Deaf Sign Language users the same stages in faith development as among hearing people.<sup>67</sup> In their opinion the crucial factor in faith development is the degree to which Deaf people have had access to faith knowledge. If they had poor access, because they had only scarce faith communication in Sign Language, Deaf people's spiritual growth was limited. Limited faith knowledge is not a consequence of a surplus of Sign Language, but of a lack of Sign Language in faith communication.

Christian tradition has always considered the expression of the message into other modalities than the spoken or written word as completely le-

---

Vrmeerbergen, *Grammaticale aspecten van de Vlaams-Belgische Gebarentaal* [Gentbrugge, Belgium: VZW Cultuur voor Doven, 1997] 18–28).

<sup>65</sup> Russo, *The God of the Deaf Adolescent* 121–22 (see n. 10 above).

<sup>66</sup> James M. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981) 28–31. This stage of faith development is reached by the child as a consequence of the acquisition of new logical reasoning skills which enables him/her to come to a conscious interpretation of experiences and meaning. Order and reliability are the central aspects of this developmental stage. Symbols, narratives, and myths are taken literally.

<sup>67</sup> William Key et al., *Eye Centered* 75–82.

gitimate. From the beginning on the concept of “Word of God” applied to the written and spoken word. The crucial point was neither the language (Hebrew, Greek) nor the modality (written, spoken) in which the Word of God was expressed, but the right meaning or the content of the message. The Christian message can even be transmitted by means of a visual depiction, in the same way as Scripture transmits it by means of the word.<sup>68</sup> In the most explicit way this is found in the Orthodox churches, where iconographic depiction of the Christian message is a faith point, established at the Council of Nicaea. This view seems to be shared, although in a less explicit way, but with a reference to the Council of Nicaea, by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. If visual depiction can transmit the Christian message, the more so can it be transmitted by an iconic medium, Sign Language that conveys the meaning of the written text as faithfully as possible.

Comprehension of the Christian message is not automatically facilitated by creating a sign lexicon for religious concepts and by translating the message into Sign Language, especially in places where Deaf culture is very secular. The concepts have to acquire meaning. It is not enough to agree upon a sign for “grace”: the content of the sign will become clear only if it expresses a lived experience of grace and if the concept is embedded in a network of experiential knowledge. The crucial question is not only whether the concepts used express the Christian message well, but also whether a common experiential world has been created that gives a meaning to the sign. This is a mystagogical way of introduction into faith<sup>69</sup> in which religious concepts are not abstract, but are existentially lived through, integrated into the reality of daily life. For Deaf people daily life has its place in a continuous adventure of isolation and alliance with other people. Experiences of alliance often find place in relationships with other Deaf people and in those relationships religious concepts have to acquire a meaning. For that reason in several places the need of creating a Christian community of Deaf people is stressed, a pastoral ministry of belonging, of alliance with a community in which true dialogue, sharing, and mutual

<sup>68</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* § 1160: “Christian iconography expresses in images the same Gospel message that Scripture communicates by words. Image and word illuminate each other: ‘We declare that we preserve intact all the written and unwritten traditions of the Church which have been entrusted to us. One of these traditions consists in the production of representational artwork, which accords with the history of the preaching of the Gospel. For it confirms that the incarnation of the Word of God was real and not imaginary, and to our benefit as well, for realities that illustrate each other undoubtedly reflect each other’s meaning’” [citing the Council of Nicaea II, 787].

<sup>69</sup> Kees Waaijman, *Spiritualiteit—vormen, grondslagen, methoden* (Ghent: Carmelitana, 2001) 858.

respect take place.<sup>70</sup> Jim Vitucci calls the creation of a community that meets Deaf people's need of relationship with one another and in which talking about faith is "pre-theological,"<sup>71</sup> as "pre-evangelization." In such a community the plausibility structure that was lacking in the lives of many Deaf people is created, with the consequence that their life experiences could not be interpreted hermeneutically with Christian narratives.<sup>72</sup> To that end it is necessary to "lose" a considerable amount of time in personal contacts with Deaf people.<sup>73</sup> The problem of a backward faith development in Deaf people is not a linguistic one, but one of dialogue because of the absence of a living Christian communion with Deaf people.

### DEAFHOOD AS CONTEXT

Up to now I have described several ways by which Church can come into being within the Deaf community: (a) breaking the shackles of Deaf people's outsider position by reaching them within the context of their own life; (b) approaching Deaf people not as impaired people with a defect, but as people who have a unique contribution to share with the whole human community; (c) empowerment of Deaf lay persons and the creation of a Christian Deaf community; and (d) acceptance and appreciation of Deaf people's own language choice in faith proclamation, religious communication, and liturgy. These points can be gathered together under one denominator: namely, deafness should not be seen as an obstacle for faith development, but as the context within which faith development and theological reflection take place. Deafness is not a curse ("Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents?")<sup>74</sup> but a *locus theologicus* ("It is so that the works of God might be made visible through him").<sup>75</sup>

This requires enculturation or indigenization of the Christian message into Deaf culture. When the European bishops in the 1970s became aware of the gap between modern culture and the gospel, Pope Paul VI in his postsynodal apostolic constitution *Evangelii nuntiandi* wrote about the necessity of evangelizing human culture. As a result of *Evangelii nuntiandi*,

<sup>70</sup> Catherine Mathews, "Crossroads: Presentation of the Liturgy in a Catholic School for Deaf Children," in *Eye People: Working Models* 23–38.

<sup>71</sup> Russo, *The God of the Deaf Adolescent* 212.

<sup>72</sup> A set of people, procedures and spiritual processes that are adapted to the task of keeping into existence a specific definition of reality (Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* [Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1969] 142 ff.)

<sup>73</sup> McDonough, "Recalled to Life—through Deafness" 41 (see n. 1 above).

<sup>74</sup> John 9:2 (*New American Bible*). <sup>75</sup> John 9:3.

the Latin American bishops stated in their Puebla document<sup>76</sup> that evangelization of culture means penetrating into the roots of culture, discovering in it the "seeds of the Word," and giving growth to them, but also transforming culture by making of its painful points an object of evangelization.

The Church has only one way to realize its mission: concrete human persons in their daily existence and within the community and the culture in which they participate.<sup>77</sup> Penetrating into that culture and thereby enriching the Church is essential to the Incarnation: enculturation of faith and gospel is a practical consequence of the fact that God's Son became human.<sup>78</sup> Enculturation is a criterion for the quality of faith: "A faith that does not become culture is a faith that has not been fully accepted, not fully well-considered and not faithfully lived."<sup>79</sup> Enculturation does not mean merely adaptation of faith proclamation and liturgy, nor is it only a maneuver to make Christianity more attractive and marketable. Enculturation is the patient and loving search for "seeds of the Word" that, when reaching their full growth, will bear fruit in a culture of love.

Can those seeds of the Word be recognized within Deaf culture? I do not wish to make superheroes of the Deaf (making superheroes of people is a subtle way of banning them outside of normalcy<sup>80</sup>), but possibly to identify values such as: consciousness of the value of relationship and contact, the need of communication, the ability of dealing with difference, the realization of our need for one another, a concrete attitude toward life, and a sense of incarnational faith. Can these values be elements characteristic of Deaf theology?<sup>81</sup> As a hearing person, by consequence always an outsider to Deaf culture, I need here to make strict limits. I cannot formulate a contextual theology for Deaf people, the most I can do is try to promote one with an attitude of humility.<sup>82</sup> I refer again to ideas mentioned earlier in my article: namely, deafness as desired by a good Creator;<sup>83</sup> the pillar of cloud that accompanies God's people on its exodus from the slavery of Egypt; the sensibility of Deaf people for relationship and contact as a

<sup>76</sup> Puebla Document, 388–561.

<sup>77</sup> *Redemptor hominis* no.13.

<sup>78</sup> *Redemptoris missio* nos. 52–54.

<sup>79</sup> Words of John Paul II, 1988, quoted by Humberto Vargas, *Biblia y inculturación*, [www.sitioabm.org/2001.htm](http://www.sitioabm.org/2001.htm) (Website of the Asociación de Biblistas Mexicanos; accessed January 14, 2003).

<sup>80</sup> See Kool, *Goed bedoeld* 61–63 (see n. 25 above).

<sup>81</sup> Louis W. Foxwell, *A Church of/for/by Deaf People: The Need for Deaf Theology* (Baltimore: St. Mary's Seminary, 1974).

<sup>82</sup> Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2002) 18–21.

<sup>83</sup> Von Trapp Walker, "Is Disability a Gift from God?" 41 (see n. 27 above).

source of transcendent experience;<sup>84</sup> and deafness and Deaf culture as a resurrection experience.<sup>85</sup>

Here deafness and Deaf culture were the fertile soil into which the seed of faith fell. Important aspects of Deaf culture have been appreciated and absorbed by faith. The value of language in this process was not dependent from its capacity of symbolism, but from its suitability as a means of a true conversation from heart to heart.<sup>86</sup> In fact in such a conversation, in such an emotionally, intellectually, morally, and spiritually satisfying encounter, an Other can be present who is more real than a fleeting abstraction or a volatile symbol.<sup>87</sup> Language, spoken or signed, becomes establishment of a community, giving life to the Church. By means of that establishment of a community, God can be present in those places where Deaf people enjoy and suffer their relationships, experience loneliness and belonging, as well as in the secular places where Deaf people's lives take place: within Deaf families, Deaf clubs, and sign bars. Such establishment of community will also express itself in liturgy, with forms that correspond with Deaf people's orientation on action, their visual needs, their need for communication with other people, in short, an indigenization of the gospel in Deaf culture.

The Deaf community is not the only context in which Deaf people live. Ninety percent of the Deaf are born in hearing families and 90% of the Deaf have hearing children. There are very few Deaf persons who live in a completely Deaf environment; there is always also that hearing world where some, mainly older Deaf people who grew up in a hearing family, have had such painful experiences.<sup>88</sup> Because of these painful experiences, deafness became, instead of a shared task in life, a crystallization point of division, where family and society were divided into two universes that never came into contact with one another. Life experience of these Deaf people is characterized by a feeling of not being accepted and by an affective hunger.<sup>89</sup> This affective hunger leads to a strong desire to be with the

<sup>84</sup> Franken, "Celebrating the Presence of God" 32 (see n. 19 above).

<sup>85</sup> McDonough, "Recalled to Life—through Deafness" 41 (see n. 1 above).

<sup>86</sup> Marcel Broesterhuizen, "The Gospel Preached by the Deaf: Conversation as Complete Form of Language in Pastoral Ministry with the Deaf," *Louvain Studies* 27 (2002) 359–75.

<sup>87</sup> "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:20); the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* describes this presence as a real presence of the Lord. The reality of Christ's presence in the Eucharist does not exclude the reality of this presence (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* nos. 1373–74).

<sup>88</sup> Key, *Eye Centered* 56–60, 70–74 (see n. 11 above); Paul Preston, *Mother Father Deaf: Living between Sound and Silence* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1994) 62–70.

<sup>89</sup> Key, *Eye Centered* 64–67.



Deaf community and to resentment toward hearing people with whom they prefer to have nothing to do.

Resentment and disappointment can also be felt by Deaf people's hearing relatives. The brokenness of relationships can be so painful that reconciliation cannot even be discussed; in other situations there can be a feeling of uneasiness and being different. Although far from always being the case and nowadays less so than in the past,<sup>90</sup> that is the undertone often characterizing the shared context of Deaf and hearing people, in family, neighborhood, workplace, and parish. In this shared and divided world Deaf people have a view on deafness that is appalling for hearing people, and Deaf people feel oppressed and offended by hearing people's view of deafness.

This division is not solved by an arbitrary court that states which view is correct. For hearing people it is more effective to try to understand why deaf persons with good intelligence and good school education, good lip-reading and speech ability, sometimes even profitable hearing rests, in fact prefer Deaf culture and Sign Language. At least hearing persons can ask themselves whether other motives underlie such a choice than simply emotional instability and fanaticism. This is only possible when they try to empathize with the feelings and ideas of Deaf people and gain insight into how Deaf people themselves experience their deafness. For hearing people who have been working for a long period of time with Deaf people, that means getting rid of their professional pride about their expertise of stimulation of speech and hearing in Deaf people and asking themselves what that Deaf person who stands there before them, wants, without being shocked when that person wants simply to be Deaf. It means getting rid of one's own "hearingness" in order to reach the other person in his or her otherness and to share in that otherness, deafness as it is experienced by that other person. That is kenosis: ridding oneself of the "empowerment" that makes many relationships between hearing and Deaf people asymmetrical and unequal: "being Deaf with the Deaf."

For people of today kenosis is a suspect concept: it has the connotation of resignation and adaptation to injustice.<sup>91</sup> American Orthodox theologian Aristotle Papanikolaou, in a comparative study about the concept of kenosis in feminist theology and the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar, shows that the concept of kenosis has been used often in a limited and one-sided way: self-effacing. He places kenosis within the framework of a

<sup>90</sup> Mary Sheridan, *Inner Lives of Deaf Children: Interviews and Analysis* (Washington: Gallaudet University, 2002) 3.

<sup>91</sup> Aristotle Papanikolaou, "Persons, Kenosis and Abuse: Hans Urs von Balthasar and Feminist Theologies in Conversation," *Modern Theology* 19 (2003) 41–65, at 41–42.

trinitarian theology: kenosis is the relationship of love in which a person is not effaced, but gives oneself completely to the other and opens oneself completely to the other, without filtering out with one's own judgments what is perceived in the other. Kenosis is the complete gift of oneself through empathy, the wish of discovering the own values of the other. The other person's otherness is not destroyed; on the contrary, the other is loved and appreciated because of his or her very otherness. The person who loves finds pleasure and joy in the other one's otherness. Through kenosis the other one, who was a stranger for me, not only comes closer to me,<sup>92</sup> but I bear that one within myself, because as a person I have been enriched by that other person. In a kenotic relationship both the two of us, I and the other one, receive our personhood as a gift.<sup>93</sup> Those who cannot or will not do that, remain lonely, locked within their own universe,<sup>94</sup> as an unloved non-person. The central point is the art of loving, always, everyone and without reserve,<sup>95</sup> even when one feels put off in one's outgoing movement toward the other by the other's reactions. Kenosis is the persistent attempt of reaching the other within that otherness and enjoying that otherness. In the relationship between Deaf and hearing people that very empathy is under threat, because "when communication breaks down, the most powerful takes control."<sup>96</sup>

From Deaf people an outgoing movement toward hearing people is demanded. Deaf people too have their prejudices about hearing people: hearing people look down upon the Deaf, they consider Sign Language is an "ape" language, are arrogant and dominant, have more information and more knowledge in such a way that Deaf people do not have anything to add to it. In that case, kenosis means the free and complete gift of oneself, without reservation, not inhibited by feelings of inferiority or by fear of negative reactions from hearing people: Ephpheta! To nobody else was the command to raise their "voice" and to "speak out" so explicitly given as to the Deaf.<sup>97</sup> "So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the holy ones and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the capstone" (Ephesians 2:19–20).

<sup>92</sup> "The subject that is strange to me, comes nearer to me" (Edith Stein, *Zum Problem der Einfühlung* [Munich: Kaffke, 1916; reprint 1980] 4).

<sup>93</sup> Papanikolaou, "Persons, Kenosis and Abuse" 48 (see n. 91 above).

<sup>94</sup> Ibid. 53.

<sup>95</sup> See Graziella De Luca, "L'arte di amare," in *Verso un pieno umanesimo: orizzonti nuovi in psicologia* (Rome: Città Nuova, 2002) 16–18.

<sup>96</sup> See Paul M. Brinich, "Childhood Deafness and Maternal Control," *Journal of Communication Disorders* (1980) 75–81.

<sup>97</sup> Coughlin, "The Best Kept Secret for Our Church" 36.