

Eucharistic Prayer for the Deaf

Background Note

This background note is drawn from the accompanying documentation submitted with the Eucharistic Prayer for the Deaf to the Congregation for Divine Worship in 1977. The Prayer was approved for use in England and Wales on 23 May 1992.

Adapting the liturgy to the needs of the deaf

It is of the greatest importance that the celebration of the Mass be so arranged that the ministers and the faithful lay take their own proper part in it and thus gain its fruits more fully. This will be accomplished if the celebration takes into account the nature and circumstances of each assembly and is planned to bring about conscious, active and full participation of the people. Such participation of mind and heart is desired by the Church, is demanded by the nature of the celebration and is the right and duty of Christians by reason of their baptism.

General Instruction on the Roman Missal 2-3

The *Directory for Masses with Children* indicates that it is both possible and necessary to adapt the provisions of the *General Instruction on the Roman Missal* to the needs of specific groups. The Directory, although not concerned specifically with those who are handicapped in some way, provides many of the principles which will ensure that the liturgy is suitably adapted to the needs of the deaf. It also makes clear that specially composed texts, even versions of the eucharistic prayers themselves, may be required to meet these specific needs. (Cf. *The Directory for Masses with Children* n. 6.)

The Eucharistic Prayer and the deaf

“The eucharistic prayer is of the greatest importance in the eucharist, because it is the high point of the entire celebration. Much depends on the manner in which the priest proclaims the prayer, and on the way in which the congregation takes part by listening and making their acclamations” (*The Directory for Masses with Children*, n. 52). If this is to be so for deaf people, the way in which the priest proclaims the prayer for deaf people and the way in which the deaf take part in it must be very different. The deaf cannot listen attentively as hearing people do. They cannot even make their acclamations with the same facility. A great deal depends on the manner in which the celebrant proclaims the prayer, if the deaf are to be drawn effectively into the celebration of the eucharist.

For the deaf there is a particular problem in the language of the eucharistic prayers. The eucharistic prayers of the Roman Rite employ a language that is complex, abstract and highly stylised with every word carefully balanced against

another. In contrast, the language most suited to communication with the deaf is simple, concrete and very direct. This problem of language is complicated by the limitations of sign language and finger-spelling. Finger-spelling is a simple and attractive system by which every letter of the alphabet is given its own individual sign. Theoretically this allows complete exactness in the expression of thought and language but its laboriousness makes it largely impracticable in ordinary communications except to a fairly restricted degree. Sign language, properly so called, is a much less systematic collection of individual shorthand gestures some of which vary from place to place but which nevertheless provide the chief means of communication among a large number of deaf people - especially among the older generation. The adaptation of the language of liturgical texts for use with the deaf has to take into account the restrictions imposed on the expression of ideas by those commonly understood signs and gestures.

A Eucharistic Prayer for the deaf

To meet these special needs of deaf people, a new eucharistic prayer is presented here. It has been composed by a group of priests expert in the pastoral care of the deaf, in consultation with theologians and liturgists. Its form and content closely follows the eucharistic prayers of the Roman Rite.

Signing the Eucharistic Prayer

This prayer is intended to be signed by the celebrant himself. In the past it has not always been possible for chaplains, especially part-time chaplains, to master the extensive repertoire of signs and the ability to finger-spell fluently – an accomplishment demanded by even the shortest of the eucharistic prayers of the Roman Rite. For this reason some chaplains have made extensive use of ‘interpreters’ who ‘signed’ the Mass while the celebrant ‘said’ the Mass – sometimes with little reference to the deaf Congregation. Though helpful to the deaf, this approach tended to draw their attention away from the celebrant to the interpreter, who was naturally communicating to them much more directly than the priest. This new prayer restores the attention of the deaf to the central figure, the celebrant, because it provides a text that can reasonably be signed even by a part-time chaplain.

The text which is offered here can be signed with considerable accuracy. The traditional form of signing the eucharistic prayer could be both laborious and obscure, since the signs employed were often a poor reflection of the ideas behind the rich and allusive language of the official text. In this prayer considerable attention has been paid to the choice of words, so that there is no confusion between the spoken word, which can often be lip-read, and the sign which signifies that word.

This new text should be signed by the celebrant with dignity and without undue haste. Sign language can have a dignity and a beauty all of its own. The prayer has been kept deliberately short, in order to avoid the appearance of a wordy text that would invite an excess of signs and give the impression of over activity. Care has been taken also to avoid childish language; there is no reason why this

prayer should not express all the calm and meditative dignity that we would demand of a eucharistic prayer for hearing adults.

Acclamations and responses

The handicap of deafness not only impairs the ability to hear; it also affects the ability to speak clearly or to speak in unison with other people. Consequently, the use of short responses to encourage participation is not always practical. Although this text retains acclamations and responses, these have been adapted in order to allow a more effective participation by the deaf in the prayer.

Conscious, active and interior participation

At a deeper level, however, this new eucharistic prayer aims to foster a degree of response far beyond that of a verbal acclamation. It is hoped that this prayer will enable deaf people to come into closer contact with the saving power of Jesus Christ through an intelligent and well informed awareness of the mystery of Christ. It is hoped that, with the direct experience of this prayer to help them, they will be able to participate more fully even in parish Masses where there is no special provision for their handicap, and so take their natural place in the praying community of the universal Church.