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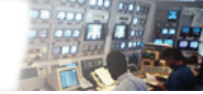
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## A welcoming Church for deaf persons in Malta

by The Deaf Ministry Team

The Church in Malta can be said to have formally expressed such commitment when in 2006 it issued a post-synodal document: Lejn Knisja (Towards a more Inclusive Church. The Role of Persons with Disability in the Life and Mission of the Church.)

Before and after the publication of this document concrete steps were taken by the Church in Malta to increase access and inclusion of people with disability in all Church activities. Nonetheless, the Church in Malta humbly acknowledges that there is still much more that she can do to be a more 'welcoming home' (Lejn Knisja Dejjem Aktar Inkluziva, 2). In this article we would like to acknowledge the Church's growing commitment towards deaf people who for many years may not have been given enough attention by the local Church.

A year ago, a Deaf Ministry Team was set up within the Archdiocese of Malta. The team includes two deaf persons, two University lecturers, two priests and a sign language interpreter. The aim of this team is to support deaf persons in their faith and to encourage and strengthen their participation in the life and mission of the Church.

The Deaf Ministry Team has been instrumental in the following accomplishments:

- The participation by a Maltese delegation which included two deaf persons in the XXIV International Conference organised by the Pontifical Council for Health Care Workers in the Vatican last year on the theme: Ephphatha! The Deaf Person in the Life of the Church.
- The financial support which the Church makes to the sign language interpretation of Sunday Masses. Throughout the winter these take place at 7.30pm every Saturday at the University Chapel. During the summer holidays, this service continues every Sunday morning at St Publius parish church in Floriana.
- The interpretation into Maltese Sign Language of the Bishop's pastoral letters on DVD and also made available on YouTube by the Communications Office of the Archdiocese.
- A deaf member of the team is representing the deaf on the Diocesan Pastoral Commission for Persons with Disability.

The Deaf Ministry Team under the auspices of the Maltese Sign Language Project of the University of Malta, Institute of Linguistics, has worked on a number of areas:

- A number of common prayers are being recorded into Maltese sign language and made available on YouTube. These prayers are being written using Valerie Sutton's Sign Writing and a Prayer Book is being prepared for the deaf.
- The Sunday Mass readings are also being recorded in Maltese Sign Language and made available on YouTube. The aim of this part of the project is to complete a missal for the deaf in their native language. At the same time the Scripture passages in Maltese Sign Languages are being compiled so that the Maltese deaf community will be able to access most Scripture passages in their native sign language.
- Seminars for Sign Language Interpreters who interpret the Mass for deaf people to better understand the language and symbols of the Mass.
- Training of a priest, Rev Martin Micallef, and a deacon, Rene Cilia to support deaf people by acquiring higher level competence in Maltese Sign Language in order to minister the sacraments and specifically to sign Mass directly in Maltese sign language. This will mean that the Maltese deaf would have full access to the sacraments, liturgy and catechesis in their native language.
- Every Christmas Eve a priest signs the Holy Mass directly to the deaf in Maltese sign language.
- A Bible group for the deaf has been set up and will start to meet in 2011.
- A facebook account (Deaf Ministry Malta) has been set up where pastoral information and resources are made available to deaf persons amongst others.
- A visit to Malta in April 2011 by Fr Cyril Axelrod, a deaf and blind priest who has been active in pastoral ministry with deaf and deaf-blind people in many parts of the world for many years. He will be meeting the local deaf community, giving a public lecture and a retreat for

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members of the deaf community and the deaf-blind.

- Sign language interpreter Maria Galea, in consultation with Fr Martin Micallef and Fr Paul Sciberras, and two deaf researchers Dorianne Callus and Karl Borg are working on making the liturgy of the Mass available to the Maltese Deaf Community through Maltese Sign Language (on DVD) and in print through the use of Valerie Sutton's system of sign-writing. This work is being done under the auspices of the Maltese Sign Language Research Project of the Institute of Linguistics at the University of Malta.

The Deaf Ministry Team is committed to continue encouraging the local Church authorities to invest in adequately prepared priests, other pastoral workers and trained sign language interpreters. This is the only way for deaf members of the Church to participate fully in parish life and the liturgy, to learn about their faith and to contribute to the life of the church. May all deaf people in Malta find in the Church "a welcoming home."

The Deaf Ministry Team: Maria Galea, Lily Mulvaney, Giannella Azzopardi, Fr Martin Micallef, Fr Paul Sciberras and Dr Marie Alexander.

Those who would like to contact The Deaf Ministry Team can do so by sending an email to: [maltadeafministry@yahoo.com](mailto:maltadeafministry@yahoo.com)

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