

SignWriting in the Roman Catholic Liturgy

In every society there are different categories of people. So in The Roman Catholic Church we have community of: children, youth, elderly, spouses, divorced, patients, blind, deaf and hard of hearing, ... Therefore we are talking about the various forms of our pastoral work. For example, we talk about hospital pastoral care, pastoral care of prisoners, the pastoral care of soldiers and their families, pastoral care of the blind and partially sighted, pastoral care of the deaf and hard of hearing and other pastoral services. Some decades ago the priest on a parish was determined for all his parishioners, regardless of which category they have belonged. But today we take into account the fact that with different people category we can't work on the same way. We also take into account that different people have different charisms. Among the various forms of pastoral communities operating in the Catholic Church in Slovenia we have also a community of Deaf and hard of Hearing. Specificity of this community lies in the fact, that all our activities and the liturgy are performed in Sign language.

Pastoral work in sign language in community of Deaf and hard of hearing are starting by individual priests or monks / nuns, who were often in direct contact with deaf people within their own families or relatives. Thanks to their charism, enthusiasm and unselfishly work for Deaf and hard of Hearing, among pastoral workers today can be also found this one which in their families were not in direct contact with deafness. Even if they can hear, they simply feel affection for the deaf and hard of hearing and they gladly devote their time, knowledge and skills and with them share his own experience of faith and they are happy in their ministry to deaf and hard of hearing.

As a priest and pastoral worker, serving my ministry here in Slovenian in Slovenian Sign language I dare to say that spoken language among most deaf people does not apply in its grammatical form. Most of them are not proficient in technical and professional terms, and therefore don't use them. With similar problems we face also in religious or theological field. Theology and Christian terminology in most cases is very complex and therefore for deaf and hard of hearing quite incomprehensible.

Why is for Deaf so hard to recapture the faith, to understand the Bible and to practice personal faith and prayer?

As a priest, I note that the majority of deaf people are very difficult to recapture faith in the God and for them is too difficult to express their own religious feelings in sign language. Of course a deaf person knows that we used prayer books in which we find various prayers and rituals for Masses. But majority of them don't fully understand these texts. If you don't fully understand some text, you are not attracted to read them so on and to memorize them. This may be a point why many Deaf don't practice prayer in his life. To speak a mother language without being given the opportunity to pray in own language and to understand the prayers and rituals in the mother language it raises different questions and doubts. Recently many pastoral workers around the world enriched local sign languages with a new theological terms and new theological signs. It is very good for the development of sign languages.

What are other reasons that is for Deaf so hard to recapture the faith, to understand the Bible and to practice personal faith and prayer?

Among the others reasons, it is also problem in illiteracy in sign language. Some pastoral workers around the world are probably informed that sign language can be written. Both of them educational institutions for the hearing impaired as well as pastoral workers do maybe too little to be sign language written. Mainly all we are apologising that the number of users of sign languages decline from year to year. Among the interpreters, teachers and deaf also we need more will and motivation for literacy in Sign language. The fact that there are so little users of some language should not be a reason not to write them.

In literacy in sign language we can find the further development of sign language, more efficient studying his semiotics, development of linguistics for Sign languages and complete realization of the personality of the deaf and hard of hearing.

Literacy is for faith and theology highly necessary because it helps to develop both personal faith for the deaf and standardization of liturgical texts.

This is the reason why I as the theologian and priest began with writing Sign language here in Slovenia. Why I chose SignWriting among many others systems used for recording Sign language? The answer is in its universality and precision in recording all details which are very important for a Sign language.

Some facts:

1. In the majority Deaf people are not proficient enough in spoken language.
2. Prayers and rituals are for hearing people available in many prayer books, religious newspaper, internet, TV broadcasts but very rarely in sign language. This is the main problem why is for Deaf and Hard of Hearing so hard to understand and practice personal prayer and liturgy.
3. In the Catholic Church in our community of Deaf and Hard of Hearing we need texts from Bible, prayer books, liturgical books and other literature written in Sign language also.
4. For the priests, interpreters and other pastoral co-workers it is very important to use Sign language in written form also.
5. In the Catholic Church prayer and liturgical blank forms for sign languages are mostly based on blank forms for spoken language because there are no one liturgical blank forms in Sign language. Prayers and Holy Mass by every priest, interpreter and other pastoral co-workers are interpreted on his own way. It is often happens that in the same sign language even for the base prayers like Our Father don't exist in a universal signing form. In everyday personal life and in a community it is for deaf and hard of hearing very difficult to practice such different signing form for the same prayer. We can't say that liturgy in one sign language has universal form. Interpreted Holy Mass in Sign language is often based on interpreter's and priest's skills, on his theological education and on his temper, because they haven't before themselves any texts in SignWriting. Liturgy and main prayers like Our Father, Hail Mary, Creed, must never

be under influence of it. Only his external form may be under influence of a person: slow-fast, a loud-silent....

6. Translation of liturgical texts is under the supervision of the Vatican Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments. For one language area liturgical texts have official version by nihil obstat and imprimatur. In liturgy for sign language we still have a great amateurism.
7. Many Catholic communities of Deaf and Hard of hearing would like to standardize liturgy and main prayers with the help of video records. But to have liturgy in written forms, for example in SignWriting system, this is something unique.
8. Any doubts, is it liturgical text in sign language are used in a valid way would have been eliminate if the liturgical text will be used in written form (SignWriting). Using SignWriting we would have liturgical texts which could be used by pastoral workers avoiding both the direct translation of the liturgy and liturgical texts and discord in the application of liturgical signing.