

Church, archdiocese turns attention to deaf

When the Vatican hosts a conference on increasing the role of deaf people in the Catholic Church Nov. 19 to 21, Eileen Colarusso will be watching on from the Archdiocese of Baltimore with great interest.

As coordinator of the archdiocese's deaf ministry, Colarusso has been fighting for greater involvement amongst the deaf population.

"It's just huge that the 'voice' of the deaf community is going to be heard at the Vatican at the highest levels of the church," Colarusso said. "Hopefully it will all trickle down to the local church."

The Pontifical Council for Health Care Ministry decided to dedicate its annual international conference this year to the condition, needs and experiences of deaf people, including deaf religious and laypeople and their families.

The theme of the gathering, "Ephphatha: Deaf People in the Life of the Church," recalls the Aramaic word meaning "be opened" that Jesus used to heal a deaf man.

According to Colarusso, a survey by the National Center for Health Statistics found that there were 7,638 people who claimed they could not hear in the Archdiocese of Baltimore, 1,295 of which said they were Catholic.

A separate survey done by the Gallaudet Research Institute, found that there were 6,110 people who identified themselves as culturally deaf in the archdiocese, which meant they spoke American Sign Language. That survey found that 1,036 of those people were Catholic.

While both surveys discovered more than 1,000 Catholics were in the archdiocese, Colarusso believes less than 200 regularly attend church.

She added that 95 percent of deaf people are born to hearing parents.

Although there is not one definitive reason for the lack of participation, Colarusso

said there are a variety of factors. Some Christian denominations have offered services to deaf people that have proven attractive. Colarusso said she could not speak to what was offered in those outreaches.

Many deaf children attend state-run schools, where faith formation is non-existent.

Colarusso has been teaching an after-school religion class at the Maryland School for the Deaf in Columbia the last five years and is hoping to restart one soon at MSD's Frederick campus.

A lack of sign language interpreters and signing priests also are reasons for disconnect, Colarusso said.

"It's not anybody's fault," Colarusso added.

Colarusso said tremendous strides are being made at the parish level and that pastors are eager to learn more.

Sixteen churches in the archdiocese have sign language interpreters. According to Colarusso, there are 11 deaf priests currently in the United States, but none serve this archdiocese.

Father Michael Carrion, pastor of Baynesville's Immaculate Heart of Mary, celebrates a Mass for deaf people in sign language at Shrine of the Little Flower, Baltimore.

"I really do believe that if there is a hearing or deaf priest who signs very well, then more deaf people are actively involved," Colarusso said.

She hopes to stoke interest in signing amongst seminarians.

Children have attended regular religious education programs at St. Mark, Catonsville, and Our Lady of Perpetual Help, Ilchester, with the help of an interpreter.

St. John the Evangelist in Frederick is believed to have the largest deaf population in the archdiocese.

“They feel welcome there,” Colarusso said, adding that many deaf children receive sacraments there.

Ellicott City’s Church of the Resurrection has strong deaf involvement, including extraordinary ministers of the Holy Communion.

Colarusso has met with many parishes to offer help in reaching out to deaf Catholics, who can become lectors.

Deaf ministry, she said, is an important call for Catholics.

“As a church, we seek to evangelize,” Colarusso said. “We want to bring them the good news of Jesus Christ and his salvation. If they have been baptized Catholic, that is their baptismal right.”

The Catholic News Service contributed to this story.