

Deaf community enjoys Mass with Archbishop Lori and deaf priest

URBANA - To someone standing outside St. Ignatius of Loyola's historic country church, the morning might have seemed rather quiet. Inside, however, conversations flowed among the congregation in American Sign Language (ASL).

Archbishop William E. Lori was preparing to celebrate Mass June 24 with the deaf community - the first Baltimore archbishop to do so, according to the archdiocesan deaf ministry office.

"What I cannot say with my hands, allow me to say with my heart," Archbishop Lori said, as he began his homily, which was interpreted into ASL.

He discussed the importance of finding a champion to support one's faith life, and also how to be that pillar for others. It was a topic that resonated for St. Ignatius parishioner Kamilla Jakubowyc.

"His homily was beautiful," Kamilla communicated through Antonio "Cisco" Vigil, an ASL interpreter. "It was directly from his heart, and it really applied to our deaf community, our everyday life and how to be a John the Baptist and help encourage other people to do beautiful things."

Kamilla said the Mass was a "beautiful experience."

"It was a very packed church and there were people even in the balconies," communicated her husband, John, through Vigil. "It was the first time we had such a big number fill this church up."

St. Ignatius' main church is located in Ijamsville, while the historic country church where the deaf mass was celebrated, is located in Urbana.

The congregation remained seated throughout Mass to allow the community to easily view the interpretations.

Oblate of St. Francis de Sales Father Michael Depcik of the Archdiocese of Detroit,

who visits St. Ignatius when he can to celebrate Mass in ASL, concelebrated. Most of the time, the Jakubowyc family attends Mass in the main church with an ASL interpreter.

“It was very honoring to have both of them (Archbishop Lori and Father Depcik) here,” Kamilla said.

The Jakubowyc’s children, Daniel (11), Matthew (9) and Emma (6), are also deaf and enjoy when Father Depcik is able to visit. Daniel and Matthew are the altar servers when the country church hosts a deaf Mass.

“Deaf Catholics still go to Mass,” John said. “We are just as enthusiastic as our hearing parishioners, our hearing congregation.”

“We love God just the same, just as hearing people do, but in our minds we think in ASL,” Kamilla said. “We hope that we can finally acquire a hearing priest that can sign and serve us. Mass through an interpreter is a three-way communication, so we prefer to have Mass given directly to us in our language, so that our numbers can grow.”

The greater Baltimore and Washington, D.C., area has one of the largest deaf populations in the country. As the Maryland School for the Deaf is located in Frederick, it, as well as its suburbs such as Ijamsville, have particularly large communities.

“The deaf people really are hungry and are calling for their language,” Father Depcik communicated through Vigil. “It’s the same as the Spanish community. The Spanish community loves a priest who can speak in Spanish, same as Vietnam community who would prefer a priest that can speak their own language. Going through an interpreter sometimes diminishes the message, so it (is) wonderful if we have someone who can directly communicate with us.”

Father Depcik focuses on his deaf congregation in Michigan, but he also travels to celebrate Mass and offer retreats across the country. He posts a weekly homily on his website, “Fr. MD’s Kitchen Table,” as an outreach to members of the deaf community who do not have access to a priest who is fluent in ASL.

“Sometimes it feels like frustration can take over, that maybe the general church can overlook a deaf person as an invisible person,” he said when asked what he wants the deaf community of the Archdiocese of Baltimore to know. “Please do not give up. Keep going. We are still members of the church and we are part of Christ’s body.”

Chris Duck, the archdiocese’s coordinator of deaf ministry, said he is working diligently to make the Catholic Church a welcoming and comfortable environment for the deaf community. He worked for 40 years at the Maryland School for the Deaf as a behavior specialist before beginning in his current position in July 2017.

A significant number of deaf Catholics are not actively participating in their parishes, he said. Having an interpreter provides access, Duck added, but not necessarily a feeling of involvement.

“I feel like it’s something we can do better,” he said.

Frederick’s deaf community requested that the archbishop celebrate Mass with them. Duck noted that Archbishop Lori visited with every person during the potluck that followed the Mass.

“It was so meaningful to the deaf community and each individual,” Duck said.

The Mass was also served by Deacon Joe Knepper of St. Paul in Ellicott City.

After losing hearing in his left ear, Deacon Knepper was unable to serve Mass for two and a half years due to severe vertigo in loud environments. He is learning ASL, and was able to sign some of the deacon’s parts during this Mass.

He called the experience a “real joy,” and will continue to hone his ASL skills through retreats and deaf bible studies.

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