

Policy for Working with Sign Language Interpreters in Catholic Religious Settings

National Catholic Office for the Deaf

Introduction:

The National Catholic Office for the Deaf (NCOD) is dedicated to promoting pastoral ministry with persons who are deaf or hard of hearing through pastoral workers, bishops and pastors, catechists and families with deaf children.

NCOD is publishing this Policy for Working with Sign Language Interpreters in Catholic Religious Settings in response to repeated requests for such a policy from many dioceses, parishes and agencies serving deaf persons. This policy statement was developed in consultation with deaf persons. It reflects the expertise and extensive experience of pastoral workers and of interpreters who work in religious settings.

While no policy statement can address every question or respond to all possible situations, this statement does establish basic principles for sign language interpreting in religious settings and sets forth a standard for making church functions accessible to deaf persons.

What is an Interpreter? ¹

What does an Interpreter do?

A professional sign language interpreter translates between spoken language (such as English or Spanish) and a form of manual communication (sign language). The interpreter facilitates communication so that the parties involved have equal access to information. The interpreter is not to be involved in the discussion or do any other tasks.

An interpreter must be fluent in both the spoken language and the signed language used in order to accurately convey the message. Most professional interpreters have completed a minimum of two to four years of study of deaf community, deaf culture and sign language before beginning their careers.

Deaf and hard of hearing persons use a variety of communication modes, including American Sign Language (ASL, a true language that does not follow English grammar

rules), contact signing (previously referred to as Pidgin Sign English (PSE, which borrows vocabulary from ASL while preserving English word order)) and the oral method (which depends primarily on lip-reading). Knowing which method an individual or group prefers will determine what type of interpreting skills are needed and what the interpreter should expect upon arrival.

Professional interpreters are bound by the Code of Ethics of the Registry of Interpreters of the Deaf (RID), including:

- the interpreter shall keep all information strictly confidential
- the interpreter will accurately translate the spirit and intent of the parties involved, using language most readily understood by those who are being served
- the interpreter will not counsel, advise or interject personal opinion
- the interpreter will accept interpreting assignments using discretion with regard to skill, setting and consumers involved

When is an Interpreter Needed?

Many deaf and hard of hearing persons depend on a sign language or oral interpreter to enable them to be fully involved in whatever is going on around them.

An interpreter should be made available whenever a deaf or hard of hearing person or the parent/guardian of a deaf or hard of hearing child requests the services of an interpreter to participate in situations such as meetings, educational classes, medical/legal appointments, workshops, retreats and religious events. The preference of the person requesting the service should be honored; it is the responsibility of the sponsoring agency or institution to make every effort to provide the interpreting service according to the format requested.

Offering a sign language interpreter when advertising an event such as a conference or workshop will encourage deaf people to attend, and will equalize access to opportunities that previously have been available only to the hearing population.

According to the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), no individual shall be denied full and equal enjoyment of the goods, services, facilities, privileges, advantages, and accommodations of any place of public accommodation on the basis of disability. Auxiliary aids and services must be provided to individuals with hearing impairments. This includes the provision of professional interpreting services. (Title III)

Catholic churches and organizations are further challenged by the Pastoral Statement of U.S. Catholic Bishops of People with Disabilities (promulgated Nov. 16, 1978) which stated that the Church must defend the rights of persons with disabilities to achieve the

fullest measure of personal development of which he or she is capable— including the right to equal opportunity in education, in employment, in housing, as well as the right to free access to public accommodations, facilities and services.+(Section II, Paragraph 7)

It is essential that all forms of the liturgy be completely accessible to people with disabilities, since these forms are the essence of the spiritual tie that binds the Christian community together. To exclude members of the parish from these celebrations of the life of the Church, even by omission, is to deny the reality of that community— Realistic provision must be made for persons with disabilities to participate fully in the Eucharist and other liturgical celebrations such as the sacraments of Reconciliation, Confirmation and Anointing of the Sick. — Celebrating liturgies simultaneously in sign language enables the deaf person to enter more deeply into their spirit and meaning.+(Pastoral Statement of the U.S. Catholic Bishops on People with Disabilities+(Paragraph 23)

How do I Work with an Interpreter?

Be comfortable with the interpreter; the interpreter's job is to facilitate communication. Everything that is interpreted will remain confidential for the interpreter; it is a violation of interpreting ethics to reveal anything communicated to an outside party. Speak naturally, clearly and at a normal rate; the interpreter will inform the speaker if he or she needs to adjust the rate of speaking. Allow extra time for responses and discussion; the interpreter will be a little behind the conversation. Face the deaf person(s) while speaking; this will feel awkward at first, since the deaf person(s) will be watching the interpreter and may not always be in direct eye contact with the speaker. Avoid phrases such as "Tell him—" or "Ask her—" ; speak as if the interpreter were not there. Avoid asking the interpreter for an opinion or to explain something.

How Do I Find an Interpreter?

First, determine the basic information concerning the event (date(s), times, duration, nature of the event) and the kind of sign language the deaf persons/group prefers. Second, obtain a referral for a qualified interpreter. Sources to contact include the local agency that coordinates interpreter services, the local Deaf Ministry Office or the National Catholic Office for the Deaf (NCOD). NCOD offers referrals for diocesan contacts for interpreting in religious settings. Contact NCOD at (301) 587-7992 V/TTY or (301) 585-5084 TTY only. In some dioceses, the local Catholic Deaf Ministry Office will directly recruit, hire and pay interpreters working at parish liturgies and other events. It is strongly recommended that parish staffs work with the Catholic Deaf Ministry Office whenever such an office exists within an (arch) diocese.

For situations lasting two or more hours, two (or more) interpreters should be used and should rotate every 20 to 30 minutes, at the interpreters' discretion.

General Principles and Policies for Working with Interpreters in Religious Settings

1) Interpreting is a distinct role, requiring an interpreter's complete attention. It is not possible for a person to both participate and interpret at an event. Thus, it is unfair to expect a parent, relative or friend who is attending a function also to serve as an interpreter. A third party is needed to allow all to participate fully.

2) Competence is essential in selecting an interpreter. Competence includes necessary fluency in sign language and in the language being spoken (English, Spanish, etc.), adherence to the Code of Ethics, and knowledge of Catholic and religious vocabulary and signs. Knowledge of Catholic belief and practice is certainly desirable, and may be a necessity in some situations (e.g. a theological talk or a catechetical conference). An interpreter is expected to use the mode of communication preferred by the deaf person(s), i.e. American Sign Language (ASL), Contact Signing (Pidgin Signed English), etc. Deaf persons have the right to work with an interpreter whom they understand clearly and with whom they feel comfortable.

3) When hiring interpreters regularly, it is ideal to work with the same interpreter or group of interpreters each time.

4) Interpreters perform a professional function and have professional training; in justice, they have a right to compensation. Paying interpreters is the responsibility of the sponsoring parish, agency, or institution, not the deaf individual, the family or guardians. Compensation rates vary from place to place and usually vary with the interpreter's level of certification and experience. Some interpreters prefer to volunteer their services, but that is the interpreter's choice, not the sponsor's. Do not expect all interpreters to volunteer because one or more has volunteered in the past.

5) Good visibility is crucial to interpreting. Ideally, interpreter and deaf persons are close to each other. Sight lines need to be clear and unobstructed; reserved seating for deaf persons in front usually accomplishes this. Good lighting . bright, but not glaring . is essential. Ideally, an interpreter works in front of a neutral background; i.e., plain, single dull or darker color, without decorations or persons moving about. Interpreters generally wear clothing that contrasts with their skin tone and little jewelry to make seeing their signs easier. Lack of contrast or bright background lighting/colors can cause eye strain for deaf persons.

6) Some situations, such as working with a deaf/blind individual, require one-on-one interpreting. In such cases, the interpreter and participant require nearness, i.e., sitting across from or next to one another.

Policies for Working with Interpreters at Mass and the Celebration of the Sacraments

General Principle: Interpreting at Mass or any liturgical celebration demands a special role on the part of the interpreter. Ordinarily, an interpreter facilitates communication so that the parties involved have equal access to information. In a prayer setting, an interpreter's role is not merely to convey information, but to facilitate the deaf people's full and active participation in the liturgy. (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, paragraph 14) Accordingly, the interpreter is best understood as one of the liturgical ministers, with a proper role and function, as are the lector, song leader, servers and Eucharistic ministers.

1) At the vast majority of liturgies, a single interpreter works throughout. However, it is appropriate to utilize several interpreters at a liturgy (i.e., a different interpreter for the presider, the lector and the music, in keeping with the various liturgical roles), for special celebrations. When a deaf person proclaims the readings in sign language, the interpreter proclaims the readings orally (voices the readings).

2) Deaf persons must focus on the interpreter for everything that is spoken. For deaf persons to be able to see and therefore participate in the action of the liturgy, it is necessary for the interpreter to be as close as possible to that action. Ordinarily, this means that the interpreter will stand near the presider at the chair, the pulpit, and the altar, and near the lector during the readings. In churches with very large sanctuaries, such as a cathedral, it may be advantageous for the deaf participants if the interpreter is closer to them, outside the sanctuary. In such cases, the interpreter should be in line of sight with the altar. It is never appropriate to place the deaf congregation and the interpreter on the side or out of the sight of the liturgy.

3) The interpreter should be given a copy of all texts used in the service in advance. These include the readings, petitions, lyrics for all songs, commentary and, if possible, the homily. Translation of any foreign language text (e.g. Latin or Spanish) should be made available as well. An interpreter may wish to have a music stand during the service to enable quick reference to a text.

4) Some song lyrics are difficult to translate into sign language. Ideally, a representative of the deaf community or an interpreter can be part of the liturgy planning process, to enable the choice of selections meaningful and accessible to all.

5) Changes to a liturgy plan, especially in the texts or choice of music, need to be given to the interpreter as soon as possible. It is also helpful to inform an interpreter of any special aspects or elements to the service, such as a procession. Interpreters are expected to be available to sign for any pre-service announcements or practices.

6) Interpreters may wish to consider wearing colors that coordinate with the liturgical season or feast, especially if other liturgical ministers do so. Wearing a gown or choir robe (as liturgical ministers do in some parishes) may be problematic for an interpreter because of the long, flowing sleeves typical of such gowns/robes.

7) Especially when a parish begins providing interpreted Masses on a regular basis, it is appropriate to provide some orientation to the hearing congregation. This orientation can include some basic information about deaf people and sign language, the role of an interpreter in allowing deaf persons to participate fully in the liturgy and practical information about which Mass(es) will be interpreted, where the deaf members of the congregation will be seated, etc. It can be particularly effective when a deaf person can address the congregation and explain what interpreting the liturgy means to him/her. It may also be helpful to ask the regular interpreter to provide input for or give one of these orientations. Most hearing persons find that the interpreting actually adds to the beauty and prayerfulness of a liturgy. Even those few who initially find the interpreting distracting usually become accustomed to it within a few weeks.

¹Technically, a distinction is made between sign language interpretation and sign language transliteration. Sign language interpretation converts American Sign Language (ASL) into spoken English and spoken English into ASL. It involves working with two distinct languages. Sign language transliteration converts signed English into spoken English and spoken English into signed English. Basically, it involves working with the syntax/linguistic structure of one language, English. For the purposes of this policy statement, interpreting includes both sign language interpreting and transliterating.

The sections "What Does an Interpreter Do?", "When is an Interpreter Needed?" (all but the last paragraph) and "How Do I Work with an Interpreter?" are copied, with modifications, from Link to Communication: Using an Interpreter for the Deaf, Catholic Deaf Center, Orange, California. Used with Permission.