

Guidelines for Working with American 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 with bishops, pastors, pastoral workers, catechists and families.

NCOD is publishing these “Guidelines for Working with American Sign Language Interpreters in Catholic Religious Settings” in response to repeated requests from many arch/dioceses, parishes and agencies serving deaf persons. These guidelines have been developed over time in consultation with deaf persons, pastoral workers and interpreters and, therefore, reflects their expertise and extensive experience in religious settings.

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

What is an Interpreter?

The role of the interpreter is to provide both hearing and deaf people with equal access to information and interactions. Achieving this requires a wide range of skills and abilities. Interpreters must have a high level of fluency in two or more languages, a keen ability to focus on what is being said, broad-based world knowledge, and professional, ethical conduct.

Interpreters serve all parties in the communication exchange. While we often think of the deaf person as the consumer of interpreter services, the reality is, all parties involved have an equal and mutual need for the interpreter.

In the most prominent type of interpreting in the U.S., interpreters interpret between two distinct languages—American Sign Language (ASL) and English. ASL interpreting occurs in two ways: simultaneously and consecutively. According to the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID), interpreting is the act of conveying meaning between people who use signed and/or spoken languages (RID Motion

C2019.14). For people who are deafblind, protactile interpreters provide linguistic information and other environmental information through touch. Another way of interpreting to deafblind individuals is through tactile ASL interpretation, which provides a modified ASL that is signed into the deafblind person's hand.¹

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

Deaf and hard of hearing persons use a variety of communication methods, including American Sign Language (ASL, a true language with its own linguistic grammatical structure that is distinct from English grammar), contact signing (previously known as "Pidgin Signed English" (PSE), which borrows vocabulary from ASL while preserving English word order) and spoken English (which depends primarily on lip-reading).² Knowing which method an individual or group prefers will determine what type of interpreting skills are needed and what the interpreter should expect prior to arrival.

Professional interpreters are bound by the *Code of Professional Conduct (CPC)* of the Registry of Interpreters of the Deaf (RID), which includes, but is not limited to, the following tenets:

- Interpreters adhere to standards of confidential communication.
- Interpreters possess the professional skills and knowledge required for the specific interpreting situations.
- Interpreters conduct themselves in a manner appropriate to the specific interpreting situation.
- Interpreters demonstrate respect for consumers.
- Interpreters maintain ethical business practices.³

All interpreters, including volunteer and uncertified interpreters, are expected to follow the same Code of Professional Conduct when applicable or appropriate.

When is an Interpreter Needed?

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

An interpreter should be made available whenever a deaf or hard of hearing person is

¹ (National Deaf Center on Postsecondary Education 2022)

² (NC Division of Services for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing 2015)

³ (National Association of the Deaf and Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, Inc. 2005)

expected to participate in situations such as meetings, educational classes, workshops, retreats and other religious events. This ensures full communication access for all parties in the event. The communication preference of the deaf or hard of hearing participant 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 sign language interpretation when advertising an event such as a conference, workshop, or parish or diocesan celebration will encourage deaf people to attend and equalize access to opportunities that previously have been available only to the hearing population.

Catholic churches and organizations are challenged by the *Pastoral Statement of U.S. Catholic Bishops on Persons with Disabilities (November 1978, revised 1989)*. It states 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...If persons with disabilities are to become equal partners in the Christian community...the leaders and the general membership of the Church must educate themselves to appreciate fully the contribution persons with disabilities can make to the Church’s spiritual life....[F]ull participation in the Christian community has another important aspect that must not be overlooked. When we think of persons with disabilities in relation to ministry, we tend automatically to think of doing something for them. We do not reflect that they can do something for us and with us....they have the same duty as all members of the community to do the Lord’s work in the world, according to their God-given talents and capacities.” (paragraphs 7, 14 and 18)

The Pastoral Statement concludes “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) The Revised Edition of the *Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments for Persons with Disabilities (2020)* provides further guidance on the celebration of specific sacraments, including accommodations for those who are deaf.

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 generally lag the conversation slightly due to processing from one language to the other. 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 directly to the Deaf person as if the interpreter were not there. Avoid asking the interpreter for an opinion or to otherwise participate in the conversation. The interpreter's job is to facilitate communication between the speaker and the deaf person.

How Do I Find an Interpreter?

First, determine the basic information concerning the event (date(s), times, duration, nature of the event) and the communication preference of the deaf persons/group. Second, obtain a referral for a qualified interpreter. Sources to contact include the local *interpreter* agency that coordinates interpreter services, the local Deaf Ministry Office or NCOD. NCOD offers referrals for diocesan contacts for interpreting in religious settings. Contact NCOD by email at info@ncod.org or by phone at 301-841-8209 (VP/voice). In some dioceses, the local Catholic Deaf Ministry Office will directly recruit, hire and pay interpreters working at parish liturgies and other events. If a Catholic Deaf Ministry Office exists within their arch/diocese, it is strongly recommended that parish staff coordinate with that office.

For situations lasting more than 90 minutes, two (or more) interpreters should be used and will generally rotate at the interpreters' discretion.

General Guidelines 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 not appropriate 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 Professional Conduct*, 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 communication form preferred by the deaf person(s), i.e. American Sign Language (ASL). Deaf persons have the right to work with an interpreter whom they understand clearly and with whom they feel comfortable.

3) 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.

4) Good visibility is crucial to interpreting. Ideally, interpreters 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 minimal jewelry to make seeing their signs easier. Clothing and appearance should be professional, modest and appropriate for a church setting. Lack of contrast or bright background lighting/colors can cause eye strain for deaf person.

5) Some situations, such as working with a deafblind 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.

6) Interpreters should be contacted with sufficient time in advance to prepare for the assignment. When possible, this should be at least a week in advance. Interpreters are expected to arrive at scheduled assignments with sufficient time to set up and properly prepare the interpreting environment, and also prepare themselves spiritually to fully participate in the liturgy. Minimally, this would be at least 15 minutes before the event starts.

Guidelines 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 majority of liturgies under 90 minutes, 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. *Appropriate care should be taken to maintain a respectful distance from the presider and/or liturgical action.* 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 on the ambo side. 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. (*The presider should be asked to clarify the desired handling of the homily text after the liturgy is concluded.*) 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. If a chair is to be provided for the interpreter, an armless chair is preferred to prevent constriction of the arms needed for interpreting.

4) Some song lyrics are difficult to translate into sign language. Ideally, a representative of the deaf community should 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 liturgical procession. Interpreters are expected to be available to sign for any pre- or post-service announcements or practices.

6) 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. 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.

References

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Version Control Table		
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