

# ST. MARY'S CHURCH OF THE DEAF: DEMONSTRATING

By Karen M. Franz

Prior to Vatican II, millions of Catholics recited Latin responses by rote and watched as the celebrants, backs to the congregations, performed the mysterious sacrament of the Mass. Despite the sudden upheaval the council created in the late '60s, many Catholics who lived through that period of change now feel that the Vatican II mandates for liturgy in the vernacular and for turning the altar to face the congregation have helped them better understand and participate in the celebration of the Holy Eucharist.

Those mandates, however, may have had the deepest meaning for those who wrestle with every spoken word and who must interpret a turned head as silence. Before the council, explains Father Raymond Fleming, pastor of St. Mary's Church of the Deaf, the Church emphasized the use of Latin in the Mass, not the comprehension level of the congregation. That policy was exacerbated by the Church's paternalistic attitude toward the deaf. "Deaf people were always considered second-class

citizens in the Church structure," Father Fleming says, mimicking, "Those poor deaf people."

In fact, the Church did not even consider the deaf to be fully human, he notes. The philosophies of Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas based the determination of humanity on intelligence, the spark that sets us apart from the animals. Intelligence, in turn, was defined by one's ability to articulate his thoughts through speech. "And, if you were deaf..." Father Fleming trails off. Thus, the deaf were considered — both by the Church and society at large — to be mentally retarded and, in the attitude of the time, "not fully human."

But in time, the Church became the force that finally brought about respect for the humanity of the deaf, Father Fleming adds. Saints Vincent de Paul and Francis de Sales worked with the poor and the deaf, as did many Jansenist priests. In their work, these men learned that the deaf do indeed have the power of language — that they employ manual and body signs to express their intelligence.

Today, the Church's growing role as an advocate

for all life has prompted it increasingly to minister to the handicapped. "Each and every diocese has some ministry to the deaf — from parishes for the deaf to (sign-language) interpreted Masses," Father Fleming notes. "There's no other organization that does that."

Father Fleming's pastorship, which began in July of this year, is a testimony to the gradual change in Church thinking and policy.

The 34-year-old priest became deaf at the age of four as a result of childhood illnesses. He attended regular parochial schools in Butte, Montana, and at 17 enrolled in Gallaudete College for the deaf in Washington, D.C.

During college, Father Fleming became acquainted with the small Washington community of the Third Order of the Regular Franciscans. In order to enter the order's novitiate, he had to obtain a dispensation from Rome. The process, he explains, was uncomplicated but upset him nonetheless. Being required to gain special permission simply because he could not hear made him feel "unclean

and dirty, and not completely put together."

Father Fleming remained with the Franciscans seven years, and calls it a very good community life. "I could not spend the rest of my life in that small group."

In the late '70s, he took the training in deaf teaching ministry and turned it into a career with the National Theater of the Deaf. He served as an actor, playwright and director of a company, which was based in New London, Conn.

After a Cursillo experience in 1979, he felt that he was called to the priesthood. He joined the theater company to various parishes in the country, he sought a Catholic diocese with a high percentage of deaf people and an "open" attitude about the notion of a deaf priest.

"There are many places that would not accept me because I am deaf and seen as less than fully human, thus not worthy of ordination to the priesthood," Father Fleming says, noting that the pre-Vatican II Code of Canon Law required that candidates for the priesthood possess all their limbs and senses.

He came to Rochester where he found a warm reception from then-Bishop Joseph L. Healy, later from Bishop Matthew H. Clark. He served at St. Bernard's Seminary as part of the school's deaf graduating class, and was ordained in 1981. Although a number of U.S. priests have become deaf after ordination, Father Fleming is one



Morton Fenley watches as Father Ray Fleming signs announcements about a parish meeting and coffee hour after Mass.

Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal



Father Fleming introduces a guest homilist.



Father Fleming accepts the offertory gifts.



Morton Fenley, right, interprets the liturgy for his friend, Charles Marchess, who is deaf and blind.