

STRATING GOD'S WORD IN A WORLD OF SILENCE

completely put together." remained with the Franciscans for calls it a very good community. ever, that he was not called to could not spend the rest of my up." he took the training in drama he prepare for the Franciscans' and turned it into a theatrical ronal Theater of the Deaf. He r playwright and director of the as based in New London, Ct. experience in 1979, he began to alled to the priesthood. Traveling ompany to various parts of the it a Catholic diocese with a high f people and an "open" attitude a deaf priest. y places that would not take me and seen as less than perfect, and f ordination to priestly ministry," ys, noting that the pre-Vatican II w required that candidates to the : all their limbs and senses. chester where he found a warm n-Bishop Joseph L. Hogan, and Matthew H. Clark. He entered St. rry as part of the school's last and was ordained in 1982. er of U.S. priests have become er, Father Fleming is one of only

three priests who have been deaf from childhood. Father Fleming explains that he was anxious to enter ministry to the deaf immediately, but that wiser heads on the Priests' Personnel Board prevailed. First, the board told him, he needed to go through the formal priest internship training. He was assigned for three years to St. Rita's Church, Webster, and yet another year at St. Mary of the Assumption, Scottsville. This summer, he was assigned to St. Mary's Church of the Deaf, replacing Father Thomas Erdle who became pastor of St. Mark's Church, Greece. In hindsight, Father Fleming notes that his previous assignments provided invaluable experience. Both parishes were "safe" places in which he could learn by his mistakes, relying on the support of the other members of the parish staffs. At St. Mary's, he is largely on his own. His pastorship, in essence, is a new experience both to pastor and congregation. "It's a new parish, growing in its relationships," Father Fleming says. "We're starting in a sense from ground zero." Four years ago, the diocese asked Father Erdle to find a home for the deaf congregation. He settled upon the basement of St. Mary's Church in downtown Rochester because of the church's central location and the stability of its parish. Although they share the same building and business manager, Sister Rosemary Sherman, RSM, the two St. Mary's churches are entirely separate. St. Mary's Church of the Deaf is almost

entirely funded by the bishop's Annual Thanks Giving Appeal. Most parishes in the diocese have deaf parishioners, Father Fleming notes, and the appeal contributes \$28,000 to the operation of the deaf parish — about 95 percent of the operating budget. "We're hoping that the other parishes will be as generous as St. Mary's has been," he says, noting

In accordance with diocesan policy, St. Mary's Church of the Deaf has a system for parishioner input on decision making. But instead of a parish council, the parish employs open meetings with a board of councilors carrying out the wishes of the entire congregation, Father Fleming explains. Thus, he says, "the community is taking ownership. We all have roles to play as people of God. The

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Father Raymond Fleming

the willingness of the "parish upstairs" to participate in joint liturgies and other activities. "We're two parishes, but we're still one church." Although St. Mary's Church of the Deaf was formally established only three years ago, Rochester's deaf community had been served by Father Erdle, who is not deaf, for 35 years. Father Fleming notes that Father Erdle was the only priest the deaf community had ever really known. Father Erdle had celebrated Mass for the deaf for many years in the chapel at the Pastoral Center and at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf and Rochester Institute of Technology: He had also worked at Rochester School for the Deaf since his seminary days. Thus, the initial months of Father Fleming's pastorship were a period of wondering and questioning among the congregation. Minor difficulties did occur as parishioners adjusted to the fact that their new pastor could not act as interpreter for them as Father Erdle had.

decisions are community decisions, not the pastor's decisions. But Father Fleming's aspirations extend beyond the current congregation. "I would like to see us reaching out to the larger community, even those who are not deaf." The Sunday congregation, he says, has slowly increased. "I consider all (deaf) people as potential parishioners." Yet, he explains, it is difficult to determine how many deaf Catholics have not been reached. "Deafness is a hidden thing. There could be deaf people in many parishes," he says, noting that the ritual of the Mass allows deaf people to participate to some degree hearing. Others, he asserts, have fallen away from Catholicism "because the Church didn't make sense to them. I've seen people walk away, not in anger, but confused, (asking,) 'What is this? It doesn't make sense.'" Deaf people, Father Fleming contends, "need to see God's word and they need to be listened to." When a minister to the deaf does not know sign language or signs poorly, he says, "he can't do either of those effectively."

Father Fleming has a hearing loss of 85-90 decibels. He wears a hearing aid, which he says merely helps him to determine the source of sound. To understand speech, he must rely upon lip reading. On the telephone, for example, he can distinguish only the difference between "yes" and "no." Despite the change, Father Fleming notes, the congregation was very helpful and patient with him as he defined his new role. "There aren't any role models for deaf pastors ... What is my role? How do I perceive it and how does the community as a whole perceive it?" Fresh starts create endless possibilities, and Father Fleming's goals, though general, are ambitious. "I would just like to see down the line a community alive and vibrant and taking charge of a small but growing and dignified church where everyone belongs and enjoys belonging to that community," he says.

Father Fleming notes that that several parishes in this diocese have become sensitive to their deaf parishioners' needs and have initiated sign-interpreted Masses. "But for myself, I would never want to depend on an interpreter," he says. "It says something about the 'people who can't pray. They need a priest to pray for them in a mysterious language.' English (to the deaf) is like Latin." At St. Mary's Church of the Deaf, however, liturgy is easily understood, even by the hearing who benefit from speech interpretation. The texts have been translated to accommodate the grammatical differences between spoken English and signed English, and to make the liturgy sensitive to a deaf congregation. "Lord hear our prayer," for example, becomes "Lord accept our prayer." A guest homilist at a recent liturgy asked the congregation to "bow your heads and pray to God." The faux pas was taken with good humor, but as Father Fleming says, "the deaf lift their heads to pray to God." The service is intimate and meditative, and Father Fleming invites parishioners to gather around the altar for the Consecration. As a member of a deaf Catholic organization called Christians Concerned for the Liberation of the Deaf Community, he has found that others in ministry to the deaf place an equally high value on an open friendly atmosphere. "All of us, when asked to analyze what is the most important thing about worship, answered small numbers, intimacy and everyone knowing everyone else," he says. Although he hopes to reach out to more and more deaf Catholics, he hopes the congregation never grows so large that its intimacy will be lost.



accepts the offertory gifts from Morton Fenley and Charles Marchese.



Marchese, who is deaf and blind, by signing into Marchese's hands.



Richard Smiley signs his response to prayer.

Despite a small gathering that Sunday, participation in worship was high. "Participation is truly important for deaf people," Father Fleming explains. "We don't have missalettes we can hide in ... We can't sit in church with our eyes closed." The hopeful atmosphere seems largely due to Father Fleming's gentleness and enthusiasm for his ministry. "Being pastor is indeed a lot of fun," he says, smiling. "It's an exciting challenge. There's an old saying in this diocese. 'Don't be in a hurry to be a pastor.' I would, indeed, be in a hurry to be a pastor again. The people are so willing to take up their work as the people of God." As to the future and the possibility of ministry to a hearing congregation, Father Fleming is unsure. "I love the work I'm doing and I don't want to change that," he says. "I know I don't want to be pastor here for 35 years, though. Six years with one renewal (the diocesan limitation on a pastor's tenure) sounds about right."