

Interpreters make church accessible to deaf

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Interpreting for the deaf has put Sister Jean Rodman's back up against a wall numerous times.

Every Saturday at 4:30 p.m., Sister Rodman interprets Mass for the deaf members of the Catholic community at the Rochester Institute of Technology. She stands against the chapel's back wall so that everyone can see her as she signs the words of the Mass to those who cannot hear.

Sister Rodman was referred to RIT by the Rochester Center for Independent Living, Inc., not-for-profit resource center for disabled people located at 758 South Ave. RCIL provides interpreters for a variety of functions, ranging from business meetings and educational courses to bar mitzvahs and weddings.

The RIT Catholic community is one of several congregations in the diocese that provide services for the deaf and hearing impaired. About 21 percent of all diocesan parishes regularly provide such services, according to Lucy Dechaine, manager of the Catholic Family Center's Department of Disabled Services.

St. Alphonsus and St. Peter and Paul in Auburn, and St. Stephen's in Geneva also provide interpreters and/or amplification systems for the deaf and hearing impaired, but most of the parishes providing such services are located in Monroe County, according to the latest information from Dechaine's office.

Monroe County even boasts a parish geared specifically to the deaf, St. Mary's Church of the Deaf at 15 St. Mary's Place in Rochester. The parish, located in the basement of St. Mary's Church, offers an audio loop system for the hard of hearing.

Every Sunday, about 50-75 people attend 10 a.m. Mass at the parish, according to Father Raymond H. Fleming, pastor. Father Fleming said the parish has a mailing list of 300 families, and offers a full range of parish services — baptisms, marriages, funerals and the like. The parish also provides religious education for deaf children, he said.

Other Monroe County parishes, including St. Louis in Pittsford, provide interpreters at Mass for their deaf members. Such interpreters are important, Sister Rodman noted, because while many deaf Catholics feel that God is accessible to them, they often don't feel that the church is as accessible.

"The only disability a deaf person has is a hearing person who doesn't know sign language," Sister Rodman remarked, noting that the deaf experience "a deep, frustrating sorrow" when the hearing-impaired are excluded from worship.

Father Louis Hohman, pastor of St. Louis, noted that it was the deaf members of his congregation who originally asked for an interpreter eight years ago. Sister Rodman interprets 9 a.m. Mass every Sunday for anywhere from five to 25 people in the pews, Father Hohman said, although she does this independently from her work with the RCIL.

"It helps a lot to have (deaf people) feel that they are into worship rather than have them on the sidelines," Father Hohman commented, noting that he himself has picked up some sign language from Sister Rodman. The priest now signs the greetings, "The Lord be with you," "Alleluia," and at Communion, "The Body of Christ."

Interpreting the Mass means more than just signing the words of the celebrant, though. Sister Rodman remarked that she lets the deaf know everything that's going

on, from a baby screaming at a baptism to the emotions of a hymn as a choir's voices rise and fall. She confessed that the Mass is one of the most difficult events for an interpreter to translate.

"The sentences tend to be long and convoluted," Sister Rodman said, adding with a laugh, "Priests sometimes mumble. Lectors go at the speed of light."

The challenges Sister Rodman faces are good reasons why parishes should use professional rather than volunteer interpreters, according to Mark Meyers, director of the RCIL's Interpreter Referral Service. Deaf people may be fluent in any one of four deaf languages — American Sign Language, Oral Method, Standard Exact English or Vocalization, Meyers noted. The best interpreters, such as Sister Rodman, are certified to translate in all four languages, whereas a volunteer may be versed in only one language, he said.

But is the cost of hiring an interpreter worth it? RCIL charges \$54 per-two-hours for its interpreters, and although some professional interpreters volunteer to serve at religious functions in their spare time, such people are "not a dime a dozen," according to Sister Rodman.

Despite the daunting financial prospect, Father Fleming said that if the church is willing to pay to provide for other needs, then the needs of the deaf are no different. Generally, any parish will provide an interpreter if one is requested, he said.

Father James J. Marvin, pastor of St. Ambrose in Rochester, keeps three volunteer interpreters on call, but noted that their services are rarely used, mostly at weddings, baptisms and holy days.

Like its parishes, the diocese is increasingly becoming attuned to the needs of deaf Catholics, Father Fleming said, noting that more and more diocesan meetings are sign-interpreted for deaf participants. He also pointed out that two deaf representatives are part of a committee working on plans for a convention of representatives of the diocesan Commitment to Ministry process, in which parishes are studying how best to meet their future ministerial needs.

For Sister Rodman, the answer to the needs of the deaf is not more deaf parishes, but making hearing parishes more accessible to the deaf. For example, deaf parents usually have children who can hear, she said, and most deaf parents want to send their offspring to parish schools, an option unavailable at St. Mary's, which has no school. Switching to St. Mary's also might be a poor solution for a deaf family that has lifelong ties to a hearing parish, she said.

Still, some deaf people prefer to worship with other deaf people at St. Mary's, Sister Rodman said, noting that deaf people live in a different culture, much as members of



Linda Dow Hayes/Catholic Courier
Sister Jean Rodman interprets Saturday afternoon Mass at the Rochester Institute of Technology's campus chapel.

other minority groups do. "No one parish is going to meet everyone's needs," she said.

Either way, reaching the deaf can be a source of joy for the church as it has been for Sister Rodman. Referring to her interpretive work at Masses, she said: "It's just wonderful to be that kind of a bridge be-

tween people who can hear and people who are deaf."

EDITOR'S NOTE: For information on interpreter services, call the RCIL at 716/442-6476 (TDD and voice), preferably 48 hours to one week prior to the actual date of a religious service.

INVITATION TO REPARATION

MAKE THE FIVE 1st. Saturdays of Reparation

Fr. Albert Shamon, Author, Lecturer, Columnist, invites you to listen to the Good News of our Lord Jesus Christ on the following stations every Sunday. WAUB-1590 Auburn, 12:30 p.m.; WSSW-99FM Seneca Falls, 6:15 p.m.; and WGVA-1240 Geneva, 7:45 a.m.

Our Lady of Victory
210 Pleasant St., Downtown Rochester
Rosary & Mass, 10 a.m. - Sacrament of Penance, 11:30 a.m.

St. Alphonsus
95 East Genesee St., Auburn, N.Y.
Sacrament of Penance, 9 a.m. - Rosary & Mass, 10 a.m.

OR MAKE FIVE FIRST SATURDAYS ON YOUR OWN.



Please patronize
our advertisers