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To Speak the Word of God with Our Hands for Those Who Hear with Their Eyes

A Pastoral Synthesis Project by

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Abstract

Deaf people often have been outsiders in a hearing Church. Ninety-five percent of Deaf people are born to hearing parents. This is a Community that is doubly marginalized for they are Latino/as and Deaf. Therefore, I will present the needs of Deaf Latino/a Catholics in order for the Church to recognize them as a Community of faith. First, I present how language impacts the development of culture and identity. Second, how this community of Deaf Latino/as is trying to make sense of their identity as they are being raised in the United States. Finally, I present a plan to bridge the gap between Spanish speaking parents and their Deaf child.

The chapel is suspiciously quiet, despite the fact that there are about one hundred people sitting in pews and chairs; these people appear to be acknowledging each other and possibly talking with one another. There are statues and stained-glass windows in the small chapel, but one experiences the feeling of being in a big parish. Suddenly, the lights go on and off, as if the electricity has had a momentary interruption. One of the leaders of the community indicates to the congregation to stand, everyone stands. The celebrant walks through the middle aisle of the chapel without any music playing in the background and begins to speak. The voice is coming from someone else in the congregation. Though this is a foreign experience for many of us, it is the way Mass starts for many Catholic Deaf Communities.

A Catholic Deaf parish provides a feeling of community. In hearing parishes, there is often an ocean of people rushing to the parking lot immediately after Mass. This never happens in a Catholic Deaf parish. Even on the rare occasions on which a social does not follow the Mass, people always stay around and chat. After spending a week in the hearing world, people will often drive from the far reaches of the diocese to come to the Deaf Mass to socialize with their Deaf friends.

Now imagine yourself in a room where the television is on, the radio is on, someone is asking you a question, while you are trying to listen attentively to another person. The overstimulation of your auditory sense can become distracting and prevent you from focusing on the most important thing being communicated to you. Our liturgy is filled with beautiful and rich symbolism, but it can become very visually “noisy” when viewed through the eyes of the Deaf. For example, while the priest is signing or saying the prayers over the gifts at the offertory, the deacon is at the same time preparing the chalices with water and wine. During a Mass for the Deaf, anything present or moving in the sanctuary can draw the attention of the Deaf

congregation. Therefore, the question is, which action can and should receive the most attention? Sometimes church buildings themselves can be visually “noisy.” They are filled with beautiful statues, icons, and stained-glass windows. While these can create an atmosphere of being in the presence of our God, they can distract from the liturgy itself. Simplifying what is visually present and occurring in a Mass for the Catholic Deaf is an important part of proclaiming the Word of God to the community in a way that will speak to their hearts.

The institutional Church’s “solution” to serve the needs of the Catholic Deaf community is the actual problem. For the Church has long proposed that simply providing an interpreter at a Mass will solve the needs of the Deaf. They have assumed that the needs of the Deaf are a matter of providing seating near the front and an interpreter so they can have access to the liturgy, when in fact that is just the tip of the iceberg. I will therefore discuss the pastoral issues of this triad community that need to be understood as people with their own language, identity, and culture and not just as a group of disabled human beings. Not only do they need to be recognized as such, but also the Church needs foster a sense of Community for all, which include the parents of deaf children and deaf adults in order to continue to pass on their values and beliefs to the next generations. First, I will provide a Deaf perspective on being an outsider in the “hearing Church,” demonstrating the social implications of the Deaf Latino/a’s situation, and their search to be seen as humans and be welcomed into the house of God. Finally, I will provide a plan to include all the members of a family to feel that the Deaf Community is everyone’s Community.

Ninety-five percent of deaf people are born to hearing parents. Therefore, the diagnosis of deafness has been the deciding factor in many of the families that have immigrated to the

United States by any means possible.¹ The search for adequate education and support for the deaf in Latin American countries is sparse and limited to those with the means to afford it. For the most part, it consists of costly private boarding schools. In addition, a diagnosis of deafness happens later in the life of children in Mexico than it does in the United States.² Every parent wants the best for their children, and the United States is the beacon of hope. This means leaving everything they know- their home, their language, their culture, their values-immigrating in the pursuit of a better future for their children. They are faced with struggle of raising a child that communicates differently than they do in a country that is not their own. These families struggle as they are faced with not understanding the rights of their children to have access to health care, the education system, and if there is any hope for their disabled children in the future even though they are undocumented. This community of parents is doubly marginalized by being Latino/a and by their children being labeled as disabled by society. For Hispanic Deaf Catholics, finding a welcoming community of faith is quite difficult because parents would like to attend a Spanish Mass, the hearing children would like to attend a more mainstream Mass in English, and then there is the Deaf child, who does not fit into any of these communities. Therefore, going to Mass on Sundays as a family has become nearly impossible; this event of trying to connect with the triune God has felt like a journey in a hostile environment, rather than finding a community that would accept and accommodate everyone's needs. Where do these people belong, in this land that rejects them for being alien in face, language, and sense? Fernando Segovia states in his

¹ Annie Steinberg M.D. et al., *A Look at the Decision Hispanic Families Make After the Diagnosis of Deafness* (Washington D.C.: Gallaudet University, 2002), 18-19.

² Ibid, 59-60.

book, “Reading from this Place,” it is like “being in two places but nowhere to stand.”³ But what about those that belong to three places, where do they stand?

This group, Latino/a families with deaf and hard of hearing children, are mostly undocumented immigrants with limited resources. Since these Deaf children belong predominantly to hearing families, it is very difficult for them to construct their identity. Deaf Latino/a are left straddling multiples worlds of disconnection. Most Deaf children are born to hearing parents; yet they are cut off from the oral tradition that Hispanic cultures express through storytelling which accompanies the transmission of cultural identity. I can identify with these families for I am a first generation Mexican-American. My parents emigrated from Guadalajara, Mexico, and my first language is Spanish. My sister was born Deaf and I experienced firsthand how my parents struggled with trying to communicate with her in a very different form and how the lack of communication led to feelings of disconnection due to the inability to pass on cultural values and traditions. The most vivid memory that I have was when my sister was about eight years old and started to ask why we would wake up early on a Sunday, go to a “big house” to sit and stand, and not be able to talk to anyone. In the rare occasions when some of our family members would attend the same Mass, my sister could not understand why she could not wave to them and acknowledge them in the “big house.” My mother would point for my sister to focus on the altar and then she finally asked, “Why is he able to come in his pajamas and I can’t?” (with this comment she was referring to the priest wearing a chasuble). These misconceptions by my sister are made by many that lack faith and spiritual formation, but my sister and many others have been fortunate enough to find a community that embraces their mode of communication and curiosity to be able to connect to a God that they cannot see or hear.

³ Fernando Segovia, “Toward a Hermeneutics of the Diaspora: A Hermeneutics of Otherness and Engagement.” In *Reading from this Place* Vol. 1 (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1995). 62.

It says a lot about a society and the Church when a group of hearing lay ministers and ordained come together to decide the best possible course to serve Latino/a Deaf Catholics. For the most part, they come to a consensus that states that the institutional Church believes that if they provide an interpreter at every parish they would solve the needs of the Deaf Latino/a Catholics. This decision is made in part with the rationale that every Deaf person would have the possibility to attend any parish they choose. Just like a hearing person, they would then have full access to the word of God. The Diocese would not have to fund the needs of the Deaf Community, since for the most part they consider interpreters as volunteers and not a profession that requires compensation. Providing equal access to the Word of God is just the tip of the iceberg, for families with deaf children and relatives need to be cared for in all aspects. As a society and Church Community, we have a responsibility to uphold the dignity of all those with disabilities who are often invisibly ostracized and considered less dignified because of their disability. In imitation of our Lord who dedicated much of his ministry to the disabled and the poor, we should give preferential care to those in our community with special needs. All people are made in the image and likeness of God and an unshakable dignity of every human person innately pour forth from this truth. Unfortunately, society has shifted its values from valuing the whole human person for being a part of the human race to valuing what the person produces. Persons with disabilities are seen as weak links in society, for they take away resources instead of contributing and producing resources.

Context

Deaf people often have been outsiders in a hearing Church. The message of the Church has not reached Deaf people because the language, symbols, culture of the traditional Church, and the view of Church people on deafness were remote from the culture and daily life

experiences of Deaf people. As Baptized members of the Church, the Deaf inherent the same Baptismal right to become priest, prophet, and king, even though the hearing have tried to suppress that right by thinking that they (the hearing) need to do everything for them instead of with them. The dominant hearing culture has not caught on that Deaf Lay persons build up the Church alongside them; Sign Language has become a sacral language. In this reality, *Deafhood* has become a *locus theologicus*, a source of knowledge about God: it is a matter of the inculturation of the Christian faith in Deaf culture. For faith discovers the positive values, the “seeds of the Word” in Deaf culture and thereby enriches the universal Church.

Deaf vs. deaf

For people not acquainted with the Deaf community, the term “deaf” and “deafness” may seem politically incorrect and potentially offensive. The hearing community would prefer the terms “hearing impaired” or “hearing challenged.” For Deaf people it is just the opposite: they do not see themselves as impaired versions of people with normal hearing, nor as people with a disability or a challenge, but as a minority with their own language and culture. The Deaf do not define themselves in terms of a thing they lack, but in terms of the positive aspects of their language and culture. Therefore, for them the terms “hearing impaired” or “hearing challenged” are typical of the disempowering and oppressive language use of the hearing society. They define themselves as Deaf; just in the same way as others define themselves as belonging to the Italian or Irish community. Therefore, the term Deaf clearly defines those people who define themselves as belonging to the Deaf community.

Deaf People as Outsiders in the Hearing Church

One out of every thousand people has some kind of hearing loss from birth or early life so that, without early intervention, they do not acquire the spoken language of their environment.⁴ Those that suffer from some kind of hearing loss run the risk of marginalization and of becoming outsiders in a hearing society, even though they often form self-contained communities of Deaf people in which most of them prefer to communicate in Sign Language. In the Christian communities, Deaf people have often been outsiders. From the first centuries of its existence, the Church held that Deaf persons who were able to indicate by means of clear signs that they understood their meaning were admitted to the sacraments.⁵ In times when most Deaf children did not receive school education, Deaf people were often deprived of knowledge of the faith and were not admitted to the sacraments. Two centuries ago, with the beginning of Deaf education, this was often a pastoral motivation, namely providing school education for Deaf people in order to obtain for them the knowledge of faith and Church doctrine. Although school education has made faith more accessible for Deaf people, their participation in the faith community has remained far from easy. In the early 1970s, Deaf people's experience of Church and faith was very remote because of the language, symbols, and cultural background of the Scripture stories. Christian tradition was foreign to Deaf culture because they could not relate to it from their own life experiences. Every story in the Bible draws from the hearing perspective and in a way adapted to hearing people. For hearing people it seems logical that the Gospel story of the healing of the deaf man "is about charity extended to an unfortunate person. The message contains the idea that deafness is a less complete, deviant, and unredeemed form of humanity which awaits healing and salvation."⁶ Therefore, the Bible stories leave no space for a liberating

⁴ Marcel Broesterhuizen, "Faith in Deaf Culture." *Theological Studies*, (June 2005 vol. 66 no. 2) 304-329.

⁵ David S. Martin, "Deaf Learners and Successful Cognitive Achievement," (Learn NC website) accessed November 17, 2014.

⁶ Marcel Broesterhuizen, "Faith in Deaf Culture," 308.

perspective on the views on impairment and disability in the dominant cultural context when the Gospels were written.

The adaption to Deaf people's experiential world is not only often absent in the content of the Biblical text, but also in the language through which they are transmitted. People who are involved in catechesis and faith formation often take for granted that religious language is a language of symbols, metaphors, and figurative meanings. Even where concrete action and objects are used as a symbol, much explanation is needed before a symbol can be understood. For instance, the step from "water as the liquid that comes out of a faucet to Jesus as the living water requires not only familiarity with the symbol, but also a verbally abstract and complicated explanation through real dialogue."⁷ Nowadays, for Deaf people, liturgy, stripped of visual symbols, is distant, static, and lifeless because of its lack of movement. For Deaf people, liturgy often means staring at slowly moving mouths and expressionless faces singing a song so slowly that the words cannot be lip-read. For Deaf people, such a liturgy is not a place where they enter into dialogue with God and fellow human beings. Not only do Deaf people not participate in the symbolic and liturgical world of faith in a hearing culture, their integration into the Church community is also lacking. Many Deaf people do not feel at home in their local parish and they lose contact with the Church. Because of their lack of integration into the Church community and their isolation from communication, much information about Church life does not reach the Deaf. They do not take notice of many aspects of Church and therefore continue to foster a limited, concrete, and traditional vision of Church and faith. At the same time, their experience of God is of loneliness, isolation and distance. The Church is the very place where God is present, but it is a place where, as a Deaf person, one cannot follow what is it all about; where

⁷ Marcel Broesterhuizen, "Faith in Deaf Culture," 308.

one can only read in a booklet what is spoken by other people, or if they are fortunate, a Sign Language interpreter indicates what is happening beyond the bounds of one's senses. Heaven and God are indicated in many sign languages by a sign that is not made within the signing space in front of the body, but that removes itself from the body, assuming a connotation of "far away." God is a distant God who does not seem to understand Sign Language, who cannot divide His attention over all people on Earth, not to mention that he might be able to occupy himself with the Deaf. For the Deaf the Church speaks a foreign language, a strange language. The Church is a hearing Church incapable of entering into a real dialogue with Deaf people and of reaching them within the context of their life. The goals of the Church are too ethereal for the Deaf, too much belonging to a different world. Therefore, churches are empty and the Deaf clubs are crowded.

Is Deafness a Disability?

Some people consider the Church's problems in reaching out to the Deaf as a consequence of the disability of deafness. What is, however, a disability? Is deafness a disability? Marcel Broesterhuizen in his article, "Faith in Deaf Culture," distinguishes that there are a few models to consider deafness, but he focuses on the moral, social, and cultural models. The moral model attributes the cause of impairment of disability to God. Disability has to be reconciled with God's goodness and justice: it is either a punishment or a gift. Therefore, disability in the eyes of the Church is something that they want to control by providing the bare minimum; and if there is a religious ritual that we can offer such as a "Healing Masses," we are in solidarity even though it is the complete opposite for the Deaf. As noted earlier, they do not consider themselves disabled. The cultural model sees disability as the consequence of culture-specific values and ideologies about differences among human beings. These values and

ideologies make a person's being different abnormal. Therefore society has imposed a category of labeling people who do not fit the normal standard for those that are disabled are seen as being "different" and are treated differently. Society's approach to disability should be changing the cultural values that which lead to a negative influence on the social development and outgrowth of people labeled as disabled.

Society's obsession with labeling everyone into a category has made deafness a defect. Although Christian theologies have long held that illness and impairment cannot be seen as consequences of sin, remnants of the past still exist. Illness and impairment are seen as signs of the brokenness of humans, the consequence of original sin. Impairment must be a source of unhappiness and disgrace which makes a person either a pitiful victim of a heroic bearer of one's own destiny, but never a normal person who enjoys life. Deafness can be dealt with, but many Deaf people will say that society treats deafness in an oppressive way, namely by the dynamics of exclusion. This exclusion is either intended or not by the hearing, but the effects are the same. For "it is about societal and cultural processes characterized by the inability to take into account the visual and communicative needs of Deaf people and to give them full access to human society."⁸ Roger Carver wrote a statement to members of the Deaf Community in "Deafness: a Gift of God?"

Many Deaf Christians rejoice over their deafness in the knowledge that God has singled them out for a special purpose. God has given them the ability to listen with their eyes and to perceive the beauty of His creation in a different light. They may not be able to hear leaves rustling in the breeze, but they can see them quiver harmoniously with each breath. They may not be able to hear birds sing, but they can just as captivated by their rhythmical twitching. They are able to perceive how other persons are thinking or feeling just by looking into their eyes or at their body language. They view Sign Language, an extraordinarily beautiful and

⁸ Marcel Broesterhuizen, "Faith in Deaf Culture," 312.

complex visual language, as a gift from God. God wanted to show that human beings, His ultimate creation, are capable of doing anything; He created them in such a way that if they were lacking in something, they would be able to make up of it. Indeed, God made it possible to communicate without requiring sound or hearing.⁹

In this view, deafness is wanted by God, not by a revengeful God who is still punishing people for crimes committed in the past, nor by a God that enjoys inflicting tragedy upon His people in order to prove a point. The fact is that life exists in different ways among all of His people.

The major obstacle for active participation of Deaf people in the life of the Church is that the Church is stuck on seeing them as impaired. We are a Church that gathers together to celebrate the Eucharist and in that Eucharist we are presented a “Disabled God” who is broken and torn just like us. This Eucharist ought to be a sign for the world, but impairment in Church leadership is still an “absurdity.” Impairment continues to be matter of guilt and penance; when Deaf people do not mourn their existence this is still always a shame for hearing people. It even becomes offensive to the hearing when Deaf people dare to reject the blessings of medical science like cochlear implants, when they dare to be proud about their own deafness and even regret that their children are not Deaf but hearing.

These are the realities that Deaf people are faced with when it comes to their life in a hearing driven world. This reality becomes more complex when your family speaks a language other than English. The feeling of being a foreigner in your own family because of this main language barrier takes over and the question of identity becomes more and more prevalent. As mentioned before, most deaf children are born to hearing parents, and therefore it is only two percent of those parents that will learn their child’s language.¹⁰ This lack of communication

⁹ Marcel Broesterhuizen, “Faith in Deaf Culture,” 313-314.

¹⁰ Gilbert L. Delgado, “Bilingual problems of the Hispanic Deaf,” in *The Hispanic Deaf: Issues and Challenges for Bilingual Special Education*, ed. Gilbert L. Delgado (Washington D.C.: Gallaudet College Press, 1984), 72.

leads to complex issues of belonging. As Deaf adults have often stated in their relationship with their hearing families, “In fact, you might say that as a little child I was part of a family in the same way as a pet. It seems hard to say that, but yes I think it was like that. People, who love their pet, take care of it very well, but they do not have a conversation with them, surely no deep conversation, they do not give information to the animal. I have to say sincerely that there were times that I felt myself more a pet than a member of the family, since Sign Language was minimally used at home. They gave me food and clothes, and...I know they took care of me, but I knew also that something else was lacking in our relationship.”¹¹

Theological Component

I have presented the pastoral issue and some context that Deaf Latino/as and their families are faced with in a society and Church that marginalize them for not fitting the “normal” model. When parents are faced with a child that has been diagnosed with an abnormality, they return to think that God has punished them. In an attempt to offer couples full disclosure of potential health and learning challenges, many specialists present a gloomy picture of the child’s prospects; many parents see this as a curse that has been placed upon the family and consequently this curse might even continue throughout generations. In their effort to make sense of why their child was cursed by God, some families turn to Scripture passages like Exodus 20:5, John 9 1:3, and Matthew 5:48 to find an explanation and hope.

Scripture

In the midst of a description of the Ten Commandments we hear, “I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth

¹¹ Marcel Broesterhuizen, “Faith in Deaf Culture,” 318-319.

generation of those who reject me (Exodus 20:5).” The thought is that the iniquities of the parents are passed from generation to generation, because they did not follow the commandments that God had given His people. We all inherit countless disadvantages on account of our parents’ decisions. Whatever the circumstances we all might face, we struggle against them, and lead good lives. As many people think of God as a vengeful God that enjoys seeing His people suffer, Brevard Childs, author of *The Book of Exodus*, states, “The parents’ iniquities will not visited on them, each man will burden his own guilt; the soul that sinned shall die.”¹² Later Ezekiel 18:20 provides hope to parents by explaining, “A child shall not suffer for the iniquity of a parent, nor a parent suffer for the iniquity of a child; the righteousness of the righteous shall be his own, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be his own.”

In the story of the man born blind, we hear Jesus’ disciples’ thoughts: “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” (John 9:1-2). This notion of sin that is generational is still visible in the New Testament as the man born blind has become a “spokesperson for a particular type of faith encounter with Jesus.”¹³ The blind man, having washed in the waters of Siloam, is enlightened by the encounter with Jesus. The blind man in this encounter demonstrates that “with the coming of Jesus, those who claim to see have become blind and those who were blind have come to sight.”¹⁴ The link between sin and disease was a common belief among the Jews at Jesus’ time, as it was stated in the Ten Commandments, the sins of the fathers upon the children and the children’s children through the generations (Exodus 20:5). Therefore, the question of the disciples thus is quite legitimate, “Who sinned, this man or his parents?” Jesus in his response is not suggesting that this man and his ancestors were free of

¹² Brevard S. Childs. *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (Louisville, KY: The Westminster Press, 1974), 387.

¹³ Raymond E. Brown. *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 348.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 348

sin, but rather that it was not on account of any particular sin that he was born blind. He was born blind in order for God to be glorified through Him. This curse, sometimes referred to as a generational curse, was surely removed by Jesus becoming human. St. Paul states that there is no condemnation now, “If God does not condemn us for our own sins, He surely will not condemn us for the sins of others” (Rom 8:1). Nevertheless, we often carry the belief of curses of our forefathers dating back to the Garden of Eden. We can also carry our forefathers’ bad habits, features, and propensities to do wrong things. We might make the same mistakes, have the same illnesses and so there are many reasons to seek deliverance from things passed down from our forefathers; but these things are not due to the sins of our forefathers because Jesus paid the price for all sins.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches with great authority the eight beatitudes. Jesus is represented by the Matthean community as having parallels with Moses, for “the OT conveyer of divine revelation encountered God on a mountain; the NT revealer speaks to his disciples on a mountain.”¹⁵ Jesus does not impose more laws, “but by asking for a deeper observance that gets to the reason why its demands were formulated, i.e., to be “perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48)¹⁶ Therefore, the word ‘perfect’ sometimes brings to mind the need to be literally perfect, which would immediately pressure us to misinterpret the meaning. The New Testament never expects a believer to be “absolutely perfect,” but calls us to an internal private perfection. Jesus, in this passage, clarifies that despite popular opinion, the intent of God’s commandment was for His people to love everyone, even their enemies. Jesus then goes on to provide evidence that God exhibits an impartial love by showing His care for the wicked, thereby establishing the basis for His clarification of God’s commandment. Jesus then clarifies that the

¹⁵ Raymond E. Brown. *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007) 348.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 179.

attitude that you will “love those who love you” is nothing special, for even the wicked do this. He then concludes with the following, “Be perfect,” in other words, having just explained how the Father is “perfect” and instructing God’s people to behave similarly. The word “perfect” essentially means nothing which belongs should be left out in love. Therefore, the word “perfect” implies to be inclusive in love as St. Paul wrote, “For the whole law is fulfilled in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” (Gal 5:14).

Dignity of Life

The imposition of our secular culture and literal interpretations of scripture have painted a dim picture of the relationship between human beings and God. In his encyclical letter, *The Gospel of Life*, Saint John Paul II identified “the heart of the tragedy being experienced by modern man: the eclipse of the sense of God and of man. When the sense of God is lost, there is also a tendency to lose the sense of man, of his dignity and his life.”¹⁷ Saint John Paul II constantly reminded everyone “Every human person no matter how vulnerable or helpless, no matter how young or how old, no matter how healthy, handicapped or sick, no matter how useful or productive for society is a being of inestimable worth created in the image and likeness of God.”¹⁸ Thus, our secular culture’s blindness to the fundamental rights of persons with disabilities led Saint John Paul II to say:

The starting point for every reflection on disability is rooted in the fundamental convictions of Christian anthropology: even when disabled persons are mentally impaired or when their sensory or intellectual capacity is damaged, they are fully human beings and possess the sacred and inalienable rights that belong to every human creature. Indeed, human beings, independently of the conditions in

¹⁷ John Paul II, quoted in, *Evangelium Vitae*, “Life Matters: Persons with Disabilities,” USCCB website, accessed February 2013, <http://www.usccb.org/about/pro-life-activities/respect-life-program/2011/upload/life-matters-persons-with-disabilities-bulletin-insert.pdf> - 21k 2011-08-15.

¹⁸ John Paul II, quoted in, “Life Matters: Persons with Disabilities.”

which they live or of what they are able to express, have a unique dignity and a special value from the very beginning of their life until the moment of natural death... In fact, ... it is in the more difficult and disturbing situations that the dignity and grandeur of the human being emerges. The wounded humanity of the disabled challenges us to recognize, accept and promote in each one of these brothers and sisters of ours the incomparable value of the human being created by God.¹⁹

Today there are also many worrisome trends that reflect a fear and an inability to embrace persons with disabilities as brothers and sisters. Our society has become more utilitarian, less compassionate, and less generous in making the sacrifices needed to treat all persons with dignity and respect. Persons with disabilities challenge us to be more fully human and compassionate, to recognize the presence of God in each human being. This requires us to sacrifice to “stretch our hearts,” as Pope Benedict XVI has said, “this requires us to gradually become more like Christ, which is after all the goal of every Christian life.”²⁰ Therefore, persons with disabilities share their gifts and needs, and they bring out the best in our mutual humanity. They challenge us to live the Gospel precepts of charity in the real world, to sacrifice some of our comfort for others, to take the time to enable them to be full members of society. They need us to feel our solidarity with them, and to know their true dignity and worth as fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. Our own future with Christ depends on it.

In November 1978, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops published a pastoral statement on persons with disabilities. Therein the bishops called for broader integration of people with disabilities into the full life of the Church, through increased evangelization and catechesis and by participation in the Church’s sacramental life. The bishop’s statement called for all forms of the liturgy to be completely accessible to persons with disabilities, since these forms are the essence of the spiritual tie that binds the Christian community together. The

¹⁹ John Paul II, quoted in, "Life Matters: Persons with Disabilities."

²⁰ Benedict XVI, *Evangelium Vitae* quoted in, "Life Matters: Persons with Disabilities."

bishops stated, “To exclude members of the parish from the celebrations of the life of the Church, even by passive omission, is to deny the reality of that community. Accessibility involves far more than physical alterations to parish buildings. Realistic provision must be made for persons with disabilities to participate fully in the liturgical celebrations.”²¹ Therefore, all Catholics by reason of their baptism are equal in dignity in the sight of God, and have the same divine calling. Pope Francis addressed the members of the apostolic movement for the Deaf in March 2014 and stated that Jesus is the clear example of always looking to encounter and to make witnesses of “persons, who are marginalized, excluded, scorned.”²² Jesus made an effort to meet people, especially those marked by illness and disability, in order to heal them and restore them to full dignity. Therefore, Pope Francis encourages us, “It is very important these people marked by their illnesses become witnesses to a new attitude, that we can call the *culture of encounter*.”²³ Our society has been plagued with a culture of exclusion which provokes a culture of prejudice instead of fostering a culture of encounter that would promote acceptance for everyone. Therefore, because of their fragility and limitations, the sick and disabled can come to be witnesses of the encounter: the encounter with Jesus, which opens them to life and faith, and to encounter others, with the community. Indeed, only those who recognize their own fragility, their own limitations, can build fraternal and solid relationships²⁴ in the Church and in society.

We are not our Disability

²¹ *Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities*. Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1995. Print.

²² Pope Francis, "To Members of the Apostolic Movement of the Blind and the Little Mission for the Deaf and Mute," Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Address of Pope Francis, Vatican City, 29 Mar. 2014.

²³ Pope Francis, "To Members of the Apostolic Movement of the Blind and the Little Mission for the Deaf and Mute."

²⁴ Pope Francis, "To Members of the Apostolic Movement of the Blind and the Little Mission for the Deaf and Mute."

The reality of disability that matters is not “nature” but the practice of “labeling people in a way that results in enforcing their marginalization.”²⁵ All human beings should be regarded as persons, even those with profound disabilities. The traditional theological way of expressing this view has been through the doctrine of *imago dei*, which means to say that we are created in the divine image, which surely means that we are created in God’s love, since love is what defines the God in whom Christians believe in. It is important to speak first of “people” and “persons,” and then often add the prepositional phrase “with disabilities.” They are “people first” before they are anything else. The term “disability” suggests people lack ability that others have, and follows the meaning of being dependent on a particular community. For people that are affected with a disability, this meaning has been embodied to focus on the condition as defining the person, stigmatizing, and marginalizing in society. The common understanding of being disabled defines being human, for it is so common to question the humanity of disabled persons that people often assume that their being human cannot be accounted for independently from their being disabled. But this assumption is false. Human beings should not be labeled as disabled, but that they *have* a disability. The issue posed by this objection is how we think “being disabled” is related to “being human.” From this point of view, there needs to be a distinction between the person and the condition, which is why we say “persons with disabilities” rather than “disabled persons.” James Charlton states, “People with disabilities are conceived as inferior and as the embodiment of bad luck, misfortune, or religious punishment. The disability itself primarily informs the conception most people have about individuals with disabilities. Their humanity is stripped away and the person is obliterated, only to be left with the condition-disability.”²⁶

²⁵ Hans S. Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 57.

²⁶ James Charlton, quoted in Hans S. Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 50.

Therefore, the objection is clear: being human is one thing, being disabled is another. The label of “being disabled” prescribes a set of particular negative attitudes and beliefs regarding particular people rather than describing a condition inherent to those people. Our humanity is an endowment, not an achievement; therefore, the fact that disabled humans cannot claim achievement because of the absence of purposive agency does not affect their humanity in any way. The humanity of human beings is certain from the moment of conception and thus the questioning of any person’s humanity is illegitimate.

Latino/a Theological Anthropology

Therefore, we need to shift this contemporary view of humanity to a theological view of human reality, for indeed we “cannot speak about the human reality without referring this reality back to God, that is, without considering the human as the subject destined to participate in divine life.”²⁷ To understand what is human, U.S. Hispanic theological anthropology has communal experience as a starting point. A focus on commonly shared cultural and religious traditions expressed in our language, Spanish, as well as being able to share the sociopolitical experiences of oppression and marginalization all tie together to the communal experience. First, popular faith experiences provide for Catholic theologians a way for understanding how U.S. Hispanic communities perceive and understand what *latinamente* human being is and how this human experience relates to the Divine. Second, U.S. Hispanic theological anthropology focuses on the sociocultural experience of *mestizaje*. Virgilo Elizondo defines *mestizaje* as “the process through which two totally different peoples mix biologically and culturally so that a new people begins to emerge.”²⁸ This experience rooted in intercultural, interracial, and intergender relations

²⁷ Miguel H. Diaz, *On Being Human U.S. Hispanic and Rahnerian Perspectives* (New York: Maryknoll, 2001), 1.

²⁸ Virgilo Elizondo, *The Future is Mestizo: Life Where Cultures Meet* (University Press of Colorado, 2000), 70.

lies at the foundation of inclusive relationships and communities proclaimed by Christ. Finally, there is attentiveness to history and cultural context. What it means to be human is seen through the lens of the historical experiences of colonization shared by Latino/a communities.

Language – English/Spanish/ASL?

U.S. Hispanic theologians express that language is not a tool but rather the closest neighbor that enables human beings to be who they are. Language speaks, it speaks specific human identity unto history. For U.S. Hispanic theologians, language is taken as a revealer of communal and cultural identity. Language and the use of language has become a litmus test of one's latinidad, and in some instance because we live in the United States we can be thought of as not being Latino enough. Goizueta affirms that language is “not simply an instrument for communication of human experience; it is to some extent, that experience itself.”²⁹ In fact, among Latinos/as, language not only unites, but also distinguishes as being different from those that comprise their communities of origin. In the words of Fernando Segovia,

[We] are a people who live in two worlds, but find ourselves at home in neither one...[w]e share a world of the past, but we do so with many homes, many mixtures, many traditions, and many conceptions of reality. We further share a world of the present, but again, we do so with many faces, many histories, and many visions of God and the world. We are thus not only a bicultural people but a multicultural people, the permanent others who are also in various respects others to one another.³⁰

The way that language is acquired is through cultural interactions. Harold Recinos defines culture as a “learned behavior common to a social group that offers individuals a

²⁹ Roberto S. Goizueta, quoted in Miguel H. Diaz, *On Being Human U.S. Hispanic and Rahnerian Perspectives*, (New York: Maryknoll, 2001), 13.

³⁰ Fernando Segovia, quoted in Carmen M. Nanko-Fernandez, “Language, Community, and Identity,” *Handbook of Latina/o Theologies*, edited by Dr. Edwin Aponte, Dr. Miguel A. De La Torre, (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2006), 269.

comprehensive way of thinking, feeling, acting, and speaking.”³¹ Hence, the many things that seem “natural” to us are in fact patterns of learned meaning and behavior. The specific behavioral patterns that people take for granted in their daily lives are acquired through the process of learning and interacting with others in a cultural environment. Therefore, culture is a socially conditioned meaning system through which people interpret their experience and act in the world; it is a context in which belief, behavior, values, and social events are expressed.

On the linguistic and cultural margins, Hispanic Deaf persons as well as the hearing children of Deaf Latino/a parents are both in a complicated relationship to the triad of language-identity-culture. When a Deaf child grows up in a Deaf family, sign language is used from an early age. This allows for the development of a firm language base for the child, which serves as a platform for later learning English as a second language in the school environment. Hispanic Deaf by their very existence threaten assumptions of homogeneity that ground an understanding of U.S. Deaf culture, and Latino/a assumptions that ground a binary linguistic construction of culture and identity. Deaf in the United States represent a combination of languages and cultures that form their identity. The Deaf speak ASL while at home it is a completely different language that the Deaf try to decipher. The community of Deaf people and the hearing children of Deaf parents are truly living on the margins of Hispanic marginality “for they bear witness that orality and aurality are unfairly privileged in the construction of communal identity.”³² As we know, Hispanics are the fastest-growing minority group in the United States, a community marked by its ethnic diversity and the overwhelming youth of its population. Also, the reality is that Hispanics also constitute the fastest growing ethnic group among Deaf students. Therefore,

³¹ Harold J. Recinos, “Pastoral Anthropology in Latino/a Cultural Settings,” *Handbook of Latina/o Theologies*, edited by Dr. Edwin Aponte, Dr. Miguel A. De La Torre, (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2006), 221.

³² Carmen M. Nanko-Fernandez, “Language, Community, and Identity,” *Handbook of Latina/o Theologies*, edited by Dr. Edwin Aponte, Dr. Miguel A. De La Torre, (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2006), 70.

according to Nanko-Fernandez, a growing number of “Deaf youth come from Spanish-dominant homes and are among the first generation in their families to attend school and live in the United States. Unlike previous generations of U.S. Deaf, yet like many of their youthful Deaf peers, the majority of Hispanic Deaf children are not in residential educational settings but in mainstream programs.”³³ The reason for Latino/a families to decide to mainstream their deaf children appears to be that parents do not want them far from the family and “do not want to transfer the child-rearing responsibilities to other parties. This emphasis on familia has both positive and negative ramifications: On the one hand their families overprotect them from the dangers of the world. At the same time, they make them feel left out of vital discussions and family decision.”³⁴

Immigrant deaf people and the deaf children of Spanish-speaking families face the daunting challenge of learning multiple new languages and cultures in the United States, as well as Hispanic Deaf culture, which is learned from older students and Hispanic Deaf adults. As a Deaf child is enrolled in school and is using some form of “home” signs unknown by their U.S. teachers, the school may label the immigrant student as having “no language,” rather than as using a different language; thus, because they use a different form of communication, they are seen as disabled. Too many Deaf Latino/as are left straddling multiple worlds of disconnection, with no place on which to stand. The overwhelming majority of Deaf children are born to hearing parents; they are cut off in many ways from the oral tradition in Hispanic cultures-expressed through storytelling and *dichos*- that accompanies the transmission of cultural identity. In other words, Deaf Latinos/as are immersed in the culture, but not enmeshed. Deaf children are more commonly born to hearing parents and educated in mainstream programs in which hearing

³³ Carmen M. Nanko-Fernandez, “Language, Community, and Identity.” *Handbook of Latina/o Theologies*, edited by Dr. Edwin Aponte, Dr. Miguel A. De La Torre, (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2006), 70.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 70.

students outnumber deaf students; many Deaf Latino/as navigate their world through interpreters. They become outsiders to the daily interactions most take for granted. In some ways they are also removed from experiences of Deaf culture in the United States, a culture in which American Sign Language (ASL) also plays a defining role in the formation and understanding of identity. For Deaf Latinos/as, in the U.S. context, the languages of discourse are American Sign Language and English, with an emphasis on its written expression, while the language of home is often Spanish. Some of the consequence for Deaf Latino/as is the lack of support at home because of the gap in communication. The intimate relationship of sign language, identity, and Deaf culture are evident not only in the United States but increasingly in Latin America as well.

Language is created by community, and in turn, also facilitates the creation of community. There has been an overwhelming push by hearing educators to enforce oralism in educational and religious settings. Oralism is defined as advocacy for the use of the oral method of teaching the Deaf. Religious ministries and Deaf churches have played a historic role in preserving Sign Language and in passing on their traditions to Deaf youth. Hearing clergy have learned at the hands of Deaf sign language masters, and Deaf ministers as well as adult Deaf congregants serve as role models for children. Therefore, from ASL to Spanglish, language creates a place for discussion even though it is ironic that both Spanish and ASL have suffered at the hands of “English Only” enforcement.

To which Community do I belong?

From this perspective of language as resistance, inclusion rhetoric is a manifestation of assimilation. Assimilation signifies a loss for the Deaf Latino/a, not liberation; isolation, not community. As Nanko-Fernandez states, “In the name of inclusion in ‘the’ community, deaf

children are frequently denied inclusion in any community. For the sake of an abstraction known as the ‘mainstream,’ deaf children are denied the solid and tangible fellowship, culture, language and heritage of the deaf community.”³⁵ Inclusion touches upon the deepest yearning for belonging, but if inclusion means a complete erasure of who you are, does it still remain the ideal? In ASL, the sign for mainstreaming presents a visual rendering of what could best be described as mutual integration, left palm faced down with all fingers spread moving toward right hand in the same configuration. The result gives an impression of integration, an encounter of mutuality in which each digit and hand still maintains its own integrity. The assumption has been that “once Deaf people are placed among their hearing peers, they will learn to read and write English fluently, to speak and hear.”³⁶ In response to this experience, another sign was created, in mockery, reflecting not opportunity but oppression. In this sign only the index finger on the right hand moves toward the open five of the left; this time the image is not one of mutual exchange in the context of integrity, but of “only one Deaf person in the midst of a mass of hearing people, and the Deaf person is subordinately squashed.”³⁷

Hybrid Community

Along with the issue of language is the cultural/racial “mingling” that constitutes most U.S. Hispanic communities. Commonly known as *mestizaje*, this experience has framed and continues to shape the identity of U.S. Hispanics. *Mestizaje* refers “to the biological, cultural, and racial mingling that occurred as a result Spanish and Amerindian interactions.”³⁸ Within emerging U.S. Hispanic theologies, this experience of living “in-between” two worlds has struck

³⁵ Carmen M. Nanko-Fernandez, “Language, Community, and Identity,” *Handbook of Latina/o Theologies*, edited by Dr. Edwin Aponte, Dr. Miguel A. De La Torre, (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2006), 275.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 275.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 275.

³⁸ Virgilio Elizondo, *The Future is Mestizo: Life Where Cultures Meet* (University Press of Colorado, 2000), 17.

a responsive chord among Latinos/as of various backgrounds. As Goizueta maintains, the *mestizo/a* “by definition inhabits the in-between world of ‘both/and.’ Indeed, this world is more than a habitat, it is our very identity.”³⁹ Therefore, for most U.S. Hispanic theologians the term “hybrid” identity has emerged from the subordination of one culture, race, and language by another. In the present U.S. landscape, that “mingling” often occurs at a great cultural cost. Indeed, “melting-pot” immigrant models (to which a number of Latinos/as are subjected) are built on the implicit or explicit assumption of the superiority of one people and culture over another. In the name of “unity,” the immigrant is expected to give up his or her cultural particularity in order to become an “American.” Beyond linguistic and cultural experiences, social experiences also contribute to our shared Latino/a identity, U.S. Hispanic theologians have noted how whether by choice, or by imposition, U.S. Hispanic Americans share a common experience of exile. For some, exile resulted from their (or their family’s) “voluntary” departure from a Latin-American country. For others, exile was imposed from U.S. involvement across the territories.

Accompaniment within Mestizaje

Therefore, in order to build upon this “hybrid” identity within this community of *mestizaje*, we need to reflect upon how Deaf Latinos/as’ humanness and their faith emerges by “accompaniment.” We need to reflect upon encounters with grace and begin to re-envision what it means to be human from this particular context. Virgilio Elizondo is credited with laying down the foundation of U.S. Hispanic theological anthropology. Elizondo’s understanding of the Galilean identity of Jesus provides the initial building blocks of a Hispanic theological

³⁹ Roberto S. Goizueta, *Caminemos con Jesus*, 17 quoted in Miguel H. Diaz, *On Being Human U.S. Hispanic and Rahnerian Perspectives* (New York: Maryknoll, 2001), 14.

anthropology. Elizondo focuses on the particular human identity of Jesus in which he argues in *The Future is Mestizo* that God's revelation in Christ is "the answer to every human question not just the answer to the questions that we ask...for the answer to the question of *our* existence."⁴⁰ Elizondo's understanding of how God's grace is experienced and mediated through Jesus offers the clue to unveiling his Christology and his theological anthropology. For Elizondo, the experience of grace, even in the case of Jesus, is socio-culturally mediated. Elizondo addresses the question of Jesus' identity and the question of Mexican-American identity in tandem. In other words, it is the socio-cultural location of Mexican-Americans, already presumed to be under the embrace of grace, which leads to Elizondo's re-reading of Jesus' socio-cultural identity in the Gospel. This re-read of identity then provides the foundation from which Mexican-American socio-cultural experiences of marginalization are critiqued and re-evaluated. Elizondo reads the Gospels in such a way as to underscore the cultural identity of Jesus as a Galilean. To be a Galilean, argues Elizondo, "was to belong to a marginalized community of persons. Galilee was a crossroads of peoples, a place where cultures and religious traditions mingled."⁴¹ Elizondo claims that this cultural mixture, or "*mestizaje*," became for other Jews "a sign of impurity and a cause of rejection."⁴² Elizondo understands Jesus' *mestizaje* as one of, if not the, most important human element that enables Him to transcend, challenge, and transform the exclusive and marginalizing human reality of his time. Elizondo suggests that being like the "Galilean" Jesus today entails, as it did in his time, accompanying the marginalized, walking within the marginalized spaces, and confronting the structures and persons who marginalize. Elizondo sees Mexican-Americans as contemporary "Galileans" which undergo rejection as a result of their "mixed" cultural heritage. For Elizondo, Mexican-Americans are "borderland rejects," who like

⁴⁰ Virgilio Elizondo, *The Future is Mestizo*, 70.

⁴¹ Miguel H. Diaz, *On Being Human U.S. Hispanic and Rahnerian Perspectives* (New York: Maryknoll, 2001), 28.

⁴² Virgilio Elizondo, *The Future is Mestizo*, 51.

Jesus, must lovingly confront the power structures responsible for their injustices. Therefore, Elizondo demonstrates the theological anthropology as “Jesus revealed the truth about persons in terms of God and the truth about God in terms of persons.”⁴³

Accompaniment within a Community

Another U.S. Hispanic theologian, Roberto Goizueta, also focuses on the theology of accompaniment about which Goizueta states, “Community is the birthplace of self.”⁴⁴ Goizueta argues that “each person reflects and distinctly refracts the whole of reality, the subject reflects the communities out of which it was born, yet, as a prism, that reflection is also a refraction.”⁴⁵ The relationship between person and community is not ethically neutral. Goizueta goes on to state that a true family or community is one that enables the person to retain an element of otherness, an element of individuality. The Spanish word *nosotros*, which denotes “we,” literally means “we-other.” This word captures, speaks of the intrinsic yet distinct relationship that each person has with a relative community. As in any relationship between persons and communities, persons retain an element of individuality while also reflecting their communal origin. Goizueta maintains, “Each person (precisely *as* a person) is defined and constituted by his or her relationships, personal and impersonal, natural and supernatural, material and spiritual.”⁴⁶ Goizueta’s vision emerges from his understanding of relationships as accompaniment. For Hispanics, to be a human being is to be in relationship with others and to be in relationship with others is to be *acompañado*. Goizueta’s notion of human freedom follows from his notion of accompaniment. For freedom entails the exercise of human creativity, movement, and

⁴³ Virgilio Elizondo, *The Future is Mestizo*, 78.

⁴⁴ Roberto S. Goizueta, quoted in Miguel H. Diaz, *On Being Human; U.S. Hispanic and Rahnerian Perspectives* (New York: Maryknoll, 2001), 32.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

individuality within authentic familial/communal accompaniment. Just as community is a prerequisite for individual freedom, so too is individual freedom a prerequisite for community. These notions of person, community, relationship, and freedom are the building blocks for his anthropology of accompaniment. God's accompaniment of humanity, God's love of, feeling for, and reception of us as "other," is mediated by the face of the marginalized.

Inculturation

Deafness should not be seen as an obstacle for faith development, but as the context within which faith development and theological reflection take place. Deafness is not a curse. "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents?" (John 9:2). The focus needs to be on Jesus response "It is so that the works of God might be made visible through him" (John 9:3). The Christian message requires inculturation into Deaf culture. Pope Paul VI in his postsynodal apostolic constitution *Evangelii nuntiandi* wrote about the necessity of evangelizing human culture. Broesterhuizen states that as a result of *Evangelii nuntiandi*, the Latin American bishops stated in their Puebla document that "evangelization of culture means penetrating into the roots of culture, discovering in it the 'seeds of the Word,' and giving growth to them, but also transforming culture by making of its painful points an object of evangelization."⁴⁷ Therefore, the Church has only one way to realize its mission: through concrete human persons in their daily existence and within a community and the culture in which they participate. Thereby, it is essential for the Church to penetrate into that culture for "inculturation of faith and gospel is a practical consequence of the fact that God's Son became human."⁴⁸ Inculturation does not mean merely adaption of faith proclamation and liturgy. It is not only a maneuver to make Christianity

⁴⁷ Marcel Broesterhuizen, "Faith in Deaf Culture." *Theological Studies*, 2005: 326.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 326.

more appealing. Inculturation is the patient and loving search for “seeds of the Word” that, when reaching their full growth, will bear fruit in a culture of love.

Culture

As Goizueta has presented his theology of accompaniment, Orlando Espín has given more attention to socio-economic aspects, what he terms “the socialized experience of the divine.”⁴⁹ Espín’s book, *Grace and Humanness: A Hispanic Perspective*, reflects on culture as an historical and social reality wherein persons are born and sustained. He describes culture as the “womb from which there is no birth, because we are already born into it. Culture does not only birth human a person; it is also the product of life.”⁵⁰ For Espín, culture is “the dynamic sum of all that a human group does and materially and symbolically creates in order to prolong its life in history within geographical contexts.”⁵¹ Thus, culture is a dynamic process of socialization, intrinsically connected to persons, as their expression and creation. Culture can be, as is the case of persons themselves, described but never fully categorized. Therefore, Espín argues, because human beings are historical, no one person is ever outside of culture. Culture cannot be taken off like a coat or a jacket; culture essentially constitutes us as humans. Culture provides a lens through which we perceive, learn, and understand ourselves and those around us. Therefore, for Espín, human persons “become” more fully that which they already are in and through culture. Moreover, since cultures differ, so will the experience of grace. Espín argues that “the experience of grace possible to U.S. Hispanics, in order to be authentically an

⁴⁹ Orlando O. Espín, *Grace and Humanness: Theological Reflections Because of Culture* (New York: Maryknoll, 2007), 143.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 143.

experience of the *God-for-us* must be culturally Hispanic.”⁵² We are essentially cultural beings; we must experience grace in cultural ways. Espín’s understanding of the U.S. Hispanic emphasis on familial and communal relationships comes in his metaphorical use of Trinity. For Espín, “Trinity stands for the intrinsic relationship that exists between oneness and community, divine unity and solidarity with another.”⁵³ Espín argues that trust of another and solidarity with that same other are the “pillars” that constitute the unity of any authentic family or community.

Symbols within our Faith

Now within U.S. Hispanic Catholicism there is a focus on what is “popular” which is not necessarily because it is widespread but because its creators and practitioners are the people, and more concretely, the marginalized people in society. U.S. Hispanic communities have understood a particular way of being Catholic and impact the way Latinos/as have received and carried forth the Catholic tradition. Karl Rahner argues that “the teaching *on the sacraments* is the central place in which a theology of the symbol is put forward in general in Catholic theology.”⁵⁴ The significance of popular Catholic symbols lies in the fact that they strike a chord deep in the identity and collective memories of U.S. Hispanic communities. The primary symbolic function of U.S. Hispanic popular Catholicism lies in the ability to mediate an experience of grace. Thus, by symbol, U.S. Hispanics understand “an object, image, or action that reveals, mediates, and makes present what may be called an ineffable, the holy, the sacred, or the supernatural.”⁵⁵ Thus, U.S. Hispanics have expressed a frequent appeal to symbolic rituals and stories associated with the crucified Christ which derives from the fact that the symbolic

⁵² Orlando O. Espin quoted in Miguel H. Diaz, *On Being Human U.S. Hispanic and Rahnerian Perspectives*. (New York: Maryknoll, 2001), 40.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁵⁴ Miguel H. Diaz, *On Being Human*, 63.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 64.

expression resonate with the socio-cultural experiences of marginalization and suffering experience. Through this identification and solidarity with a specific people, these symbols offer a sacramental word of grace and hope. Thus, Sixto García states that the significance of symbols is made evident in “the broken humanity of Jesus stands as a sacrament of the broken humanity of the body of the Hispanic communities. Jesus the Christ is our brother in sorrow and oppression, and we can touch him, mourn with him, die with him, and yes, also hope with him.”⁵⁶ Therefore, having a sacramental perspective in which “*lo cotidiano* is at the very heart of that history into which Christ has been born, which he continues to accompany us, and upon which it is the task of the theologian to reflect,”⁵⁷ is found in the religious symbols of U.S. Hispanics that conceive the encounter with grace.

The Kingdom of God – here and now

To be human is to become one with the other, in order to change and transform the context that unites and defines the marginalized and the marginalizer. The way that humans express themselves by the use of language “is far more than a symbol system expressing the depths of one’s inner life and experience. It shapes the experience itself.”⁵⁸ Indeed, social and cultural experiences (*mestizaje, marginalization, and suffering*) have been more than ordinary experiences; they serve as mediators of grace. According to Rahner, to be human is to be a grace-bearing symbol. Jesus is the “full, definitive symbolic cause and expression of the divine-human inter-relation that is always already present from the beginning and capable of being acknowledged in a myriad of ways in diverse times and places.”⁵⁹ As a result of God’s self-

⁵⁶ Sixto J. Garcia, “A Hispanic Approach to Trinitarian Theology,” 118-119 quoted in Miguel H. Diaz, *On Being Human U.S. Hispanic and Rahnerian Perspectives* (New York: Maryknoll, 2001), 65.

⁵⁷ Miguel H. Diaz, *On Being Human*, 66.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 126.

expression in humanity, the human reality is iconic in different ways of the life of grace. As Elizondo and Goizueta's Christocentric arguments show, to know who Jesus accompanied and where such accompaniment took place is essential to understand the who and where of grace, and of our personhood. Thus, the Kingdom of God is present in worldly reality but it is most present in the experience of the marginalized. The Kingdom is distinct from worldly reality, but it is most distinct from those who marginalize. Finally, the Kingdom critiques worldly reality, but it is most critical of oppressive human reality. In our traditional Hispanic ways of expressing hospitality, we say, "*mi casa es tu casa!* Come into our home, sit at our table, hear our story, and share your story of what it means to be human, and how your humanity has encountered the experience of grace."⁶⁰

Plans for the Future

I have provided you with a Deaf perspective on the Hearing Catholic Church. I have also presented the theological anthropology to this triad community that wants to recognize as human beings and not be defined by their disability. Now I will present my plan to improve the relationship between Deaf Latinos/as and their hearing parents.

It takes a community to foster the relationship of the triad language-identity-culture of the Latino/a deaf and their hearing parents. As I have previously stated, providing an interpreter is not and cannot be the solution to serving the Deaf and their families. In our society, the hearing with authority have taken upon themselves to dictate to those marginalized how to better take care of the "disabled," but they have seriously underestimated how a community provides the effective construction and transmission of language- identity-culture. Language is not neutral. As

⁶⁰ Miguel H. Diaz, *On Being Human U.S. Hispanic and Rahnerian Perspectives* (New York: Maryknoll, 2001), 140.

Carmen Nanko-Fernandez states in her book, *Theologizing en Espanglish*, “Language, after all, is at the heart of an individual’s social identity. It is the vehicle through which the songs, folklore, and customs of any group are preserved and transmitted to its descendants.”⁶¹ The significance of language in the navigation of boundaries and in the negotiation of identities within and across generations emerges as a legitimate and necessary focal point for theological reflection. For Latino/a Deaf Communities, in particular, the role of language in the process of passing along traditions across generations is vital to the perseverance of the whole community. Human identities are formed through a web of interlocution in the transmission of language, and Christian tradition creates a dynamic exchange that in each generation inevitably births new possibilities and interpretations. These language matters invite the U.S. Church to navigate the tension of respecting particularity while retaining unity, of being a community of inclusion but not assimilation. Without sustained reflection on language as a source of our theologizing, and as a component of community and identity, diversity will be perceived as an obstruction to unity and a challenge for ministry.

This Community of Deaf Latino/a children with hearing Spanish speaking parents need a place to bond together and become one Community. For a family to learn that their child has a disability can be life-changing. For many, it marks the beginning of a journey into a maze of emotions, information, relationships and services that, in time, may very well become the new “life as usual.” Being told that your child has a disability can be as traumatizing as learning of a family member’s sudden death. Many parents are stunned by such news. Receiving such message can produce overwhelming emotions of shock, disbelief, anxiety, fear, and despair. For some parents just trying to comprehend the disparity between their desires for their child and the

⁶¹ Carmen Nanko-Fernandez, *Theologizing En Espanglish*. (New York: Maryknoll, 2010). 62.

disability that exists compounds their emotional and intellectual efforts to adjust to the situation. They may feel grief, depression, or shame. Some may also ask questions of “why me” and conclude as stated in the theological component that they are being punished for sins or bad acts of the past. So many parents repress their emotions because they believe it to be sign of weakness to let people know how they are feeling. Therefore, my plan is to be able to create a safe environment in which parents of deaf children can come together to reflect upon their shared experience of trying to raise a child that will have a different language than their own and have different cultural experiences, but share the same faith.

My plan for this community of parents is for them to come together at the same time their children attend religious formation on Sunday mornings. Having set aside a private room at which the environment will be set up according to the liturgical season and the chairs will be set up in a circle, everyone can see and hear each other. I would start with each parent introducing themselves in the language that they most comfortable with, whether Spanish or Spanglish, to share something about themselves and their families. David A. Hogue states in his article, “Brain Matters,” “We tell stories not only about what’s happening in the world, but we construct stories about our own lives.”⁶² My ultimate goal would be to support and foster a community of life-long learners, but we must first understand that human beings make meaning of their lives through story and so the story that is shared is would be validated by the other adults that have had similar experiences.

After everyone has had an opportunity to introduce themselves, we establish that this will be a safe setting in which everything that is shared here will remain here. I will then inquire from

⁶² David A. Hogue, *Brain Matters: Practicing Religion, Forming the Faithful*. (Religious Education. Vol. 107, No. 4 July-September). 343.

the group what their needs are in both practical and spiritual matters, such as whether the parents would like more information or to discuss a variety of topics such as how to help their children succeed in school. Some other topics could include a presentation on how to understand an IEP – (Individual Educational Plan), cochlear implants, education, immigration, and how parents can pass on their culture and traditions to their children. My hope is that, not only would these parents receive vital information and support, but that these parents feel that they belong to the Catholic Deaf Community. Having gained the trust of the group I hope this would lead to learning and practicing American Sign Language. This would include some religious signs as well as leading the group of parents in a theological reflection on the Gospel in Spanish and ASL that would be proclaimed that Sunday. After the proclamation of the Gospel, I would invite the parents to reflect upon the Gospel and to share something from the reading that caught their attention whether a word or phrase or even a sign. Human beings are able to engage in conversations of finding patterns and relationships that give unity to one's life and therefore coherency and meaning. For me, as the facilitator of the group, these conversations will provide me with hints as to how to have a better perspective of each participant's faith development.

James Fowler describes faith as a

Way of finding coherence in and giving meaning to the multiple forces and relations that make up our lives. Faith is a person's way of seeing him or herself in relation to other against a background of shared meaning and purpose. Faith has to do with the making, maintenance and transformation of human meaning.⁶³

Having gained the trust of the group, I would try to weave into the conversation the stories of the Deaf Community, especially the questions their children are dying to express but somehow never are allowed to ask, especially when it comes to faith. For an important part of

⁶³ James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981 quoted in Jane E. Regan, *Toward An Adult Church: A Vision of Faith Formation*. (Illinois: Loyola Press, 2002). 43.

developing a real and dynamic faith is having their children, who experience life differently, see for themselves Deaf adults from the community who have committed their lives to Christ. The younger Deaf are still under the impression that Catholicism is a “hearing” religion; they do not see faith as a personal relationship between Creator and the creation. As I personally recall, one of the questions my sister asked me when she was twelve years old was if God could understand sign language, and my answer was, of course, for He is God and He can do anything. My sister was baffled as many other Deaf children are when they find out that God can understand the beautiful language of American Sign Language. The immediate response of my sister was, “No, God doesn’t know sign language! He is a Hearing God! God has always talked to the prophets, for they can only ‘hear’ His voice, but never see Him. God cannot understand my signs!” Like most Deaf people, my sister is the only Deaf person in our family. Although my parents have dragged her to church for her entire life, she still had made little or no sense out of the gospel, even though I assured her that God both signs and reads sign language with incredible skill. God knows her thoughts, feelings, experiences and loves her completely. God is the creator of everything and the author of all languages and cultures. I explained, in sign language, that God wants a personal relationship with her through Jesus Christ. My sister needed some time to figure this out on her own. The gospel made sense to her at some point, because she later became a leader in the Deaf Community. She experienced the grace and love of God and wanted to share this with others. But first she had to make sense out of a “hearing” God who knew her language and understood her Deaf heart. Later in life my sister was able to understand that society has imposed labels on everyone whether Deaf, Hard of Hearing, or Hearing, but that God would label her as neither. My sister went on to state, “I am physically Deaf and I know that God made me that way. Though, God knows full well that I am not spiritually Deaf.”

Having the opportunity to share stories of the Deaf Community to the hearing parents may bridge the gap between them and have the parents realize that this is their community as well. At some point I would like to for the families to experience the celebration of the Eucharist together by having the Mass be celebrated in Spanish for the parents and have an interpreter sign it in American Sign Language or (vice versa the Mass be signed and have it be voiced in Spanish). I know too well that in most households with Deaf children the family rarely attends Mass together as a family. I can recall my parents going to their home parish and attending the Spanish Mass, my younger sister attending the evening Youth Mass, I attending the early morning English Mass, and my Deaf sister attending the Deaf lead Mass. We would never get a chance to go to Mass together as a family until I was able to interpret the Spanish Mass for my sister; then we were able to worship together at the same time and in the same place.

In essence, if this group of parents could come to the realization and the acceptance that the Deaf person who stands before them wants to simply be Deaf, it means getting rid of otherness and to share in that otherness. For a child does not want to be seen as fixable in the eyes of their hearing parents; they just want to be loved and accepted. To be able to foster a strong relationship between Deaf child and hearing parent without the need of an interpreter, and have a one-to-one conversation is to be open to the work of the Holy Spirit within in us all.

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