

# Hearing is Believing

## *The Liturgy of the (garbled) Word*

BY HERBERT ELY

In the Year of Mercy, the church gave special attention to welcoming people with disabilities. Although the physical conditions of blindness and deafness were highlighted in a recent report from the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), the report overlooks a much larger population. (To explore this document, visit [www.cara.georgetown.edu/Disabilities.pdf](http://www.cara.georgetown.edu/Disabilities.pdf).) While about 2 percent of the population experience deafness, about 15 percent suffer mild to moderate hearing loss. Their need is less noticeable, but real and unspoken. Hearing loss is the invisible disability. Fifty percent of people over age 75 have disabling hearing loss. These numbers should be a concern for parish communities, lectors and homilists.

Parishes make accommodations for the physically handicapped and would never keep a physically disabled person from the Eucharist. Eucharistic ministers carry bread and wine to them. Parishes make provision for those who are deaf or have profound hearing loss. Yet, many who have mild to moderate hearing loss experience the proclamation of Scripture as garbled, confusing or even misleading. How do we carry the word to them? Since we believe that God is present in both word and sacrament, we should find this disturbing in the extreme. A parish that allows the words of the liturgy to be garbled is not just unwelcoming, it is failing in its mission to preach the Gospel.

For most who are hard of hearing the basic challenge is not volume — it is word recognition. Their pleas are: “You don’t need to speak louder, just slower.” The reason for this is that most hearing loss is for higher frequency sounds. Consonants are higher in frequency than vowels and have similar sounds. As an example, when discussing a medical problem, the speaker might say “pill” yet the

listener might hear “bill.” Depending on the context, either meaning could be correct. When the speaker talks rapidly, the listener can easily misconstrue either word for the other.

For a parish that is welcoming, as Pope Francis urges, a ministry to the hearing challenged would be conducted on three levels; liturgical, educational and pastoral. On each level, there are some changes that can be implemented easily while others may require more time and effort.

Since word recognition is the basic problem, we must begin on several levels. Consider the following recommendations.

Train homilists and lectors to speak less rapidly and enunciate clearly.

Use microphones properly. In our travels my wife and I have seen parishes in which the lectors read clearly but the microphone was pointed away from their faces.

The challenge of word recognition is greater when listening to music. Printed lyrics make it much easier to understand words. Whenever possible, hymns should be announced and available in hymnals.

Background noise makes word recognition much more difficult. Parishioners should understand that noise of any kind interferes with the listener’s desire to experience the presence of the Lord in the Scripture as proclaimed and preached.

Parishes could consider installing a hearing loop system. The hearing loop transmits sound wirelessly to properly equipped hearing aids. Separate headphones are supplied to those who do not have them. (While a help, the hearing loop does not compensate for poorly trained speakers. It merely makes garbled speech louder.) Hearing loop equipment does have additional costs but perhaps a specific pastoral fund can be created.

Closed captioning is an option in some places. Some parishes engage it only for music while others use it for all parts of the Mass including the

homily. Some may see it as a distraction but if it aids people to listen, worship and pray it seems appropriate that parish leadership groups could discuss this option where possible and educate parishioners as needed.

Each diocese should assist parishes in engaging qualified sound professionals who can evaluate a parish’s sound system and recommend improvements. In some cases, it may be recommended that the acoustic environment be changed.

Parishes should include those with hearing issues in their health ministry. Since it is gradual, people are unaware that reduced hearing brings emotional, spiritual and medical risks. Health education programs could provide instruction on the danger of hearing loss and its impact on families. Screening programs could provide hearing tests, initial counseling and provide referrals to professionals.

Pastoral care can help people recognize the dangers involved. Often people feel embarrassed or fearful of what they might discover if they pursue testing of any kind. Resentment, fear, anxiety and family disruption can result from people losing some hearing ability. Often people who are aging experience slowly declining levels of ordinary skills and need help in overcoming denial, learning trust in the face of diminishing powers, and developing social skills to cope with difficult situations. Financial help and spiritual counseling might also be needed and welcomed.

As faith communities, we must find a way to be present. In listening to the concerns of our parishioners, we in turn, are compelled to accommodate all so each may fully hear the saving word of God.

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