

Local deaf Catholics attend conference at Vatican

By Nadia Maria Smith
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ROME — Thousands of deaf Catholics from around the world descended upon the Vatican in June for a conference dedicated to discovering and affirming the ways that the deaf Catholic community can fulfill its call to discipleship and evangelization.

Forty-one representatives from the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, as well as deaf Catholics from other dioceses, embarked on an 11-day pilgrimage under the spiritual direction of Father Michael Depcik, a deaf priest who is an Oblate of St. Francis de Sales in the Archdiocese of Chicago.

Msgr. Louis D'Addezio, director of the Philadelphia archdiocesan Office for Special Projects, served as the group's Italian translator, sacristan and cultural mediator.

The pilgrimage included the two-day conference in Rome; a papal audience with Pope Benedict XVI in St. Peter's Square; the celebration of the International Deaf Mass and an opportunity to socialize with Catholics from more than 20 countries.

"Experiencing everything in the silence and lively animation of American Sign Language added a dimension that will have a lasting impact on all those who participated in this unique pilgrimage," said Sister Kathleen Schipani, I.H.M., the director of religious education for the archdiocesan Deaf Apostolate, and the pilgrimage coordinator.

The two-day conference was sponsored by the International Catholic Foundation for the Service of Deaf Persons (ICF). Archbishop Patrick Kelly of Liverpool, England and president of ICF, opened and closed the conference and served as the master of ceremonies. Bishop José Luis Redrado Marchite, O.H., secretary of the Pontifical Council for Health Pastoral Care, was the keynote speaker. Both emphasized that deaf ministry is at the heart of the Church's mission, and that the efforts to evangelize and support the faith of people who are deaf is vital to the Church. Participants also heard from deaf Catholics from Mexico, South Africa, Ireland, Germany, USA and South Korea, who shared their own experiences and faith journeys.

One of those speakers was Father Min Seo Park, the first deaf priest in Korea, who explained that he is re-evangelizing many fallen away deaf Catholics who have never seen a priest who can sign. In his country there are many deaf Evangelical preachers who know sign language, Sister Schipani said.

Meanwhile in Mexico, many deaf young adult Catholics are eager to become catechists and provide substantial and consistent religious education to deaf individuals throughout Mexico — something they themselves never had while growing up.

"Each of the presenters spoke of the need for deaf vocations and lay discipleship that can nourish and spread the faith among the deaf community throughout the world," Sister Schipani said.

The conference ended with the International Deaf Catholic Mass and a social that was a big hit with the pilgrims.

They also attended the papal audience, where Pope Benedict encouraged them in their discipleship.

"At our papal audience, Pope Benedict shared a message of faith, hope, trust and love," said Rosanne Cain, who works in deaf ministries in Camden, N.J. "The Pope assured the deaf people that we are part of God's family. He encouraged us to be obedient and responsible to God so that we can continue the work of Jesus, and spread the Good News to both hearing and deaf people."

The Philadelphia pilgrims also visited several significant sites, including Orvieto; Assisi; the shrine of St. Padre Pio in Pietrelcina; and the catacombs and major basilicas of Rome.

“Until I made this pilgrimage, I had very little contact with the deaf community,” Msgr. D’Addezio said. “I was inspired and edified by their courage and deep commitment to their Catholic faith. Their sense of humor and caring for one another was an example to be imitated.”

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