

Papal Words to Conference on Care of the Deaf

Ephphatha! The Hearing-Impaired Person in the Life of the Church

VATICAN CITY, DEC. 1, 2009 (Zenit.org) - Here is a Vatican translation of the address Benedict XVI delivered Nov. 20 upon receiving in audience participants in the 24th International Conference organized by the Pontifical Council for Health Care Ministry. The theme of the meeting was "Ephphatha! The Hearing-Impaired Person in the Life of the Church."

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Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I am pleased to meet you on the occasion of the 24th International Conference organized by the Pontifical Council for Health-Care Workers on a theme of great social and ecclesial importance: "Ephphatha! The hearing-impaired person in the life of the Church."

I greet Archbishop Zygmunt Zimowski, President of the Dicastery, and thank him for his cordial words. I extend my greeting to the Secretary and to the new Undersecretary, to the Priests, Religious and Lay People, to the Experts and to everyone present. I would like to express my appreciation and my encouragement for your generous commitment to this important sector of pastoral care.

Indeed, the problems that beset deaf people, who have been made the object of attentive reflection in these days, are numerous and delicate. It is a situation on different levels, which ranges from the sociological horizon to the pedagogical, from the medical and psychological to the ethical and spiritual and the pastoral. The reports of specialists, the exchange of experiences among those who work in this field, the testimonies of the deaf themselves have offered the possibility for an in-depth analysis of the situation and for the formulation of proposals and guidelines for an ever more specialized attention to these brothers and sisters of ours.

The word "Ephphatha" as the beginning of the title of the Conference's theme, calls to mind the well-known episode in Mark's Gospel (cf. 7: 31-37), which is paradigmatic of how the Lord works for deaf people. Jesus took aside a deaf mute and, after making some symbolic gestures, raised his eyes to Heaven and said to him: "'Ephphatha', that is, 'Be opened'".

At that moment, the Evangelist says, the man's ears were opened, his tongue released, and he spoke plainly. Jesus' gestures are full of loving attention and express deep compassion for the man who stood before him. The Lord showed the deaf man his concrete concern, drew him aside from the confusion of the crowd, made him feel his closeness and understanding by several gestures full of meaning. He placed his fingers in his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. He then invited him to turn his interior gaze, that of his heart, together with him to the heavenly Father. Finally, he healed him and restored him to his family, to his people, and the crowd, marvelling, could only exclaim: "He has done all things well; he even makes the deaf hear and the dumb speak!" (Mk 7: 37).

By his way of behaving which reveals the heavenly Father's love, Jesus does not only heal physical deafness but points out that there is another form of deafness of which humanity must be cured, indeed, from which it must be saved: it is deafness of the spirit, which raises ever higher barriers against

the voice of God and that of one's neighbour, especially the cry for help of the lowliest and the suffering, and closes the human being in profound and ruinous selfishness.

As I had the opportunity to say in the Homily during my Pastoral Visit to the Diocese of Viterbo last 6 September: "we can see in this 'sign' Jesus' ardent desire to overcome man's loneliness and incommunicability created by selfishness, in order to bring about a 'new humanity', the humanity of listening and speech, of dialogue, of communication, of communion with God. A 'good' humanity, just as all of God's Creation is good; a humanity without discrimination, without exclusion... so that the world is truly and for all a 'scene of true brotherhood'" (Homily, Mass in Faul Valley, Viterbo, 6 September; L'Osservatore Romano English edition, pages 5-6, 9 September 2009).

Unfortunately experience does not always testify to acts of prompt acceptance, convinced solidarity and warm communion for people who are unable to hear. The numerous associations that have come into being to protect and promote their rights, highlight the existence of a discontent society that is marked by prejudice and discrimination. These are deplorable and unjustifiable attitudes because they are contrary to respect for the dignity of the deaf and their full social integration.

Far more widespread, however, are the initiatives promoted by institutions and associations, in both the ecclesial and civil contexts, that are inspired by authentic and generous solidarity and which have contributed to improving the living conditions of many hearing-impaired people.

In this regard, it is important to remember that in the 18th century the first schools for the religious instruction and formation of these brothers and sisters of ours were being founded in Europe.

From that time on charitable institutions in the Church increased, impelled by priests, men and women religious and lay people, whose purpose was to offer the hearing-impaired not only an education but also an integral assistance for their complete fulfillment.

However, it is not possible to forget the serious situation in which they still live today in the developing countries, both because of the lack of appropriate policies and legislation and because of the difficulty in obtaining access to primary health care treatment. Deafness, in fact, is often the consequence of illnesses that can easily be treated.

I therefore appeal to the political and civil authorities, as well as to the international organizations, to offer the necessary support in order to promote, also in those countries, a proper respect for the dignity and rights of deaf people, encouraging their full social integration with adequate assistance.

Following the teaching and example of her divine Founder, the Church is continuing to accompany the various pastoral and social initiatives for their benefit with love and solidarity, reserving special attention for those who are suffering, in the awareness that it is precisely in suffering that a special strength is concealed, a special grace which brings the human being inwardly closer to Christ.

Dear hearing-impaired brothers and sisters, you are not only recipients of the Gospel message but also legitimately heralds of it, by virtue of your Baptism. Thus you live every day as witnesses of the Lord in your living contexts, making Christ and his Gospel known. In this Year for Priests, you are also praying for vocations, so that the Lord will inspire numerous good ministries for the growth of the ecclesial community.

Dear friends, I thank you for this encounter and entrust all of you who are present here to the motherly protection of Mary, Mother of Love, Star of Hope, Our Lady of Silence. With these wishes, I cordially impart to you the Apostolic Blessing, which I extend to your families and to all the associations which actively work at the service of the hearing-impaired.

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