



The Gift of Silence: Towards an Active Participation of the Deaf in Sri Lanka

ABSTRACT

With his prior experience of ministry for the deaf in Davao City and the subsequent enriching experience of exposure-immersion in Sri Lanka, Bro. Amila Pathum reflects on his concrete encounters with the so-called “silent gifts” of the church: the deaf people. Utilizing the image of a “disabled God,” he explores the pastoral and missiological challenges of ministering to the deaf people who are often marginalized in the life and history of the church. In this paper, Bro. Amila invites us to be open to what the deaf and mute people speak to us about a disabled Christ who is present in midst of our deaf sisters and brothers.

Keywords: Deaf Ministry, Disabled God, Communion of Struggle

INTRODUCTION

For my mission immersion I was given the option to choose where to work. Since I had pastoral exposure with the deaf in Davao, I thought of deepening this experience with the deaf in my own country. Thus, I was privileged to journey and work with the deaf of Sri Lanka at St. Joseph’s College in Ragama, a good one-and-a-half hour drive from Colombo. The school is housed



in a former tuberculosis hospital that the nuns transformed into a school for the deaf and blind.

The school serves deaf children from Kindergarten up to the Advanced level,¹ and uses sign language and lip reading as media of instruction. This system is also referred to as “total education” for the deaf. At present, there is a former pupil who works as one of the teachers and a deaf nun who looks after the spiritual needs and housing concerns of the school population.

One particular encounter that happened a few months into my mission immersion stands out in my memory. There was a call for an emergency staff meeting and, as usual, I was asked to monitor the primary section until the teacher could return to the class. I loved such opportunities since, apart from the pupils’ break time, it was when the teachers were out on meetings that I could freely talk with the children. It had already been few months since I started studying Sri Lankan Sign Language and I could by then somehow sign simple sentences.

On this particular day, the teacher left the students with an assignment. I sat down for a casual conversation with a young boy who had been born with both his hearing and his right arm missing. I asked him about his family, his studies and so on. Eventually, I asked to borrow his hearing aid. He did not hesitate to lend it to me. I tried it on, but I found that I could not wear it for too long because of the amplified and deafening noise that it created in my ear.

When the class resumed and I was free to give full rein to my thoughts, I found myself reflecting on this experience. Many questions came to my mind: What kind of world does the deaf belong to? How do the deaf relate to the hearing world? What are their struggles in life? What are they really capable of? What can the Church learn from them? These questions eventually inspired me to write this paper.

¹This is similar to the K+12 educational program in the Philippines

How do we look at the deaf in Sri Lanka? I begin to address this question by looking at the phenomenon of the deaf statistically. This will help us to get a good picture of the deaf people whom we are dealing with in this article. I then try to delve into their lives by looking at their joys and sorrows. Here, I specifically look at their struggles as deaf.

Secondly, I introduce the framework of a “disabled” God: an image of God that the deaf can relate to. This framework reveals a God who understands them and whom they can identify with. A sociologist named Nancy Eiesland proposed this idea of a Disabled God to the disabled community. Together with the context and the background of this framework, I will explain some of the characteristics of this disabled God so as to clarify the importance of this image of God that is being introduced.

Finally, I look at the Church vis-a-vis the deaf. The deaf are gifted people and they have many things to share with the Church. We look into the possible areas in which the deaf can be incorporated actively into the life of the Church. Practically, we ask: How can the Church integrate the deaf within its fold?

This paper is an invitation for you to join me to enter into this world of silence: the world of the deaf. As we enter into their seemingly silent world, let us be sensitive to the possible voices that we might hear.

THE DEAF AND THEIR WORLD

At St. Joseph’s School of the Deaf

The St. Joseph’s School has 31 staff members trained to teach deaf learners. Their students come from all parts of the island, except from the north. Some of the students who come from far away stay in the boarding house run by the Perpetual Help Sisters. The sisters also help teach different subjects at the school.²

²Sr. Damayanthi PH, e-mail message to author, June 28, 2017.

Aside from academic subjects, the school also requires the students to participate in various extracurricular activities like sports, Church feasts, and special days like Literature Day. They also take part in interschool scouting activities through which they learn more skills and make friends with kids outside the deaf school.

At the time of my mission immersion, the St. Joseph had 175 students – 75 boys and 100 girls. Some of the children wear hearing aid³ to amplify sounds while some are given permanent earphones connected to the brain via a surgical operation.

We may ask, what are the struggles of the deaf in their daily life? What are their challenges?

Joys and Challenges

I asked some of the deaf about the happiest day in their life. Their responses varied from the day they found a job,⁴ or the day they were accepted to the university,⁵ to the day they won their first cricket match.⁶

I also asked former and present students of St. Joseph about their struggles and challenges in life. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the most common answer they gave was about their well-known struggle to overcome the language barrier. Both the deaf and the hearing parties have their own mutually exclusive language that makes it rather difficult for them to communicate with one another. Mangalika Ranjani, for example, separated from her husband when her daughter, who is also deaf, was young. When her husband stopped paying child support she went to the police but was faced with the insuperable barrier in her life – communication. She shared that,

³“What Are Different Types, Styles of Hearing Aids?” Starkey Hearing Technologies, 2017, accessed June 29, 2017, <http://www.starkey.com/improve-your-hearing/frequently-asked-questions/types-of-hearing-aids>.

⁴Malaka Silva, e-mail message to author, May 20, 2017.

⁵Dilan Haputhanthri, e-mail message to author, May 25, 2017.

⁶Rukshitha Kaushalya, e-mail message to author, May 26, 2017.

*“When I went to the police to make a complaint they couldn’t understand what I was saying and in those days, we did not have interpreters so I couldn’t do anything about it. So, I gave up on my husband’s child support. I started sewing to provide for her and myself. My daughter is 21 years now.”*⁷

Furthermore, the lack of a common sign language is also a problem in Sri Lanka, making it difficult for deaf people who come from different parts of the country to talk to each other. This diversity does not encourage a unified participation of the deaf once they come together. At the same time, this diversity keeps the hearing more distant and alien to the deaf culture:

...in Sri Lanka, we don’t have a place where people can learn sign language or have sign language interpreter training. For example, Bernadine (he gestures at the lady interpreting the signs he makes during the interview), she became an interpreter only because her parents were deaf. And usually people are not aware of the value of sign language. I think that the government has a responsibility to introduce sign language into the education system. The government must accept the people who use sign language and work as interpreters. They must collaborate with them and make a start.⁸

Meanwhile, in their interior life, the emotional struggle of the deaf especially in the early part of life is quite striking. A deaf can explode in expressions of extreme emotions, going from remarkable calmness at one moment to violent aggressive behaviour in the next instant. A teacher at St. Joseph who has been working there for three years made this observation:

⁷“Deaf and damned,” Plus, August 14, 2011, accessed June 30, 2017, http://www.sundaytimes.lk/110814/Plus/plus_04.html.

⁸“Deaf and damned,” Plus, August 14, 2011, accessed June 30, 2017, http://www.sundaytimes.lk/110814/Plus/plus_04.html.

“You can see different ways deaf students behave. If they are violent, that is the extreme. If you are an outsider or a hearing person who doesn’t know anything about deafness you might end up labeling the student as bad. But then somehow the same student can change his or her emotions within a few minutes and become very calm. Once the student has expressed his or her emotion then he or she would become very obedient and calm afterward. You can’t imagine the swing.”

Bullying a deaf person because of his or her “disability” is not uncommon. This can cause harm to that person even unknowingly. A deaf child said,

“Sometimes hearing people call us Beera (Deaf). I have experienced that from childhood. Sometimes when people realize I am deaf in the buses or in other modes of transportation they make fun of it. It really hurts us. Though we cannot hear through our ears we can hear that from lip reading. That kind of comments is so awful.”¹⁰

In general, the deaf’s marginalization from the hearing world is very real. It happens to them knowingly or unknowingly. The above stories manifest how the deaf struggle to survive within this reality.

The above overview helped us to learn more about the deaf in Sri Lanka. It also helped us to “hear” their struggles amidst the joys of life. In the next section we will propose a paradigm of looking at the phenomenon of deafness.

THE DISABLED GOD: A THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Earlier, we attempt to hear about the lives of the deaf and their struggles. We now continue to listen to them but through a lens. In order to do that, I would like to propose that we do this with the help of a book entitled, ‘Disabled God’ by Nancy

⁹Mrs.Anusha, e-mail message to author, November 15, 2016

¹⁰Dilan Haputhanthri, e-mail message to author, May 25, 2017.

Eiesland. Nancy Eiesland brought an image of God which fitted into this reality.

Eisland was born in 1965 in North Dakota in the United States.¹¹ At the age of seven she was fitted with a full leg brace. Her parents however refused to treat her like an invalid. Her father told her, “You’re going to need to get a job that keeps you off your feet. You’ll never be a checkout clerk.”¹² Though her condition was like this, Eiesland excelled in her studies.

Her professor at the Theologate at Candler says that she was always complaining about the lack of care given by the Church to the poor and especially to the disabled. Finally, when she graduated in 1995 with the thesis on “Disabled God”, she got married and had a daughter named Marie. In 2009, at the age of forty-four, Eiesland went back to live forever with her Disabled God. She died not because of her inborn “disability” but because of cancer.¹³

So, let us look from the outside with the lens of Eiesland in her attempt to see God present amidst these so-called disabilities. In her book, she presents her notion about God out of her own experience. She starts her discussion with the lack of helpfulness given by the Christian communities to persons with disability. Most of the faithful think that they are helping, but more often than not they do more harm than good. Eiesland writes,

As a person with a life-long disability, growing up in the church exposed me to a wide range of religious responses to disability. These folk theodicies are summed up in the familiar remarks: “You are special in God’s eyes. That’s why you were given this disability”; “Don’t worry about your pain and suffering now, in heaven you will be made whole” ... People asked about my hidden sins, but they must have been so well hidden

¹¹Douglas Martin, “Nancy Eiesland is Dead at 44; Wrote of a Disabled God,” The New York Times, March 21, 2009, accessed July 06, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/22/us/22eiesland.html>.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Douglas Martin, “Nancy Eiesland is Dead at 44; Wrote of a Disabled God,” The New York Times, March 21, 2009, accessed July 06, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/22/us/22eiesland.html>.

*that they were misplaced even by me. The religious interpretations of disability that I heard were inadequate to my experience.*¹⁴

In other terms, she pleads with the Christian community to see the “disabled” as people. Otherwise, the society goes on dividing itself between those with normal perfect bodies and those with abnormal imperfect ones. This exclusion of disabled person can only be undone by a conscious agenda for inclusion. She mentions this many a times in her book, “Disabled God”. In a society where denial of our particular bodies and questing for a better body is “normal”, respect for our own bodies is an act of resistance and liberation.¹⁵

Here, the symbols we use in our Christian life play a major role. The most common symbols that we use in our Christian communities and in the Church, do not favor the disabled. Eiesland says, “My focus on symbols as crucial for emancipatory transformation is a strategic judgment about the power of religious symbols with reference to disability.”¹⁶ She further narrates a short story:

*A man was wandering in a deep jungle not knowing where he was. Suddenly, he saw another man approaching him and so he called out, saying, “Help me, I’m lost.” And the fellow who was approaching shook his head and said that he was lost too. But he did have one piece of advice. He gestured back over his shoulder and said, “Don’t go that way, I’ve tried it already.” Theologically, people with disabilities have tried most, if not all, of the well-trod theological paths in responding to our queries about the meaning of disability in the world. We have found them mostly treacherous and inaccessible.*¹⁷

¹⁴Ibid., 35.

¹⁵Nancy Eiesland, *The Disabled God* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 96.

¹⁶Ibid., 92.

¹⁷Ibid., 58.

Deborah Beth Creamer in one of her writings comments: “Eiesland argues that traditional images of God, especially those that lead to views of disability as either blessing or curse, are inadequate. Within the course of her own experience, she wondered whether such a God could even understand disability.”¹⁸

Eiesland proposed the idea of the “Disabled God” in order to integrate “disabled” people with the rest of the society and to create for us an image or a symbol where the disabled can experience God concretely. This idea helped her find the answer to questions in her life.

She arrived at this idea of a Disabled God through one of her experiences. While working at a rehabilitation hospital, she asked the residents one day what they thought. After a long silence, a young African-American man said, “If God was in a sip-puff, maybe He would understand.” Eiesland reflects that,

“I was overwhelmed by this image: God in a sip-puff wheelchair, the kind used by many quadriplegics that enables them to maneuver the chair by blowing and sucking on a straw-like device. Not an omnipotent, self-sufficient God, but neither a pitiable, suffering servant. This was an image of God as a survivor, as one of those whom society would label “not feasible,” “unemployable,” with “questionable quality of life.”¹⁹

Eiesland got her inspiration from this young African-American young man. But she did not stop there. She was able to bring this profound experience to the Gospel and deepen this enlightenment she had begun to experience. She was successful. She was able to discover that God became not a pitiable suffering servant but a survivor in the resurrection story. Let us look at the Bible narration where Jesus appears to his disciples after the resurrection:

¹⁸Nancy Eiesland, *The Disabled God* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 85.

¹⁹Ibid., 85.

While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you' they were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, 'Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have' and when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. Luke 24/36-41 (NRSV).

This notion of the disability of Christ as God was something noteworthy to reflect. According to Eiesland the whole earthly life of Jesus was upside down with his suffering, death and resurrection. The disciples could not grasp the sudden death of Jesus and all the more the resurrection. However, at the resurrection, Jesus with his wounds revealed to them the will of God and a new image of God. Eiesland writes:

At the resurrection, the disciples understood the person of Jesus for who he really was. Only through the lens of resurrection could they understand the meaning and significance of the life of Jesus on earth. In the resurrected Jesus Christ, they saw not the suffering servant for whom the last and most important word was tragedy and sin, but the disabled God who embodied both impaired hands and feet and pierced side and the imago Dei.²⁰

SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF DISABLED GOD

According to Nancy Eiesland, here are some of the characteristics of a disabled God:

1. The disabled God rejects the idea that disability is tied with sin. Many people, especially Christians, still hang on to the idea that disability is a consequence of sin.

²⁰Nancy Eiesland, *The Disabled God* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 99.

2. Jesus Christ the disabled God, is not a romanticized notion of an “overcomer” God. Instead here God in Jesus is a “survivor.”²¹
3. Stories of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus reject the notion that God in Christ has absolute power. She argues instead that the Disabled God is in solidarity with people with disabilities and others who are oppressed.²²
4. Disabled God also stands not only “against deliberate injustice, but unintended rituals of degradation that deny the full personhood of marginalised people.”²³ This image of a disabled God shows us how caring and loving God is for his people especially to the “disabled”.
5. Disabled God also primarily extends his hands to find more images and symbols that appeal to people with disabilities. Eiesland notes “Jesus Christ as the Disabled God provides a symbolic prototype and opens the door to the theological task of re-thinking Christian symbols, metaphors, rituals and doctrines to make them accessible to people with disabilities and removing their able- bodied bias.”²⁴

This image of a Disabled God is a very powerful lens to see God who sat both with the “abled and the disabled”. It helps erase the divide and calls us to build up a common unity which is the Church. This image of a Disabled God prompts others to say, “I significantly agree with the author’s assertion that the church is disabled. Christ’s body, the church, is broken, marked by sin, divided by disputes, and exceptional in its exclusivity.”²⁵

²¹Ibid 102.

²²Deborah Beth Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 87.

²³Ibid., 103.

²⁴Nancy Eiesland, *The Disabled God* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 104.

²⁵“Who am I?” The Gentle Traveller, 2009, accessed July 07, 2017, <http://gentletraveler.blogspot.com/2009/06/disabled-god.html>.

The lens of a disabled God enables us to see the God who is with us, the God who knows and who struggles together with us. The Risen Christ with His wounds is able to guide His disciples to follow Him and face difficulties in life. The disabled God can also help us journey with the deaf.

Now, there remains for us two questions to ask in the next section: What are the deaf teaching us as a Church? What is the role of the Church for them?

THE DEAF AND THE CHURCH: A COMMUNION OF STRUGGLE

As members of the Church, it is incumbent upon us to ask what is the Church's role towards the deaf and vice versa? Since both deaf and hearing are equally gifted, together, they have the capacity to face the challenges addressed earlier. This section will be divided into two main areas. One area will be devoted to the gifts the deaf bring in building up the Church; the other will be devoted to the Church's mission in growing with the deaf.

In my dealings with the deaf I encountered some of them who share their giftedness to society. At St. Joseph I found a teacher and a nun who are deaf and both are serving the school as teachers. There was also a deaf novice who was preparing herself for her vocation at the novitiate. Others like Fr. Cyril C.Ss.R., himself a deaf, serve the deaf in his ministry.²⁶ These are good examples for the giftedness that the deaf can share with the rest of the society. They are not a burden; in fact, they are able helpers and co-travelers of their fellow deaf.

Like all of us, the deaf face many challenges in life, yet they are also able to be a gift to others in their service to the Society and to the Church. By looking at their own lives they could say "These are gifts and talents that I have, and I have them not despite my deafness but precisely because I am a deaf! Ergo, my deafness can be looked at as a gift from God!"²⁷

²⁶The author has read the life and ministry of Fr. Cyril, CSsR but due to inadequacy of space, it cannot be included in this short presentation.

²⁷Marcel Broesterhuizen, "Faith in Deaf Culture," *Theological studies journal* 2005, 313.

Perhaps we can ask, what about the rest of the deaf who are not so involved in services relating to the betterment of society? Can we still consider them as gifts? I would say yes; certainly, they too are gifts of God. Their deafness itself is a gift to the larger community. Here are a few ways in which they continue to show themselves as gifts of God and share that giftedness to the society and to the Church.

THE GIFTEDNESS THAT EACH DEAF PERSON HAS:

1. The innate abilities that a deaf person has is the ability to listen to others totally. Anthony Russo, a Redemptorist who did a research on deaf adolescents, points out a practical example he found from a particular study. A certain artist who conducted a program with deaf adolescents decided to draw a bus. But the bus was not the main focus of the entire artwork. It was just the background. So he did not mind to draw a handle for the bus. Having finished his work, he showed his art work to the deaf who were present and immediately the deaf recognized the missing handle and pointed this out to him.²⁸ Indeed, there is a certain sensitivity that is present among the deaf.
2. Every deaf person is also a living gift for us to rethink of the entire creation of God: that there is a variety in creation and there are varieties of gifts. He gave the deaf the ability to listen and speak to the world in a different way and to make up for what is lacking in them. At the same time, through the deaf, we are taught to listen not only with our ears but with our other senses and the rest of our body as the deaf do.
3. Another giftedness of the deaf is that they show us the way to really evangelize a person or a community. Deaf people are constantly searching for ways to

²⁸Cf. *Ibid.*, 221.

relate with other people. They put emphasis on personal relationships and look for ways to deepen that relationship and create communities. This is exactly what we need for evangelization. We need to create and deepen personal relationship with one another in order to evangelize and organize.

Thus, deaf people though silent in their speech, are vibrant in their giftedness. They have the capacity to serve the Church as fellow believers. So, how are we as a Church going to respond to this reality of deaf people? The challenge lies here: “The question as to how the Church should deal with people who do not communicate through spoken language seems to have become more urgent.”²⁹

Searching for God is man’s eternal quest. Each generation looks at God in different ways. The present generation looks for easy answers in their search for God. This reality is similar with the deaf, especially with its youth. How can we help the deaf search for answers to their questions? It is a fact that the deaf youth’s lack of knowledge about the Church and faith is not a recent phenomenon. It was found already in the 1970s, a period when secularization was less strong than nowadays.³⁰ The issue is more urgent now. Here are some of the possible ways in which the Church as an institution can help:

RECOMMENDATIONS

Create and coordinate a system where a deaf child can be brought to education in the early stage of his/her life.

1. Reintroduce and make accessible the meanings of the symbols that are in our tradition. There are plenty of symbols that still carry rich meaning for the deaf in the Tradition of our Catholic Church. For example, the icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help.

²⁹Marcel Broesterhuizen, “Faith in Deaf Culture,” *Theological studies journal* 2005, 307.

³⁰Ibid.

2. Establish an institute where courses in different fields can be learned via sign language for the deaf. Catechism, leadership programs, Technology and other fields can be included as courses. Such institution can form deaf lay collaborators.
3. Promote the learning and use of Sign Language to seminarians during their formation to priesthood. They can then work later in the ministry for the Deaf.
4. Provide at least a priest to minister to deaf people. During my stay in Sri Lanka, I was exposed only to the Sinhala-speaking area. There, I could not find any priest who knew Sign language except for Fr. Sudath.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This paper was an attempt to listen to the deaf people's life with their joys and sorrows. Using the lens of a "disabled" God, we were able to see things differently. We saw that the deaf people's "disability" can be a gift too. The deaf are born with innate giftedness and they can share their giftedness with the society. On the other hand, this paper posed a challenge to us hearing people in particular and to the Church in general. The present situation in which the Church as an institution and the members in general deal with the deaf is still far from the ideal. We need to be more open to taking the deaf into our community. They can be our inspiration to the extent that we welcome them into our community. We are challenged to look for ways to better actualize their participation to the rest of the Christian community. It is a lifelong task and we are all called to be its heralds. The disabled God is also waiting for all of us to "be open" to this silent gift: the deaf.

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