



Lana Portolano. *Be Opened!: The Catholic Church and Deaf Culture.* Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2021. 336 pp. \$33.66, paper, ISBN 978-0-8132-3339-0.

Reviewed by Tim Vermande (Disability Ministries at the United Methodist Church)

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Commissioned by Iain C. Hutchison (University of Glasgow)

The author describes this book as a Deaf pilgrimage: a hearing person's overview of history, Catholic Deaf culture, and language. Her interest was sparked by adoption of a Deaf child. In a parallel of the path of many parents of children with any disability, her entrance into Deaf culture was without any background, personal experience, or guidance. To her credit, rather than assume that she knew the child's needs, she pursued an informed path and then shared it with us.

The title is drawn from a pericope in the Gospel of Mark, where Jesus cures a Deaf man by saying, "Be opened!" These words become a recurring theme in the book, a point of both critique and a prospect of hope. Portolano notes in opening the topic that the baptismal ritual once stated that the purpose of the sacrament is to touch the candidate's ears so as to receive the divine word. When applied to the Deaf, this reflects an attitude of ableism, in common with many religious uses of disability metaphors. It also reflects attitudes that the condition requires medical or other intervention, rather than being a social difference that requires cultural adjustment. The need for such adjustment becomes, throughout the book, a call to the church and other social institutions to change their ways.

The book is divided into two parts: the first, a chronological narrative that is primarily organ-

ized geographically, and a second that covers more recent events, concluding with future prospects and needs. A central development in this history is the development and acceptance of sign languages, which in turn supports a Deaf culture. In turn, that acceptance becomes one aspect of recognizing disability rights. It is also essential in the development of a friendlier theological stance.

The nature of disability has been a long-standing religious issue. In the traditional medical model, it is considered a deviation from normal, an impairment that needs to be corrected. Theologically, these deviations have often been considered a recompense for sin. So it is not surprising that Deaf advocates have maintained that they are not disabled, but are a cultural minority. More recent social models cite deficiencies in attitudes and infrastructure, such as the lack of physical access (e.g., ramps, elevators) or, as is often the case here, the lack of captions or use of signed language. As this social model has gained ground, theologians have come to emphasize this approach as respecting diversity in creation, not deficit.

At some points, the chronological narrative is a challenge to follow across the geographical lines. However, there are common themes, one of which is sign languages. With a long history, they were a tool that opened the door to Deaf education. But they were also an oral tradition in an increasingly

text-oriented world, and thus much is lost. The main narrative begins with sixteenth-century Catholic schools. One will find familiar figures here, such as Laurent Clerc (1785-1869), who began his religious life in the Catholic Church, and many who are obscure. One will also be reminded of social and political differences. With Clerc as an example, after some early work in England, he met Thomas Gallaudet (1787-1851), who invited him to the United States where he established a nonreligious public school. The story of Roman Catholic developments is intertwined with others, particularly among Anglicans and Methodists, whose work often predated that of Catholics. Another concern is that Deaf people are scattered, and only recently has technology been able to bridge this gap. Thus, in a manner similar to Black churches (as noted by Eileen Southern in *The Music of Black Americans*, 1997), these institutions often became community bases for Deaf people and denominational boundaries were secondary. Another aspect is that in the United States, government-funded schools became common by the mid-nineteenth century. Although nominally disestablished, they often had strong Protestant leanings, obscuring the work of Catholics.

Theological issues are also part of the story. The passage in Mark is the only place where Jesus communicates with a Deaf person, which he does by cure. Some take this as an instruction to reject sign language—but the author protests: they have not read the story carefully, as it implies the use of signs to summon the man from the crowd. A similar situation exists with statements such as “faith comes by hearing” (Romans 10.17). There are also stories of reversal: St. Francis de Sales, who would be named the patron saint of Deaf people, was friends with a Deaf man named Martin and learned signing from him. When a nobleman asked Francis if teaching the young man was worth the effort, and if it would not have been easier to pray for a miraculous cure, Francis replied that he had learned so much from Martin through their friendship that it never occurred to

him to ask God to make Martin a hearing person for his own convenience

The theological explanations also include points that may not be obvious to non-Catholics, such as a requirement to use valid forms or words during the Mass and absolution. Because of this, early Deaf candidates for orders spent decades in limbo, awaiting rulings from Rome. This began to change with the Second Vatican Council, 1962-65, whose approval of vernacular languages seemed to clear the way for sign languages, which by this time were recognized as full languages.

As social movements produced disability legislation, the church found a path for participation through its long-standing social justice tradition. Coupled with the waves of disability rights movements and legislative affirmation, this has brought back the question of disability vis-à-vis cultural difference. A possible resolution seems to be in the social model coupled with liberation theology, a movement that began among Latin American Catholics. One example is the ecumenical Claggett Statement of 1985, which states that Deaf people do not need to be cured of an impairment but do need relief from social exclusion and cultural oppression. It also charges churches to end the practices of charity that portray their objects as disadvantaged, to consider differences to be gifts, and to develop forms of worship that convey the Deaf culture.

These trends are reflected in the ongoing flowering of Deaf culture after Vatican II, spurred by technologically aided movements and cross-cultural understanding. A result has been the emergence of a “Deaf World” that identifies a diaspora with a bond of deafness that transcends other cultural difference. Building on this idea, Deaf members have established networking associations and become leaders, pastors, and role models. Yet, noting that many see the church as a “hearing institution” that overlooks them, the author lists still-needed changes, such as national offices, seminary training, and more use of modern

media. Direction is needed in effective delivery to both hearing and Deaf audiences, Eucharistic prayers and liturgy in sign language, and theological questions on the use of female or non-Catholic interpreters.

I find hope in this book as well as challenge. Susan White notes in *Christian Worship and Technological Change* (1994) that a historic theological focus on texts overlooks technological advances (recall that Portolano cites textual focus as a reason for loss of Deaf history, which is generally an oral tradition). If we turn with open minds, using visual arts to relate stories through such media as statuary and stained glass windows would be comparable to encouraging the use of video screens and social media today. At the same time, technology is always a two-edged sword: technological devices such as cochlear implants are often viewed as an attempt to erase the culture, so the future remains open.

As a postscript, the book has a useful companion website, <https://www.icfdeafservice.org/beopened>, with examples of sign language and liturgy. No log-in is required to use it.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-disability>

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