

Archbishop Smith: Boasting of Weakness

On Sunday, I had the great blessing and joy of celebrating Mass with the members of the St. Mark's Catholic Community of the Deaf in Edmonton. The visit recalled to mind the years in Halifax when, as a priest, I served as chaplain to deaf Catholics there. They retain a special place in my heart, to be sure.



St. Mark's Deaf Catholic Community is named in reference to this Sunday's gospel reading. Lincoln Ho, Grandin Media

The deaf have taught me many things, and Sunday's visit was the occasion for yet another lesson. In the second reading for Mass (2 Corinthians 12:7-10), St. Paul boasted happily of his weakness. It was striking to think of those words as I watched and interacted with the members of the deaf community, whose "weakness" (inability to hear) was on full and joyful display as they communicated with one another in sign language. I stress here the "happily" in regard to St. Paul, and the "joyful" on the part of the deaf. The lesson to learn here is that the gift of true joy is inseparable from the acknowledgement of limit.

Admittedly, this kind of teaching is anathema to much of Western culture. If we are to boast of anything, it is the Self which has been personally and individually fashioned. Weakness is not something to display with joy but to hide in shame. The tragic irony is that, if we attempt to cover it over, our

weakness will nevertheless eventually show itself, and often in shameful and destructive ways.

To acknowledge weakness and limit is to acknowledge the truth of our human nature as creature. We are the created, not the Creator. As such, we are dependent upon God, called to rely peacefully upon Him with trust in His wisdom and providence. Acceptance of this truth brings great peace, and, yes, joy. Refusing reality by choosing instead to rely upon the self leads to anxiety and sadness.

This is not to say that the transition from resistance to reliance is easy. Pride is a major obstacle. It prevented those listening to Jesus teach in the synagogue from accepting that he, one of their own, could have anything to say to them (Mark 6:1-6). Hubris is also for us a stumbling block to receiving the Word of God, especially when it summons us in unexpected ways to unanticipated changes in thinking and behaviour. The Gospel calls us to let go of any and all illusion of self-reliance and to embrace the truth of weakness and need. Then, and only then, shall we know the joy of God's love and mercy at work within us, doing great things for us (Luke 1:49).



Archbishop Smith: "My name is Richard [name sign]." Parishioner: "Nice to meet you." Lincoln Ho, Grandin Media

On Sunday, my own weakness was certainly on display. That happens in many ways, of course, and one of them is my own use of sign language. The communication is supposed to be via American Sign Language, ASL. Whenever I sign, the deaf have to adapt to what they now call RSL (Richard's sign language). Somehow, the message gets through, which is a testament more to their intelligence than to my skill. The collective sign we make is of a community sharing limit in a highly visible way, and it never fails to be for me a source of great joy.



His Grace meeting with the Deaf Catholic community after Mass. Lincoln Ho, Grandin Media