

HOMILY—Mark 7:31-37

After Jesus had spent some time preaching in his Galilean homeland He went up to the territory north of Israel where He spent some time among the people there. In ancient times, this land that we now know as Lebanon was home to a very influential pagan civilization of wealthy city-states called Phoenicia. When we meet Jesus in today's Gospel, He is returning to Galilee from the Phoenician cities of Tyre and Sidon. Somewhere in the vicinity of the Sea of Galilee some people brought Him a deaf man, who had a speech impediment of some kind. Having heard of the many cures that Jesus had performed throughout Galilee, the people begged Jesus to cure this man.

Not only did such people have to endure the physical shortcomings of their condition, but also they were often the object of ridicule. Even today, how many times do we hear others making fun of someone who talks funny as a result of a speech impediment? In ancient times, it was often much worse because such people would not only be ridiculed but many times shunned because Jews believed that these physical afflictions were the result of some terrible sin committed by the person or his parents.

Always compassionate, Jesus could have healed this man merely with a word as he had done on many other occasions. But this time, He perhaps wanted to show that the health of the body was a sign of the health of the soul. So, in order to make spiritual realities intelligible to someone, who could neither hear nor speak, Jesus used a form of sign language.

First, Jesus took the man apart from the crowd. He “put His fingers into the man's ears”¹ to show that he wanted to cure that part of his body. Then, Jesus “spat on His fingers and touched the man's tongue”² to show that he wanted to also cure that part of

the man's body. Having done this, Jesus then looked up to heaven, as if to indicate that help can only be obtained from God. He sighed and said: *Ephphatha*, an Aramaic word meaning, "be opened." We know that Jesus' native tongue was Aramaic, and therefore, the fact that this word was used even in the Greek text of St. Mark's Gospel, leads us to assume that it was probably the very word that Jesus Himself used. St. Mark tells us that "at once the man's ears were opened and the impediment of his tongue was resolved, and he began to speak normally."³ He spoke the word and the cure was immediate.

"Since ancient times, the Church has used [this] Gospel story as a symbol of baptism, because through baptism man first receives the power to hear (i.e., to understand) and to speak supernatural truths. Before baptism he resembles one who is deaf and dumb. He can't speak to God in prayer because he has no faith; neither can he hear the voice of God. He is deaf and dumb in regard to the kingdom of God. But through baptism he becomes a child of God and he receives the life of sanctifying grace. The Holy Spirit, the Mediator between his soul and God, comes to dwell within him and supplies, one may say, the tongue that speaks to God and the ear that is sensitive to the divine voice."⁴

Because of this symbolism, the Church's ritual for Baptism since ancient times has included an action similar to what Jesus did in today's Gospel account. The priest moistened his thumb with saliva from his own mouth, as Jesus did, and touched the ears and the nostrils of the person being baptized. As he touched the ears, the priest said: "*Ephphretha*, which means 'Be opened,' " repeating what was probably the very word that Christ spoke. Then, the priest touched the nostrils and said: "so that you may perceive the fragrance of God's sweetness. But you, O devil, depart; for the judgment of

God has come.”⁵ “By these actions [the priest wished] to indicate that through baptism one’s ears are spiritually ‘opened,’ and that by the symbolic touching of the person’s sense of smell, the sweet odor of a virtuous life [would] rise from the newly baptized.”⁶

But what Baptism initiates the Holy Eucharist continues and perfects. The famous German Benedictine liturgist, Pius Parsch, wrote that the Church gives us this Gospel lesson as if to tell us: “You came to Mass poor, deaf, dumb. In the midst of the world’s noise you could hear nothing of what God is saying to you; even now you stand here, a stuttering child unable to speak. But by the grace of today’s holy Mass your ability to hear heavenly things is perfected anew, your tongue is loosed.”⁷ What Baptism began, the Holy Eucharist should perfect.

In Baptism we are born anew and in the Holy Eucharist we receive the food of eternal life, which increases the measure of divine life within us as we advance toward Christian perfection. The Holy Eucharist completes Christian initiation, which began in Baptism. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says that “those who have been raised to the dignity of the royal priesthood by Baptism and configured more deeply to Christ by Confirmation participate with the whole community in the Lord’s own sacrifice by means of the Eucharist.”⁸ And in that now famous statement from the Second Vatican Council’s document on the nature of the Church, *Lumen gentium*, we hear that the Eucharist is “the source and summit of the Christian life.”⁹ All of the other sacraments, in fact all of the other works of the Church are oriented to the Most Holy Eucharist, for it contains “the whole spiritual good of the Church, namely Christ himself.”¹⁰ “The Eucharist is the sum and summary of our faith.”¹¹ As St. Irenaeus wrote many centuries ago, “ Our way of

thinking is attuned to the Eucharist, and the Eucharist in turn confirms our way of thinking.”¹²

This is the beauty of the Eucharist, the Body and Blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. This is our faith and this is why we should desire to return to the altar week after week, if not day after day. As you approach the Communion Rail today, think of your Baptism when the Holy Spirit and His life came to dwell in you, making you a new person in the Spirit. And think of how Christ will dwell in you today, filling you with more of His divine life to conform you to Him.

Once you were deaf and dumb. Now, through Baptism, you are friends of Christ and through the Sacrament of His Body and Blood, He is perfecting you. Don't take the Eucharist lightly.

31 July 2005
St. Peter's, Volo
6 September 2009 (6:00 p.m., 8:00 & 9:30 a.m.)
St. Peter's, Volo

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¹ Mark 7:33.

² Mark 7:33.

³ Mark 7:35.

⁴ Parsch, Pius, *The Church's Year of Grace*, vol. 4 (The Liturgical Press: Collegeville, Minn. 1959), 120.

⁵ *Collection Rituum*, Schmitz, Walter J., S.S., editor (The Bruce Publishing Company: Milwaukee 1964) 19.

⁶ Parsch, Pius, *The Church's Year of Grace*, vol. 4 (The Liturgical Press: Collegeville, Minn. 1959), 121.

⁷ Parsch, Pius, *The Church's Year of Grace*, vol. 4 (The Liturgical Press: Collegeville, Minn. 1959), 121.

⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1322.

⁹ *Lumen Gentium*, 11.

¹⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1324.

¹¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1327.

¹² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1327—from St. Irenaeus, *Adv. haeres.* 4, 18, 5: PG 7/1, 1028.