MEMORANDUM

TO: All priests, deacons, and liturgical coordinators
FROM: Father Nicholas Smith
DATE: 15 February 2019

Celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation with Those Who are Deaf

In the 2017 edition of the *Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities* (*Guidelines*), the USCCB stated:

> It is essential that all forms of the liturgy be completely accessible to persons with disabilities, since these forms are the essence of the spiritual tie that binds the Christian community together. … Accessibility involves far more than physical alterations to parish buildings. Realistic provision must be made for Catholics with disabilities to participate fully in the Eucharist and other liturgical celebrations.

What accommodations are to be made available for those who desire to participate in the Sacrament of Penance/Reconciliation but have trouble hearing or speaking?

Canons 990 states that “No one is forbidden to confess through an interpreter, provided however that abuse and scandal are avoided.” *Guidelines* n. 30 applies this to people who are deaf:

> Catholics who are deaf should have the opportunity to confess to a priest able to communicate with them in sign language, if sign language is their primary means of communication. **They may also confess through an approved sign language interpreter of their choice.** The interpreter has the obligation to observe secrecy (emphasis added).

Therefore, those who speak sign language may use a sign language interpreter to assist them as they make their confession.

Canon 990 favors the right of the faithful to use an interpreter; thus, “an approved sign language interpreter” means the following.

1. It is up to the judgment of the confessor to determine if the interpreter is a reasonable person to do the interpreting.
2. It is not necessary for interpreters to secure approval from any other authority before assisting a penitent.
3. It is desirable, but not required, that the interpreter be a Catholic.

It is the expressed desire of the Archbishop and the Office of Sacred Worship that all confessors collaborate with interpreters so that Catholics who have difficulty speaking or hearing are able to fully participate in the Sacrament of Penance/Reconciliation.