

Father Joseph Thermadom, CSC, is [India's first](#) deaf Catholic priest, the third in Asia, and only the [26th in the world](#).

Born in [Thrissur, Kerala](#), India, and raised in [Mumbai](#), he spent more than a decade in seminary formation in the United States and across India. He was ordained on May 2, 2024, at the Basilica of [Our Lady of Sorrows in Thrissur](#), and belongs to the [Congregation of Holy Cross](#) (CSC).

Today, his ministry is devoted entirely to the Deaf Catholic community, celebrating the liturgy and sacraments in sign language.

In this interview, he shares his journey to the priesthood and his vision for a more inclusive Church. Based on email exchanges between March and June 2026, the interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Growing up deaf in a society that often misunderstands silence, when did you first realize that your silence could also become a source of strength and faith?

I first realized that my silence could become a source of strength and faith when I was introduced to Deaf culture in the United States. Born deaf in Thrissur, Kerala, and raised in Mumbai, I moved to the United States in 2008, where I gained access to some of the world's most developed Deaf resources and communities.

That experience helped me better understand my identity and faith. Returning to India in 2017, I encountered ongoing misunderstandings about deafness, but my experiences in the United States helped me address them and advocate more effectively for Deaf people.

Many people say they “hear” God through music, prayers, or homilies. As someone who communicates through sign language, how do you personally experience God's presence?

I experience God's presence visually through sign language. I have also felt his presence since childhood, as I have seen how he has helped me and my family in countless ways. My family has a strong Catholic background: two uncles are priests, and three cousins are nuns.

My parents taught my elder Deaf brother and me to pray and always ask God for help. Attending Holy Mass, reading the Bible, and praying the Rosary have strengthened my faith.

As a child, I once told my mother that I found Holy Mass boring. She gently encouraged me, saying, “Ask God to let you see the Holy Face of Jesus during the consecration of the Eucharist.” Since then, I have continued to pray for that experience.

Interestingly, a church in Kannur, Kerala, is associated with the miracle of the Holy Face of Jesus. I had the opportunity to visit the church, and I felt deeply grateful and spiritually moved by the experience.

Was there a moment in your journey to the priesthood when your calling felt impossible, and what helped you persevere?

Yes, there were several moments. I will share five major ones:

Around age 10: I first felt called to the priesthood, but I assumed it was only for hearing people. I even celebrated a “pretend Mass” at home, using a cookie as the host and milk as the wine, which I shared with my elder Deaf brother.

Around age 15: I received an award for excellence in catechism studies. This encouraged me to consider the priesthood seriously, as it showed me I could pursue religious studies despite being deaf. However, when I asked my parents, they told me that the Catholic Church did not permit people with disabilities to become priests. I felt discouraged, but I continued my catechism studies and eventually ranked first among approximately 100 hearing students in my diocese’s final scholarship exam.

Before graduating with a B.Sc. in zoology: I learned that a blind man had become a priest in Kerala. This renewed my sense of calling, and my parents supported me this time. However, when I approached bishops in India, I was told it was not possible. That was a deeply painful moment.

In 2008: I joined the Dominican Missionaries for the Deaf Apostolate in the United States to pursue theological studies, which I continued until 2015. During this period, I struggled with the question of whether to return to India. In 2013, the election of Pope Francis inspired me, and I made the difficult decision to return. Trusting in God, I stepped out of my comfort zone in the United States, guided by the pope’s message and example. Later, in 2017, I left the

order after its charism changed, which became one of the lowest points in my journey.

After returning to India: It was challenging to continue pursuing my calling, but the Congregation of Holy Cross, South India Province, eventually accepted me.

On the day you became India's first deaf Catholic priest, did you feel more joy, responsibility, or pressure knowing your journey would inspire so many others?

On May 2, 2024, the day of my ordination, I felt overwhelming joy with no sense of pressure or burden. It felt like the culmination of all the challenges, struggles, and responsibilities I had carried since childhood.

I was deeply moved to see friends and family — both hearing and Deaf — travel from around the world to be present. Among them were Asia's first Deaf priest, the first Deaf Black priest, and Sri Lanka's first Deaf nun. Within India as well, people traveled from all parts.

Many faithful even waited in line to kiss my hands. A video of me signing was recorded and shared on Instagram, where it received more than a million views. My ordination was also widely covered across national and international news outlets and social media.

Above all, my greatest moment of joy came during the Eucharist. As I lifted the Body of Christ, I felt called to lift all people — including myself — from earth toward heaven.

You conduct prayers and ministry through sign language. How does sign language change the way faith and emotion are expressed in worship?

I use Indian Sign Language (ISL) for prayers and ministry. ISL does not change the faith or emotion expressed in worship — it only changes the language. The faith itself, and the emotions behind it, remain the same.

When people understand ISL, they realize that prayer and worship are universal experiences, shared across communities regardless of spoken language. ISL is the primary sign language used by Deaf people in India, although many different sign languages exist around the world.

Having lived in the United States for ten years, I am also able to conduct prayers and ministry in American Sign Language (ASL).

Do you believe the Catholic Church still needs to do more to make Deaf people feel fully included in spiritual and community life, and what changes would you most hope to see?

Yes, I believe the Catholic Church still has work to do to ensure Deaf people feel fully included in both spiritual and community life.

Catholic Deaf people are scattered across the world, while hearing Catholics are united through Rome. At present, there is no dedicated global structure within the Church specifically supporting Deaf Catholics. I hope this can change, as the Church has the capacity and global reach to build such a system of inclusion.

Also, Catholic Deaf people often lack their own shepherds. We hope to see Deaf bishops who can guide Deaf Catholics, as many are leaving the Church due to a lack of Deaf ministry. Protestant churches often have stronger Deaf ministries, which is why many Catholic Deaf people join them.

Lastly, Catholic Deaf people need more support from heaven. There are unsung Deaf saints, and I hope the pope will one day canonize a Deaf saint.

Your priestly motto comes from Leviticus: “Do not curse the deaf.” Why do you think society still needs to be reminded of the dignity and humanity of Deaf people?

Society still needs this reminder because both society and the Church often misinterpret the concept of *Ephphatha*. *Ephphatha* means “be opened” — not just the opening of deaf ears, but the opening of hearts, for both Deaf and hearing people.

Instead, many focus only on “healing” deafness, which can undermine the dignity and humanity of Deaf people. What we truly need are bridges between Deaf and hearing communities, fostering mutual understanding and cooperation rather than trying to erase deafness.

Throughout your journey, your mother and family have supported you. What is one sacrifice or act of love that you will never forget?



My family made many sacrifices for me.

My mother, Rosy, taught my elder Deaf brother and me lip-reading and traveled with us daily to school. Even though there were closer Deaf schools, she chose better ones farther away, commuting for hours each day so we could receive a better education.

My father, Thomas, frequently relocated us so we could attend more suitable schools. He worked long hours, endured difficult commutes, and carefully saved to support our education, which eventually made it possible for both my brother and me to study in the United States.

My elder Deaf brother, Stalin, played a key role in building the Catholic Deaf community in India. He co-founded the Catholic Deaf Association of India (CDAI) and continues to support my parents, his Deaf wife, and their three hearing children.

In a world filled with noise and constant distraction, has deafness given you a different understanding of silence, prayer, or inner peace?

Yes. Living in the Congregation of Holy Cross, I have found that my deafness has given both me and my community a new understanding of silence and inner peace. The Holy Cross priests, brothers, and nuns have told me that living with me has deepened their own experience of silence. They appreciate my presence, even though full accessibility is not always possible — whether during prayer, meals, work, or socializing.

Despite these challenges, we live together with mutual understanding and cooperation. In this way, we help the Church educate hearing Catholics about Deaf culture and welcome back Deaf Catholics who had joined Protestant churches.

Many hearing people have even told me that I am fortunate not to be disturbed by noise and distractions.

If a young Deaf child in India, or anywhere in the world, reads this interview today, what would you want them to believe about themselves and their future?

I want young Deaf children to embrace their deafness with joy and confidence. When I teach in Deaf schools and colleges, I see how happy Deaf students are when they learn, play, pray, and eat together. Deaf and hearing children are the same — Deaf children should not be treated differently.

Of course, they need to learn about hearing culture to navigate the hearing world. At the same time, they can help hearing people understand and engage with the Deaf world. Ideally, everyone should appreciate both worlds, because both are beautiful.

With that mindset, they will be able to thrive in any environment they encounter.

Written by Lavoisier Fernandes