

# Conference will examine sexual abuse of young deaf Catholics

CHICAGO (CNS) – The first international conference on sexual abuse of young deaf Catholics will take place on May 7 and May 21 during webinars organized by the Deaf Catholic Youth Initiative for the Americas.

Father Joe Mulcrone, director of the Archdiocese of Chicago's Office of the Deaf, and one of the founders of Deaf Catholic Youth Initiative for the Americas, said this is the first time an event like this is happening.

Juan Carlos Cruz, a Chilean survivor of clerical sex abuse who was appointed to the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors in May, and Archbishop Charles J. Scicluna, adjunct secretary of the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, will both participate in the event. The sessions will be offered in American and Mexican Sign Language and in English and Spanish.

People with disabilities are sexually assaulted at nearly three times the rate of people without disabilities, according to the website Disability Justice.

While Father Mulcrone is not deaf, his grandparents were, and he grew up speaking to them in sign language. In 1977, he took over the archdiocese's ministry to the deaf at the request of Chicago Cardinal John P. Cody.

"Over the years, as I got good at signing and understanding deaf people signing, I began to get stories and experiences and revelations. Often enough the issue of being sexually abused growing up came out," the priest told the Chicago Catholic, archdiocesan newspaper.

He also heard stories of past abuse from young people who attended the Deaf Catholic Youth Initiative for the Americas' *encuentros* – Spanish for “encounters” – gatherings in Mexico and Central America.

“We didn't do the *encuentros* looking for sexual abuse, but when you get young deaf people together in a situation where they were surrounded by adults who were signing and in a trusting environment, these kids would just start disclosing, without any kind of prompting from us,” he said.

“There wasn't an *encuentro* we did where you didn't have at least two or three young people – boys and girls – at some point disclosing” what had happened to them, he added.

At the last few *encuentros* prior to the pandemic, the group had two deaf psychologists on the team and as he put it: “They were busy all week.”

That was when the group decided to bring more awareness to the issue with a conference.

“It became obvious to us, among young deaf people we were seeing in Mexico and certainly Central America, the rates of abuse we were seeing were three times that of their hearing counterparts,” he said.

Many of the dioceses in Mexico and Central America do not have the same abuse prevention programs and systems in place as dioceses in the United States do, so it makes it harder to address the issue, he noted.

The conference is open to anyone interested in participating. Cost is \$10 for one day or \$15 for both. For more information or to register, visit [dcyia.net](http://dcyia.net).

*Duriga is editor of the Chicago Catholic, newspaper of the Archdiocese of Chicago.*