



HOSPITALITY AT CHURCH

It's free, and it works.

By Kristeen A. Bruun

The advice appeared in a newspaper column written by an interior decorator. A correspondent had asked, “What’s the single least expensive change I can make in my home in order to improve it?” The columnist responded: “Clean the place up. It’s virtually free, and it will improve your mood more than any other single change you can make.”

I thought of this as I was reading essays written by undergraduates for my class, titled “Person and Mission of Jesus Christ.” I had assigned them to attend a Holy Week service and reflect on the question, “Who is Jesus Christ for these people?” In the course of pursuing their “research,” they experienced a panorama of liturgical practices: some good, some bad and some really ugly. Unbeknownst to them, their papers also identified the single least expensive change parishes can make in liturgy in order to improve it.

To my surprise, my 20 - something students' basic satisfaction with liturgical services did not depend on the quality of music or the preaching, which only received mention when they moved toward one extreme or the other ("fabulous" or "awful"). They also did not discuss the inadequate sound systems. Nor did they notice correct or incorrect liturgical posture or who filled the Communion cups.

The practice that to the greatest extent determined whether or not they considered their experience to be positive was simple hospitality. If they were greeted at the door and handed a worship aid, if the people they sat with smiled at them and moved over for them, if they could see that the members of the community enjoyed being with each other before and after the service (even if no one spoke to them, because they were strangers) - these things made all the difference.

None of this requires in-depth personal interaction. It does not even require coffee and donuts. People don't go to church expecting to be invited home for brunch or to have someone offer to pay off their car loans or sponsor them in a treatment program. Yet they often feel insecure about approaching a new church, unsure of what to do, wishing to avoid social embarrassment. The simple presence of greeters saying hello at the door relieves an immense amount of social anxiety. At the least, it means there is an identifiable person who can direct a guest to the rest rooms. It may symbolize even more. As one student wrote, "Walking into church you are greeted from both directions, almost bombarded with kindness by ushers and the priests."

Several papers mentioned the presence of the priest greeting worshipers at the doors, not hidden until the service began. Student comments indicated that it is worth the time it takes for the pastor to arrange for others to handle the last minute liturgical setup so that he can take a visible stand at one of the doors. Having the presider, or others, say goodbye at the door was also mentioned.

Consider the advantages of such a practice. Like cleaning the place up, it is virtually free, requiring no capital outlay. Oh, you can invest in some snazzy "Greeters" badges if you want to. But that does not seem to make much difference in the effectiveness of the practice. It does not require theological compromise by the right or the left. It does not call for an additional staff member, a revised catechetical program or chancery authorization. Except for suggesting that the priest stand at the door before and after the service, it does not add much to the time demands already placed on overburdened parish leaders.

So, if it is such a simple and valuable practice, why isn't everyone already doing it? My experience at two parishes that decided to implement a greeter program while I was on the staff suggests the following. First, and simplest, people who are already members of the parish are comfortable coming there, so they tend not to realize the impact the ministry of hospitality has on newcomers, guests, people testing the waters and those less well connected to the core group at the heart of every parish. These churchgoers have already broken the ice, found the rest rooms and nursery, volunteered or not volunteered.

They have decided on their level of interaction. In other words, the people who will answer this call to ministry are not the people who need it.

Second, forming a hospitable community calls for a cultural paradigm shift, which may be simple but, of course, is never easy. Catholics, perhaps more than others, have a tradition of privatizing their faith. They often remind me of the members of a local country community who feel no need of signs on their network of back roads: if you don't know where you are, you shouldn't be driving on this road in the first place. When called to turn their attention to the ministry of hospitality, they often feel as if they are being asked to shift their focus to something nonessential. There is also a certain amount of anxiety associated with welcoming a stranger. In many other situations, keeping to ourselves is one way that we protect ourselves from unwanted attentions. It requires a conscious effort to change this attitude at the church door. But it is worth it.

Becoming a hospitable community does not require giving up quiet prayer after Communion, but it calls for being aware of the people around you and smiling at the person who joins you in the pew, even if he or she is pushing you out of "your" place. When it comes to a general impression of hospitality, how people act toward one another before and after the service is just as important as being greeted at the door. As one student paper said: "If anyone was taking the message of Jesus with them as they departed, they were doing so in their own hearts. People did not express any great joy or exuberance." Contrast that remark with the description of another community: "After the service, everyone looked sort of refreshed and rejuvenated. There were smiles on their faces and there was happy chatter among the crowd as they were leaving the church." Carried to extremes, an introverted culture may even become a scandal, as witness the following comment: "There was no one at the front greeting each of us as a family. The sad thing about everything was that not one young person except for me and my family gave up our seats for the old people and the disabled. There were so many of them standing in the back with us."

Wal - Mart does not have greeters at the door because the management is theologically committed to a culture of hospitality. They have them because they have figured out that people who feel welcome come back more often and spend more. I'd like to see us do at least as well as Wal - Mart in the hospitality department, so that, when I next send my young adult students on a research visit to a church, they will all return discussing the outstanding welcome they received. As the interior decorator said, "It's virtually free, and it will improve your mood more than any other single change you can make."

