

Hospitality and Parish Life

When I invite non-Catholic friends to accompany me to mass, I am always proud to introduce them to my own religious tradition. After the liturgy they will frequently comment on the sense of reverence and the power of ritual actions which comprise the celebration of the Sunday eucharist. In all of my years as a Catholic, however, I have never had a guest compliment me on my parish's sense of hospitality! By hospitality, I mean the sense that a person feels welcomed into a community unconditionally. This sense of hospitality has never been a strength of the parishes I have been part of, yet it was once considered vital to the life of the early Christian community.

Those early Christians took to heart the injunction in the Letter to the Hebrews: "Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect hospitality for through it some have unknowingly entertained angels (Heb. 13:1-2)." Indeed, ancient documents from the first and second centuries testify to the reputation of the early Christians for their concern for poor and forgotten in society. This included welcoming the marginalized and the stranger into their own communities. The early Christians recognized the seriousness of the warning found in the Letter of James:

For if a man with gold rings on his fingers and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and a poor person in shabby clothes also comes in, and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Sit here, please," while you say to the poor one, "Stand there," or "Sit at my feet," have you not made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil designs? (James 2: 2-4).

This passage reminds me of a painful experience I had in a parish some time ago.

At this parish some parents would drop their teenagers off to go to the vigil mass each Saturday. However, often the teenagers would not actually enter the church but would gather instead in the back of the church vestibule talking and joking around during the liturgy. Now it was this parish's practice to have ushers invite the parishioners to communion, pew by pew, with those in the back of the church going to communion after the last pew. On this particular Sunday when it came time for communion, about five of these youth marched up the aisle for communion before the ushers had worked their way to the back of the church. One of the ushers took umbrage at this breach of church etiquette and, in classic traffic police fashion, raised his right arm, gesturing them to halt, and then, like a baseball umpire whose taken all he cares to from an irate manager, vigorously pointed to the back of the church, sending them back to wait their proper turn. I am sorry to say that I was happy to see the youth "put in their place," literally and metaphorically. You see I have a problem with people who are irreverent and ill-mannered in the liturgy and so. But here is the thing I am forced to ask myself. Were we more interested in preserving respectable Christian community governed by a sense of propriety and order than we were in inviting those youth into the scandalous hospitality of God's reign? Moreover, did not the actions of the usher, engaged in with the full consent of most of us there, simply reinforce every bias those youth already had about who we really were as church? The call to genuine hospitality demands much of us.

Hospitality is too often reduced to an attitude of friendliness toward those we do not know. Now I certainly believe that a sense of being friendly to others is. My wife and I appreciate the way in which we are greeted warmly when we visit a Protestant congregation and we are well aware of the complaint of many that when they attend a

Catholic parish liturgy for the first time they remain completely invisible to the parishioners. This lack of a welcoming spirit is certainly an issue that many Catholic parishes need to address. But the Christian virtue of hospitality, demands more than mere friendliness. Hospitality is a stance of openness to the stranger as someone about whom I am to have a vital concern. It is a virtue that demands my conversion for it calls me to abandon my tendency to put people in neat categories that determine how obliged I am to them. To be hospitable in the Christian sense is to risk inviting the stranger into my life and the life of my community, to attend to their needs and to affirm the gifts that they offer us.

The call to cultivate the virtue of Christian hospitality stands as a challenge to every parish. Does the character of our liturgies and the conduct of our liturgical ministers reflect the radical hospitality that characterized Jesus' embrace of the stranger and those not accepted by respectable society? Do our parish receptionists recognize that they are the first face and/or voice that newcomers encounter? Do they make the effort to see that this first encounter is for the stranger, an encounter with Christ? Does our parish reach out to strangers, and seek to meet their needs, spiritually and materially? Do we greet the homeless at our parish doorstep with a brusque dismissal and a voucher to a food bank?

Are we as parishes in anyway concerned that our Lord will one day declare before us that most searing of biblical indictments: "I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, a stranger and you gave me no welcome...(Matt. 25: 42-3)