

CLIFF NOTES

By Fr. Clifford Smith

The Call to Catholic Hospitality: A Ministry of Greeters

"For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me" ---Gospel of Matthew 25:34-35

"The biggest disease is not leprosy or tuberculosis, but rather the feeling of being unwanted." --- Blessed Mother Theresa of Calcutta

Hospitality gets its name from the Latin *hospes* for "welcoming the stranger," ... *hostis* means "stranger," or alien (or *immigrant*) ... and *potestas*, "to have power over." It also is related to the Latin *hostire*, "to equalize or compensate." As Church we are called to practice radical hospitality as a serious duty and obligation; to extend welcome to visitors, newcomers and the unchurched into our space, and that especially means the stranger, both those inside and outside our community of faith.

For the past seventy-five years Catholic faith communities have lost members to Protestant communities because they were more welcoming and hospitable. Hospitality is not something one denomination has and others don't, but rather a concrete set of conscious and deliberate practices that we learn and do and improve upon to welcome everyone. The Gospels tell us that hospitality is directed first toward the stranger ... the outsider, but also to those inside who may feel excluded or marginalized.

We may be good at saying the right welcoming things to newcomers, but don't follow through with the appropriate actions. The **Letter of St. James** (2:15-16) says: "*If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and has no food for the day, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well," but you do not give them the necessities of the body, what good is it?"* We must match our words of welcome to our actions. Radical Hospitality pulls us out of ourselves and stretches us.

The Minister of Hospitality or Greeter is a relatively new role for Catholics. The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* lists among the liturgical ministers "those who ... meet the faithful at the church entrance, lead them to appropriate places, and direct processions," but no name is given to this ministry, nor is it described in any further detail. The current edition of the *General Instruction* mentions this ministry at the very end of the list of liturgical ministries, following "those who take up the collection in church." But the *Introduction to the Order of Mass*, published by the U.S. Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy to aid in the implementation of the *General Instruction*, quotes St. Paul's instruction to the **Romans** to "*welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you*" (Rom 15:7). It then assigns to these ministers the task of "*welcoming people at the door, providing them with all necessary books and aids, and helping them find their places.*"

No one comes through our church doors haphazardly. By sending guests to us, God is giving us the privilege of cooperating with Him to move someone forward in their journey toward Jesus. When we have a clear plan in place to make all strangers feel welcome, to encourage the person to return as a second-time guest, to keep the individual coming as a regular attendee, to see the person accept Jesus and to decide to commit him- or herself to our faith community through membership, then we get to include that person in our number count. In so doing, we glorify God with another person that came to us a stranger and found welcome and hospitality.

The purpose of the **Ministry of Hospitality** is to bring honor and glory to God by providing a warm spirit of Christian love and friendliness to all visitors and members. It is a ministry that ought to be undertaken by every member of the faith community. Every person who comes to our church has a common need of acceptance. To a visitor, warmth, genuine friendliness, and caring are the most important qualities of a true church and visitors seem to know immediately if they are in a place of welcome and acceptance. No matter how great the music, or how inspired the sermon; what happens upon arrival and departure makes a lasting impression on people who visit our church. When people return home, the impressions and opinions of the church, and especially that of the congregation, have been significantly shaped by the kind of hospitality that was provided.

St. Mark the Evangelist will begin training for Ministers of Hospitality in August.