

## Hospitality

The ministry of hospitality is ancient and the biblical stories of welcome are compelling. For instance, Abraham and Sarah welcomed three strangers into their home and fed them (Genesis 18). In return, they were richly rewarded with a son. The three strangers are often depicted as angels, representing the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Andrei Rublev's icon is perhaps the most memorable image of the passage. The implicit message—when we welcome the stranger, we welcome God.



At liturgy, the goal of hospitality is to form the assembly into a unity. The Eucharistic Prayers, following the consecration, pray for unity: "Grant that we...may become one body, one spirit in Christ (Eucharistic Prayer III). In our time, Walter Cardinal Kasper has written about Eucharist as the "sacrament of unity." Augustine called it a "sign of unity, a bond of love," Aquinas, "the sacrament of ecclesiastical unity." In the Jewish tradition, to invite someone to a meal is to welcome them into your family, so close is the relationship. This is the type of unity we seek in our worship assembly.

Responsibility for hospitality at church is shared by the entire assembly. We are all called to be warm and welcoming. Why?

- Because Christ has chosen to dwell within us and is present in the assembly (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* #7).
- Because we are all baptized into Christ and recognize Christ in others. St. Teresa of Calcutta was able to work with people who were dying of hunger, old age and AIDS because she said: "I see in them the face of Christ."

- Because we are part of something larger: An individual bishop represents his own local church, but all bishops together with the Pope represent the entire Church (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* #23).

To welcome those who come to worship is to welcome the Body Christ. To ignore those who come to worship is to ignore that Body of Christ.

Ushers and greeters assist the larger community as ministers of hospitality through duties that include: greeting, assisting those in need, taking up the collection and cleaning up before and after Mass. Their ministry is needed.

However, if we are to achieve—or even get close to—the unity of the assembly, all of us must get involved. The same guidelines for the hospitality ministers apply to us. If we are to participate then, consider the following. Before Mass:

- Be visible, positive and polite.
- Be warm and welcoming.
- Focus on others, not yourself.
- Be attentive to the needs of others.
- Include others in your conversation, strangers too.

During Mass:

- Pay attention and participate in the liturgy.
- Be a model to emulate, not a distraction.
- Don't walk around at liturgy, especially during times of silence, prayer, and song.

An author who works with youth wrote in *Today's Liturgy* magazine a while back: "We are often more courteous to others in a bus or an elevator than we are to someone who sits near us in church. This coldness or lack of friendliness creates an obstacle to praying together as a people."

Hospitality need not be difficult. A few simple actions go a long way toward creating a welcoming community. Try it for yourself. Smile. Say hello to someone new. Move to the middle of the pew and invite someone to sit with you. "Do not neglect to show hospitality, for by that means some have entertained angels" (Hebrews 13:2). Peace.