

The Minister of Hospitality

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The minister of hospitality does one thing that everyone there is to be: welcoming everyone and offering hospitality. Ministers of hospitality are the community's way of being sure that this happens, being sure that the first face everyone sees at church is smiling, being sure we get the idea that here people are expected to sit together, being sure that strangers are welcomed and made to feel at home. Those are things everyone in the assembly has some responsibility for, but the minister of hospitality is one who takes this responsibility most seriously.

Yet somehow this work often separates ministers of hospitality from the rest of the assembly. Welcoming may in fact be ignored altogether, and seating may be done in a very mechanical way more characteristic of the theatre or sports event than the Christian community. And ministers of hospitality have been notorious for habits which, during the liturgy, seem to say that they are too important or busy to be concerned about singing or praying or keeping silence with the assembly.

It is the minister of hospitality's ministry to greet people warmly, to introduce strangers, to help people sit together, to pass out hymnals when necessary, to care for any needs (if someone gets sick, or other emergencies), to take up the collection, to help with good order at communion, to distribute bulletins and such in the course of saying goodbye to everyone or to direct people to coffee in the parish hall.

As with all the ministries, the question to ask is: What kind of a person is best suited to do these things well? Two things would seem to stand out.

First, the man or woman who would be a minister of hospitality must be one with a sense for liturgical prayer. If a person has experience of how this kind of prayer is not just an audience watching while a priest says Mass, then that person has one qualification to be a minister of hospitality. Such a person will not want to see people unwelcomed, spread out over the room. And that person will not want to do anything other than enter into the assembly's prayer during the liturgy itself. No chatter in the back, no disturbing walks up and down the aisles to look for places for latecomers, no counting heads or money. Just joining in prayer.

And second, the one who would be a minister of hospitality must have a gift for hospitality. Like the ability to read well aloud, or the ability to lead singing, there will probably be something obvious about this, something to build on. The minister of hospitality should be comfortable at welcoming the regulars and the strangers. If a warm greeting for a large number of persons comes hard, or if there is great difficulty recalling names, then perhaps this person belongs in a different ministry. Many parishes have discovered that they have no shortage of people who have the exact gifts needed for being ministers of hospitality, but until now they had not even considered these people: because they are women, or are elderly, or are teenagers.

Everything else about being a minister of hospitality can be easily learned by people who have a sense for the prayer of the assembly and a sense of hospitality. Such people will, in fact, be the best ones to take up a collection, to help those who don't feel well, to distribute the bulletins, to take care of any needs special to the day (a procession, a first communion). In many cases, it is simply a matter of the present ministers never having the ministry opened up to them. In other cases, they may be able to continue to do the parts of the ministry they like and understand, such as taking up the collection and handing out bulletins, while others are added to exercise more of the ministry of hospitality.

Reflections

Have you ever noticed the difference in your feeling: when a hostess seats you in a restaurant you are experiencing for the first time, and when a hostess recognizes you as a regular at a frequently shared place?

Have you ever been invited to a gathering, knowing you may know only the one who invited you? What a relief when someone reaches out to welcome you!

We men and women who are active in the parish may not pay much attention to the minister of hospitality's because we feel pretty much a part of the community. We may not feel the need to be welcomed. We may not have to be shown to a front seat. We are probably easily recognized by other and made to feel at home. But most of the congregation isn't so easily recognized, nor so quickly made to feel at home. Maybe we should visit another parish where we are not so well known and see if we feel welcomed. We have to put ourselves into the shoes of the shy, the unpracticing, and the infrequent worshiper to get a sense of what we want to look for in our ministers of hospitality.

1. How do your expectations for ministers of hospitality match their own perception of the role? Are they clear about their responsibilities?
2. What are the criteria for choosing ministers of hospitality in your parish?
3. Is a training period of ministers feasible?