

# Evangelizing through

# Hospitality



## Christina Spahn

It's Tuesday morning and, down the hallway from my office, I hear Don Conklin, our pastoral associate for administration and ministries, launch into a familiar story. He's recounting how he came to New Mexico and ended up at Our Lady of the Most Holy Rosary Catholic Community. His brief account precedes his invitation to John and Maria, newly registered Holy Rosary parishioners, to tell their story and reflect on what led them to request parish membership.

This discussion, known as our covenant meeting, is part of Holy Rosary's registration process. We are a parish of more than 2,000 families, and many years ago we decided that a meeting with one of our nine pastoral team members would be an effective way of completing the registration process and welcoming new people to our parish. During that meeting, scheduled a few days after their paper registration, we spend some time getting to know them, discuss why they have decided to register at our parish, review the information they've supplied, check on any sacramental needs they might have, and invite them to consider volunteering in one of our many ministries.

At the end of the meeting, we briefly discuss and then invite them to sign the following covenant:

These days, journeying with a particular faith community is largely voluntary. There is no compulsion to choose this way of life or this parish. There must be a reason, then, why you are seeking to join *this* community. We presume that you are motivated by a desire both to give and receive from this community; that, as in any relationship, you are bonding yourself freely in the give and take of our common life.

Therefore, you are ready to enter into a covenant with us—that most solemn contract of mutuality, concern and shared responsibility. There is no requirement to be perfect or without flaw or sin; only the commitment to be faithful.

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*Name*

*voluntarily wishes to enter into this Covenant with the community of Our Lady of the Most Holy Rosary.*

*We promise: to walk faithfully with the parishioners of Our Lady of the Most Holy Rosary Catholic Community; to worship with them regularly; to participate in the parish's commitment to Stewardship as a Way of Life.*

After both the new parishioners and the pastoral team member sign the document, it is presented to the newly covenanted parishioner who is warmly welcomed.

At Our Lady of the Most Holy Rosary Catholic Community, welcoming and hospitality is seen as an essential part of the parish ministry.

Photo by Christina Spahn



Photo by Norma Vivian

Spanish and bilingual liturgies as well as bilingual bulletins, apps, and hospitality events after all liturgies help all to feel included.

What is the reaction to this additional step in parish registration? Generally, the reaction is very positive. People are attracted to Holy Rosary because it is seen as a welcoming community, and this process is an opportunity for a one-on-one encounter with a person who genuinely cares. It's an opportunity to learn more about the parish and to possibly become involved in ministry. It's also an opportunity to begin a pastoral approach to issues that might need resolution.

Speaking of his meetings with unmarried couples who want their babies baptized, couples in need of an annulment, and others in complex situations, Don reflects, "There's a story in every situation that calls for good listening. It's an art to hear the particular need and to respond with sensitivity and compassion."

Our ministers to the sick and homebound know well the need for a sensitive and compassionate response. Not only do many of them bring the Eucharist to their neighbors on a weekly basis but they also take time to visit for awhile or bring a spring flower or a freshly baked muffin. Their care and sensitivity is shared by members of our bereavement ministry who meet with the families of the deceased and help them prepare the funeral liturgy. During the funeral rites, the bereavement minister attends the service and assures that tissues are available.

A pastoral approach pervades every effort at Holy Rosary. Norma Vivian, our office manager, says, "Hospitality is a big part of our job. We're the first contact—by phone or face to face. We set the tone for the parish." Connie Orona, our secretary/receptionist, echoes that thought: "It all begins by the way we answer the phone. Sometimes we're so busy but they want to tell us their problems. You have to lend an ear and have sympathy."

*Lending an ear* evokes imagery that our pastor, Fr. Robert Campbell, OPRAEM, has used. Fr. Bob sees welcoming and hospitality as essential to both his and our parish's ministry. In his *Pastor's Corner* in the bulletin, he has written:

I need to listen to my parishioners, and listen not just in English but in Spanish. Also, I must stretch my ears to our



Photo by Norma Vivian

As the first contact for individuals interested in the parish, office staff set the tone of welcome and hospitality.

beloved Christmas and Easter Catholics and to all on the fringes of our Church who think they have no home here. I need to stretch my ears further to those outside the Church, our Christian brothers and sisters in other denominations, to our Jewish and Muslim neighbors and those of all faiths. I must listen to agnostics and atheists as well. I must listen to those on the margins and hear the cry of the poor and oppressed.

And if I say anything at all, it should be this: no matter what your present status in the Catholic Church; no matter what your current family or marital situation; no matter what your past or present religious affiliation; no matter what your personal history, age, background, orientation, race, or color; no matter what your self-image or esteem, you are invited, welcomed, accepted, loved and respected at Our Lady of the Most Holy Rosary Parish.

## PRACTICING THE ART OF ACCOMPANIMENT

Of course, a primary ministry for the official welcome of people not only to the parish but to the Church is through the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). Louise Nielsen, our director of adult faith formation, describes her ministry as hospitality in three stages.

First, there is *welcoming*: receiving and affirming people wherever they are spiritually and personally, offering a spiritual home, and connecting the individuals, as necessary, to other resources. At Holy Rosary we have both a year-round RCIA process and a separate year-round adult Confirmation process. Through the years we've seen adults (and older unbaptized children) enter the process of preparing for sacraments with vastly differing degrees of awareness and commitment. Some are evangelized but not catechized; some are catechized but not evangelized. Some have annulment issues that must be addressed. For all, there is a warm welcome and an assurance that we will accompany them to full initiation and beyond.

Second is *companionship*: accompanying those in sacramental and faith formation processes as they journey toward greater spiritual maturity. This includes ministerial flexibility and support as people growing in faith encounter the challenges and demands of daily life. The transparency of team members willing to share their stories in the light of the Christian message, the example of sponsors and mentors, and the prayer and encouragement of the larger community all contribute to the sense that those in formal faith formation processes are not alone. They are surrounded by a community and, with that assurance, they are able to form new perspectives and attitudes and feel more comfortable in their "spiritual skin."

Finally, there's *integration*: bringing individuals and/or families into the community as active and productive members. Louise states, "Hospitality is more than just welcoming people as guests; it's helping them to use their own gifts to become active members of a spiritual family." Integration includes participation in parish and outreach events, ministerial opportunities, and involvement with the parish's small Christian communities.

Practices that integrate people into the community are echoed throughout the various ways that parishioners are engaged in faith formation. Three of the four sessions required for infant Baptism are held in the homes of team members, and men and women preparing for marriage are matched to a sponsor couple who forms a relationship with the engaged couple and accompany them through their preparation and to the ceremony, on hand to make sure that all goes well during the liturgy. Within a month after infant Baptism, celebrated about every six weeks during several weekend liturgies, and a year after marriage, congratulation cards are sent to the parents and newlyweds.

To respond to varying needs, our religious-education program offers a number of options: traditional classroom catechesis as well as two distinct family programs that allow parents and children to pursue faith formation together. In addition, family retreats encourage relationship building among the participants. Director of religious education Sr. Evangeline Salazar, OSB, recounts an incident several years ago during a family retreat at her monastery in Colorado Springs. A family new to the program was remaining rather aloof, even sitting in their car during a scheduled activity. Others noticed them, invited them into the group, and formed bonds that have lasted for many years. This family is currently one of the most active in the parish.

Similarly, hospitality is one of the hallmarks of our youth/young adult ministry. More than 120 youth and young adults, many of them post-Confirmation, assemble each Sunday evening and, under the direction of Michelle Montez (who is also the executive director of pastoral ministries for the Archdiocese), reflect on and grow in their faith. Speaking of the spirit that pervades this group, Michelle says, "All are welcome. They offer hospitality in the way they would want to be welcomed. They know that, from the time of their Baptism, they *are* Church. They're not just the *future* of the Church. They are preparing to be leaders . . . they are necessary and important for the full expression of the Church today."

Many of these young people have become involved at the invitation of friends, and they see evangelization as something to which they're called—each year leading Confirmation retreats

and doing presentations in several parishes throughout the state. In addition, they've started an ecumenical Taizé group that meets at the Norbertine Community of Santa Maria de la Vid Abbey on the fourth Friday of every month.

Four years ago, our parish fiesta committee approved the youth group's request that the annual determination of a fiesta king and queen no longer be competitive. In the past, the individual who sold the most raffle tickets for this event was automatically crowned. Now youth group members still hold breakfasts, car washes, etc. to raise fiesta funds. But they do this together. At Vespers on the first evening of the fiesta, names are drawn to determine who will be crowned. All others who have aspired to this are named as members of the royal court. The fact that, in a competitive world, our young people initiated a process of working *with* each other rather than *against* each other is clear evidence of the depths of relationship building among them.

The effect of involvement in Holy Rosary's youth group is reflected well in the comment by Juan Leon, who will finish a ministerial program this summer: "I didn't even want to be here seven years ago when I came for Confirmation. Now I'm completing my national certification in youth ministry studies."

Besides involvement in liturgical ministries, service projects, and other programs (this year we hosted the Archdiocesan Lenten lock-in for 400 young people), a special gift that the youth group offers is the integration of Spanish- and English-speaking members. We have a large immigrant community of around 400 families, and nowhere are efforts to integrate both language groups more obvious or more successful than in youth ministry.

In an effort to minister more effectively to our Spanish-speaking parishioners, in 2009 we hired Lulu Garza, originally from Mexico, to focus pastoral efforts on recent immigrants. Lulu and her husband visited several Albuquerque parishes before coming to Holy Rosary, where they finally felt at home. Especially since joining the pastoral team, Lulu's special priority has been making sure that each new person attending the Thursday night family catechesis program and the adult program, *Grupo de Oración—Unidos en Cristo*, or any of the four Spanish Bible study programs, is received as warmly as she and her family were.

Spanish and bilingual liturgies, bilingual bulletins and apps, fund-raiser breakfasts in our Family Center most Sunday mornings, and our Hospitality Committee's quarterly hosting of free coffee, doughnuts, cookies, and and lemonade after all seven weekend liturgies are intended to help everyone feel included and welcomed. At the quarterly hospitality events, held in our church plaza, parishioners are actively encouraged to meet someone new or to introduce themselves to someone with whom they've been praying for several weeks but have never talked to. While many people just grabbed a doughnut and hurried to the parking lot during the first of these gatherings, these days increasingly larger numbers are staying on and spending some time in conversation.

## REACHING OUT TO OTHERS

Hospitality is more than just welcoming others into one's space. It's also about reaching out and relationship building beyond our membership. At Holy Rosary, the St. Vincent de Paul Society



Photo courtesy of Santa Maria de la Vid

Young people from Our Lady of the Most Holy Rosary Community have started an ecumenical Taizé group.

annually aids hundreds of people, an Advent Giving Tree drive each year provides Christmas gifts for more than 200 neighborhood families, and a supply of ready-to-eat lunches is always on hand in the parish office kitchen for distribution to the hungry.

Other efforts of outreach include:

- **Ecumenical and Interfaith Work:** Besides regularly hosting an annual Octave of Christian Unity prayer service this year, including representatives from fourteen faith communities, for several years we've also planned joint adult faith formation programs with our closest neighbor, Rio Grande Presbyterian Church. We are also part of a newly formed interfaith coalition to address hunger issues in New Mexico.

- **Family Promise (FP) of Albuquerque:** Holy Rosary participates in an interfaith network of eighteen Albuquerque faith communities who, week after week, provide housing, meals, and a safe, welcoming environment to homeless families. Families accepted into the program are aided by the Family Promise director and staff as they search for employment and/or a home. Meanwhile, during the one-week periods (approximately three times a year) that we host families, Holy Rosary's FP Core Team sets up individual rooms in our Family Center, organizes parish volunteers for about sixty ministerial slots, and, in general, assures that our guests are comfortable during their stay with us.

- **Albuquerque Interfaith (AI):** For the last twenty years we have been AI members and involved with schools, unions, and



Photo by Norma Vivian

Hospitality includes listening to the story that individuals bring and responding with compassion.

other faith communities, in community organizing for the common good. Concerns of late have especially focused on public education in New Mexico, on employment opportunities, and on fairness for immigrants.

• **Our Sister Parish Relationship with San Eugenio Parish in Tijuana, Mexico:** In 2007, we began a process through which we hoped to establish a sister parish relationship with a faith community in some other part of the world. After more than two years of study and reflection, discernment, visits, and a workshop held in Mexico that involved ten delegates from both of our two communities, in early 2010, San Eugenio’s pastor and ours visited each other’s parishes and, in the midst of the parish assemblies, signed covenants of mutual prayer, support, and relationship building. Some of our activities include an annual Lenten prayer exchange, selling crafts made by San Eugenio parishioners, hosting visitors from our sister parish, and coordinating semiannual visits to the very poor area of Tijuana where our sister parish is located.

• **Parish Outreach:** For almost thirty years we have tithed the annual parish budget. With its members representative of various ministries and organizations, the Parish Outreach Committee is responsible for the distribution of these funds—given to a wide range of organizations and programs offering direct and indirect relief to those in need. The committee’s work is guided by its bylaws, approved by the Pastoral Council, and reports on the amount of money distributed and to whom are regularly printed in the parish bulletin.

While much is happening at Holy Rosary, we are constantly aware that so much more is possible. Recently both the pastoral council and pastoral team read and discussed *Rebuilt*. This book chronicles the innovative efforts of Fr. Michael White and pastoral associate Tom Corcoran and their community to

reinvigorate the Church of the Nativity in north Baltimore. Many of their strategies focus on the importance of hospitality, relationship building, and creatively considering new possibilities.

In light of the Pastoral Council’s discussion of *Rebuilt*, our pastor asked pastoral council members to attend services at a few of Albuquerque’s evangelical mega churches. This was an eye-opening experience! Members returned with tales of affable parking lot attendants who manage traffic control, warm handshakes as people enter the church, complimentary child care, hospitality areas in which refreshments are available for purchase, volunteers available to orient newcomers to the worship space and the faith community, gifts for first timers, updated and informative websites, and a sophisticated use of technology.

Convinced that the most effective way of being and growing Church is by welcoming others and forming relationships, the pastoral council and team continue to discern new approaches to hospitality. Through the years, we’ve discovered that as soon as one aspect of ministry is focused on and somewhat enlivened, another surfaces. There’s never a time that we’re done! The words of Pope Francis both inspire and challenge us:

I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. I do not want a Church concerned with being at the centre and which ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures. If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life. More than by fear of going astray, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: “Give them something to eat”—Mark 6:37. (*Evangelii Gaudium*) ♦

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*At [www.PastoralLiturgy.org](http://www.PastoralLiturgy.org)*

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