

Forming Liturgical Ministers in Hospitality

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Walking into Our Lady of the Most Holy Rosary Catholic Community in Albuquerque, New Mexico, the first thing you'll notice is that our front doors are difficult to open (we're working to fix that). However, on our best days you won't have to worry about the doors because they are likely already open, or about to be opened by one of our Welcome Team ministers or even one of our extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion.

Once inside the building, you'll find the altar servers and readers in the gathering space getting ready for the entrance procession, and the priest or deacon greeting the last of the arrivals before Mass begins. One of the ushers will help you find a seat, especially if you arrive at the usually full 10:15 AM Mass. Just before the gathering song is announced, the choir director will invite visitors to stand to be recognized and welcomed by the community. You'll learn where to find the music and order of service, and be invited to fully participate in the liturgy. A hospitable welcome indeed (if you don't think about the difficult doors).

In every parish in which I've ministered over the past twenty-five years, there has been a ministry of hospitality. These ministers served as greeters, welcoming people coming to Mass. It was only when I began my ministry at Holy Rosary Catholic Community that I discovered the responsibility of hospitality had been assigned, not to a select group of ministers, but to all liturgical ministers, including the assembly. What is it about our faith community that makes it so hospitable? Is it just a coincidence that all the warm, friendly people ended up on the west side of Albuquerque? Oh, no. As easy as this may seem, being a welcoming hospitable community requires an ongoing effort, particularly on the part of our liturgical ministers.

Most of us in parish ministry recognize that Sunday Mass is where we come in contact with the largest number of our parishioners (and guests) on a regular basis. Some are involved in faith formation, others in various parish groups or activities, but Sunday Mass is where most of our folks regularly gather. That means Sunday Mass is also the time and place when the community can show its best face.

The challenge for our ministers, and probably yours too, is that we easily get wrapped up in *what* we have to do and sometimes forget the importance of *how* we do our ministry. Yvonne, one of our ministry leaders, reminded me recently of the importance of one simple act that can make all the difference. "We need to look people in the eye," she said. "When ministers look people in the eye, even without saying a word, the person knows that they have been noticed and received, and welcomed."

Look people in the eye. So simple, yet so difficult. Do we really want to look the homeless person in the eye? Can we look

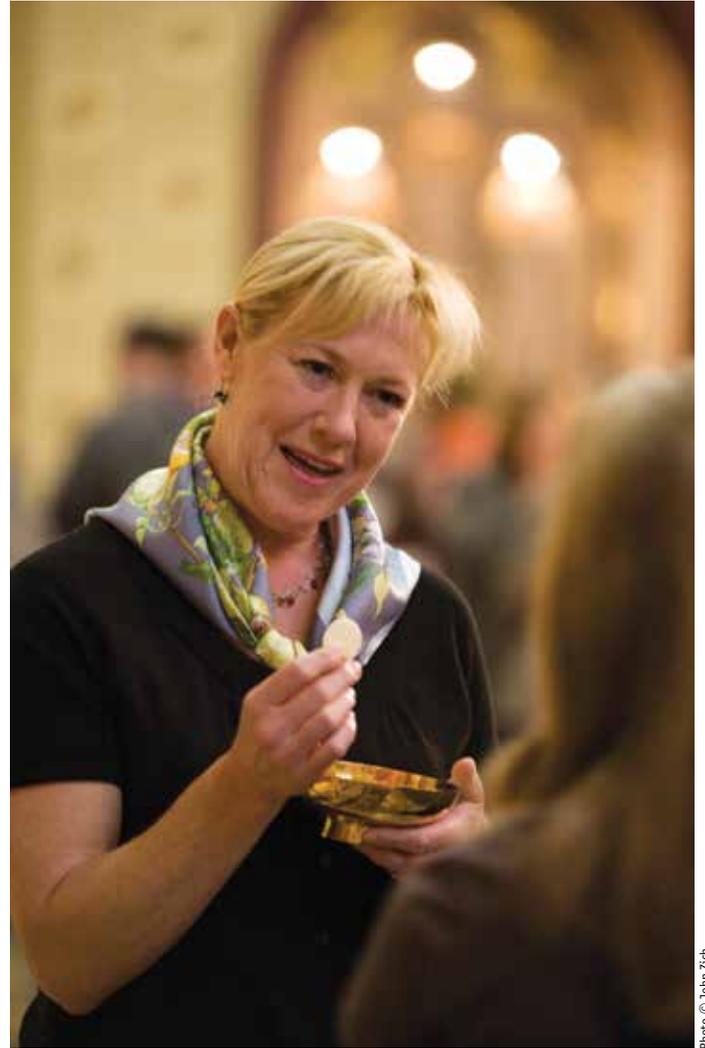


Photo © John Zich

An extraordinary minister of Holy Communion evangelizes and welcomes by looking another in the eye.

at the person who is physically or mentally challenged and feel compelled to welcome them? Are we able to look at the one who speaks a different language and invite them to sit next to us? These are the challenges that face us as the Body of Christ. So we start with small things.

Our Welcome Team is a new ministry. Their sole purpose, truly, is to hold open the door of the church for every person coming to Mass on Sunday morning, smile, look each person in the eye, and greet them. Simple and easy; anyone can do that.

Our extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion arrive early for each liturgy to prepare the vessels, the bread and wine, and themselves. Then, about fifteen minutes before Mass is to

begin, they take up positions in the gathering space near the entrance of the church to greet each person with a “good morning” or “hello.” They remain at the entrance until just a few moments before the liturgy begins, when they move to their seats without disrupting the assembly or the procession.

At the same time that the extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion are greeting people near the door in the gathering space, our ushers are standing near the aisles in the walkway around our worship space. They, too, have arrived early to prepare the things necessary for their ministry, and then stand ready to welcome people and lead them to an open seat. Our ushers are always looking for new faces before Mass, people they can invite to present the gifts of bread and wine. Sometimes people in the assembly are reluctant to present the gifts but our ushers make it easy. They provide clear guidance and cues so the gift bearers know exactly what to do and when to move.

The ministries of reader and altar server may not seem to have much of a role in hospitality, but they do. After their preparations for Mass they wait patiently in the gathering space for the entrance procession to begin. They also greet the arrival of assembly members. But the hospitality exhibited by our readers and altar servers comes primarily in the way in which they perform their specific ministry tasks.

Our readers are trained and practiced so as to make eye contact with the assembly, to proclaim the Word of God with thoughtfulness and clarity, and to invite the assembly to reflect in silence on the Word they have heard. This is hospitality. I have often reminded ministers of the Word of one simple thing: if the assembly can’t hear or understand the Word you proclaim, your ministry is useless. So our readers work hard to be heard and understood, and to look at the assembly.

The way in which our altar servers fulfill their duties plays a big part in hospitality in another way. Their role is not only to assist the priest celebrant, but to help everyone through the liturgy without too many bumps and bruises. Our altar servers take care of the many details of the liturgy and carry out their ministry with reverence. They are truly servants of the liturgy, somewhat like the servants of a great manor house, often in the background and standing to the side but available whenever you need something. Considering that, at least in our community, altar servers are often elementary and middle-school age, this is a great responsibility for them and their families, and a great gift to the faith community.

REACHING PAST COMFORT ZONES

In any faith community, it is truly the pastor who sets the tone. Our parish has been blessed with the pastoral presence of the Norbertine Community of Santa Maria de la Vid Abbey for more than twenty-five years. Their example of hospitality has been a strong guiding force in the development of our communal sense of welcome. Our current pastor, Fr. Robert Campbell, OPRAEM, is no exception. Assigned as our new pastor only a year ago, and a self-confessed introvert, he steps out of his comfort zone before every liturgy at which he presides. He walks around the church greeting people, and makes a special effort to welcome those seated in the back and around the edges. He looks them in the eye, greets them, and sometimes sits down to have a

quick chat, before getting back to the gathering space for the entrance procession. Fr. Bob likes to know the people with whom he is worshipping.

Just before the entrance procession, our cantors take a moment to recognize the guests and visitors joining the community for liturgy. It’s easy to see who they are in our community because of the way our worship space is arranged. The altar is in the middle of the building, and the assembly is seated on three sides, so one can look around and see the face of Christ looking back.

The role of the assembly as a ministry of hospitality should be evident, but it’s not always clearly defined. Ministers assigned to greet people at the door have little impact if those already in the pews are unwilling to make room for someone to sit down. We try to encourage those in the assembly to greet one another and introduce themselves to those around them. At major celebrations, when the church is overflowing with people, the assembly squeezes together to make more room for those still arriving.

The hospitality experienced within the church building extends beyond the liturgy as well. At nearly every Mass each weekend, as the Communion procession of the assembly concludes, the priest celebrant calls forward our ministers to the sick and homebound. These ministers are dismissed to take Holy Communion to our brothers and sisters too ill or infirm to worship with the gathered community. But these ministers also take with them the assurance that those whom they visit are not forgotten. Our participation in this simple act of dismissing these ministers to the homebound expands our vision and reminds us that our community is larger than what we see with our eyes.

Whether a parish names it hospitality, welcome, or evangelization, reaching out to others requires each person’s willingness to step out of their comfort zone, look up, and look another person in the eye. Our liturgical ministers strive to set an example of hospitality for our community, but we remind ourselves often of the ongoing need to greet one another, move over and make room, and welcome both friend and stranger alike. There will never be a time when our community says, “We’ve got it, we don’t have to do any more.” There are always things we can do better, and we look for ways to improve.

How does one go about forming a liturgical community of hospitality? Start simple. Look people in the eye. ♦

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