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An active presence to the community year-round is the foundation for hospitality and evangelization at Christmas.

# Hospitality and Liturgy Partner for Evangelization at Christmas

Letitia Thornton

When I was growing up, every year at Christmas my parents had the same conversation when discussing which Mass we would attend, inevitably ending with my mother saying firmly to my father, “Whatever we do, we have to get there early if we want to get a seat!” Depending on the Mass, this could mean getting six children up at the crack of dawn to get them presentable in time for an earlier Mass.

It is as true now as it was then: When it comes to welcoming new people to our parishes, there is no greater opportunity than Christmas. As predictably as malls fill with eager shoppers, dress-

up Santas, and the sound of carols, our pews fill with unfamiliar faces. And yet, my parents’ attitude toward these strangers—sometimes making at best grudging space—is a typical (and understandable) one. It can be difficult for some not to express, never mind feel, some indignation toward those who at Christmas take limited pew space from the regular Mass-goers. Christmas morning can engender crankiness in normally kind Catholics, at exactly the time when a spirit of joyful welcome is crucial.

How can parishes foster that joyful spirit? How do we maximize what can be a real evangelical opportunity in such a way that feels authentic and organic for both the visitor and the longtime parishioner? The answer to these questions, and the

strategies that parishes employ, can make the difference between a growing parish that is a vital part of the surrounding community, and one that is, at best, merely maintaining its current status, and at worst, aging, dwindling in size, and becoming less and less relevant.

The following suggestions arise from conversations with ministers in parishes around the country, from recommendations and guidelines that are already incorporated into the Church's ritual books, and from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and other bodies. They're intended to assist both parishioners and staff not only to prepare for, but look forward to, the new faces that, with luck, will crowd their pews on December 25. They include ideas and practices for the time before Christmas, both proximate and well in advance; for the liturgies themselves; and for the time after Mass—again, both immediately and going forward into the rest of the year.

### PLANNING FOR CHRISTMAS—IN JULY

It probably goes without saying, but no parish will feel welcoming at Christmas if it doesn't already have a charism of hospitality. Warmth and acceptance do not spring up overnight spontaneously. Therefore, parishes need to evaluate their approach to hospitality throughout the year before they begin to make special plans for Christmas. And they need to do so among all the faithful, not just with the professional staff or regular volunteers.

Fr. Len MacMillan, pastor of Holy Apostles Parish in Meridian, Idaho, knows this well. "You need to have a 'regular' hospitality approach in order to have Christmas hospitality," he says. "I have the largest parish in the diocese, and it's easy for people to get lost in the crowd if you don't make an effort."

Just before and after each liturgy, Fr. MacMillan makes a point of being present at the entry to the church to make sure he personally greets as many people as possible. If he is aware of a new face, he tries to spend a little extra time with that person to find out more about them. "It's not long—maybe thirty seconds—but being personally greeted by the pastor let's people know that I'm accessible and glad to see them." He tries to make sure longtime members know not to try to make appointments or involve him in longer, church-business conversations at this time, instead asking them to call the office on Monday so he can devote time to the people entering and leaving church, to make a personal connection with as many of them as possible.

He also encourages the community to make use of the church's generous plaza and entry to greet each other before Mass. "I don't like the sentimentality of asking people to 'greet their neighbor' at the beginning of Mass," he says. "I definitely want people to get to know each other and catch up on each other's families before Mass, but I ask them to try to do it either after Mass over coffee and doughnuts, or before—outside in the summer—or just before entering the worship space if the weather's bad." Regardless, parishioners at Holy Apostles feel part of an inclusive, expanding family, a feeling that will then naturally extend to that strange family sitting in "the wrong pew" at Christmas Mass.

In July, Holy Apostles contacts local title companies for contact information on families who may have recently moved

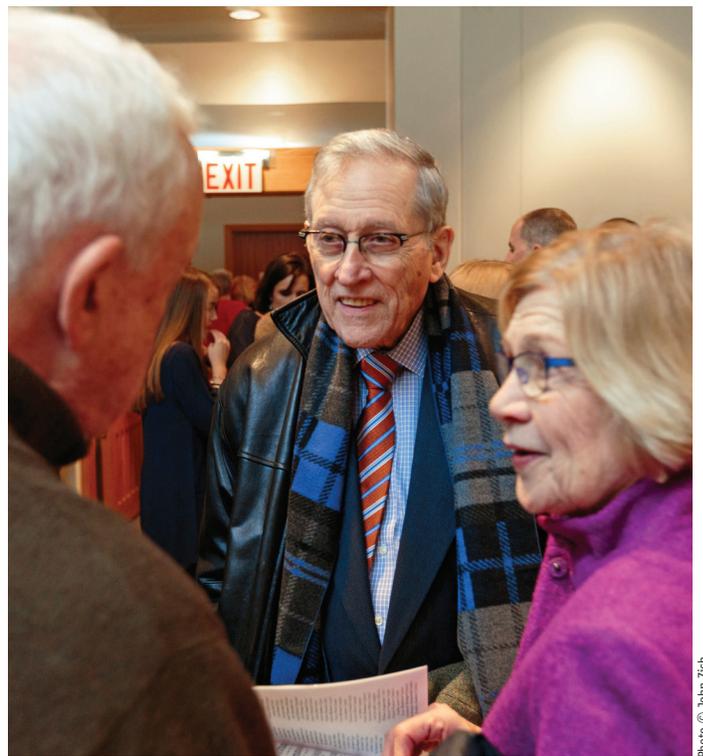


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Smiles and welcoming gestures from parishioners may help people decide to return to practicing their faith.

to the area. (This is a creative application of the understanding that parish boundaries are generally territorial or geographic: pastors assume responsibility for the *cura animarum*, the care of all souls within a very specifically circumscribed area, not just registered parishioners.) The new community members are sent mailings and invitations: to Sunday Mass, yes, but also to the summer parish picnic, to adult faith formation classes, and children's vacation Bible school and religious education classes. They're also made aware of local services, the parish food bank, the local Catholic school, and the like. By the time Christmas comes around, the parish doesn't seem quite so much like unfamiliar territory as it otherwise might.

At St. Joseph Church, in Placentia, California, the question of Christmas evangelization begins when the staff gathers to plan the holiday liturgy schedule. "We have the ongoing question that I think happens in a lot of parishes," says Kate Li, the parish's coordinator of adult faith formation. "What time do we schedule midnight Mass? That is, do we do it when the regular parishioners want it (and, to be honest, when the priest wants it), at 10 PM or 11 PM at the latest? Or do we schedule it for midnight, which is when those people who don't normally come to Mass, but who may have a sentimental connection to midnight Mass from their childhood, expect it to be?" Li says there is a strong argument to be made for holding Mass at midnight, if only to be available when it is traditionally expected by returning Catholics, and so serve as a possible evangelizing tool. But, she urges, this will only work if the liturgy is the best the parish is capable of. Where a carefully planned, thoughtfully executed liturgy is its own best recruiting tool, nothing is more off-putting than a careless one, where no thought has been given to the



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From Christmas Eve through the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, the decor of the season announces the joy of the coming of the Lord.

experience of the people in the pews, or indeed to the nature of the exchange between God and the People of God. As *Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship* states, “Faith grows when it is well expressed in celebration. Good celebrations can foster and nourish faith. Poor celebrations may weaken it” (5).

### THE CHRISTMAS MASSES—FROM PARKING LOT TO PARISH HALL

Once people have decided to attend Christmas Mass, where does the experience of that exchange begin? Again, Kate Li describes how the parish’s outreach to newcomers begins before they even enter the church. “It’s not exciting, but it’s practical: we put up a big banner, besides our usual sign in front of the church, that you can see from blocks away, that announces all our Christmas Mass times.” At St. John’s Cathedral in Boise, that sign is bilingual, keeping in mind the demographic of the neighborhood; and both English and Spanish-speaking parishioners are scheduled to assist with parking, to make sure the steps into the church are clear of snow, and to ensure that the elderly or disabled know where the elevator and handicapped entrances are. By such actions, people begin to feel the parish welcome them before they even get indoors. Also at St. John’s, before Christmas liturgies, docents are on hand to explain the artwork and history of the building.

Many parishes in the Southwest make use of luminaries (lit candles inside paper lanterns) to light the pathway to the church door; in communities with many Latinos, Our Lady of

Guadalupe is a familiar, welcoming, and seasonally appropriate presence. Wreaths and greenery can and should indicate to passersby that this is a festive, joyful, and peaceful time for this community.

Once inside, the ushers become the face of hospitality at any parish. Anyone engaged in this ministry should already know to welcome all who come through the church doors, but it’s especially important at this time of year. Ushers should be sure to greet everyone with a warm and smiling, “Merry Christmas”; if the church is crowded, to make sure that families can be seated together if possible; and to be alert to newcomers who may be looking for restrooms, etc. (In older churches, this kind of help can be especially important, as restrooms are frequently “hidden” in basements.) Ushers also hand out worship aids, which should include, besides the hymns and Mass parts for the liturgy, explanatory text regarding posture (many people feel intimidated by the question of when to kneel and stand at Catholic liturgies), and instructions for non-Catholics—phrased as generously as possible—regarding the reception of Communion.

While people are waiting for Mass to begin, the experience of looking around and taking in their surroundings can be more catechetical than any homily or text. Many of our older parishes are filled with stained glass and elaborate and beautiful decoration, but each parish should be sure to pay careful attention to their environment around Christmas. It’s important to remember that although we may be trying to appeal to an audience



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The church decor, which can be as catechetical as the homily, should adhere to liturgical principles.

whose experience of the holiday is strictly secular, we have clear guidelines that dictate environment during liturgy. Rubrics regarding these must be adhered to. (At one parish, the art and environment committee wanted to place a red cloth on the altar at Christmas because “red is the color of Christmas!”) Fresh greenery and real candles are always appropriate, as are traditional Catholic items like Nativity scenes and Advent wreaths. (See *Built of Living Stones*, 124 and 128, for direction regarding these items.) Parishes with older Nativity sets with interesting histories may want to place signs near their creche; the creche at St. John’s in Boise is life-sized, encouraging children to interact with it, to kneel next to Mary at the manger, to pat the donkey between the ears.

Be sure the parish has taken into account the need for overflow seating. As Fr. MacMillan says, “You know these people are coming; it’s just plain rude not to prepare properly for them. It’d be like inviting people to dinner and then telling them to stand against the walls the whole time while the family sits at the table.” At his parish, the parish hall is set up ahead of time for the Mass to be broadcast there over a closed-circuit channel. Comfortable chairs are set in rows, and the environment in the hall is carefully attended to, to make it as reverent and appropriate as possible. Extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion are scheduled to distribute Communion to those seated in the hall. Of course, not every parish has the space or ability to do this; a ready willingness among those already seated to make room may be the best that can be done, and is just as valuable a sign of welcome.

Once Mass begins, all preparation comes to fruition. The key is the same as with all Masses: Liturgy must be as excellent as possible. Not only does the nature of the liturgy demand it, but no one returns to a dismal liturgy. Charitable, welcome, and attentive parishioners; worship aids that take into account the makeup of the community, with language and explanatory text that is compelling and accurate; lectors, servers, and musicians who have rehearsed and prepared, and seem pleased to be there—all of these are important.

But perhaps the most important is the homily. The people in the pews are truly reached at Mass through the preaching and the music, and a carefully prepared homily is undeniably the most effective evangelizing tool at any liturgy. As Li says, “Our pastor makes a concerted effort at Christmas to make his homily sound different, in that he’s mostly addressing fallen-away Catholics who feel pressured from family to attend Mass at Christmas, those types of Catholics who don’t feel the need to be at church. And he’s been successful, through a message that is not judgmental, that is understanding, that is expressive of Christmas joy. Frequently, the people who end up in my adult formation program tell me they became interested through Father’s Christmas homily.”

One word of caution. Increasingly, Catholic parishes are considering staging children’s Nativity pageants during Christmas Masses. Although an understandable temptation common among non-Catholic Christians, this is not an appropriate practice during a Catholic liturgy. The Liturgy of the Word and

the homily cannot be replaced by any other element during Mass, including a reenactment of the Gospel in pageant form. Any activity that converts the faithful from participants to spectators at Mass is to be avoided; what's more, fond parents and relatives taking pictures of the actors turns the liturgy into theater, changes the focus of the Mass, and removes the community out of the continuing event of the Paschal Mystery, indicating that it is a strictly historical rather than ongoing occurrence.

### ITE, MISSA EST—NOW WHAT?

Mass is over, the choir is singing “Joy to the World,” the ministers are processing down the aisle—are we finished evangelizing yet? No; as a matter of fact, and as most Catholics know, we've only just begun. Not for nothing are the final words of the Mass at once dismissal and mission.

Once again, the burden of hospitality falls upon everyone. The priest must be available to shake hands, greet the people, and wish them a merry Christmas. Ushers should be ready with bulletins that include welcome language and information about the parish. (At St. Joseph's, the bulletin changes significantly around this time so that it addresses groups of people who aren't normally in the parish. Invitations to Bible study look different, and the invitation to the Welcome Home program is prominent around the two or three weeks at Christmas Time.) After the liturgy at St. John's, the community is greeted as they leave the church with hot chocolate and Christmas cookies on the sidewalk in front of the church. The parish used to host refreshments in the parish hall but found that most people weren't going out of their way to partake. Taking a more creative approach, meeting the people where they are, has allowed them to reach everyone, however briefly.

Finally, though, nothing will evangelize like the welcome and openness of the people that newcomers encounter in the pews. Do we smile and make room? Or whisper that we're saving a seat, and there's simply not space for anyone else? Do we offer our hand at the Sign of Peace with generosity and warmth? Do we take the time to meet and remember people as we enter and leave Mass, or walk past them and leave that to someone else? As Li said when discussing liturgy at Christmas, “To be honest, as someone who works with adults in evangelization, it is not the individual components of our liturgy that are ever going to bring new people into the church after one Mass. Those components are important, and liturgy done poorly will definitely discourage people from coming back. But our liturgy is simply too complex and rich. What will bring people into our church is knowing other Catholic people. It's all about relationships.”

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops states, “Christmas is one of the most important days of the Church year, second only to Easter itself. It is the feast of the incarnation, the feast of God becoming flesh (the Latin ‘in carne’ means ‘enfleshment’). God is not only Transcendent, but also wholly Immanent, Emmanuel (God-with-us).” If God is so generously with us in so particular a way at Christmas, how can we be anything less—less generous, less present?—to those who might wander in to join us for this feast?



Photo © John Zich

A well-celebrated liturgy, with a homily that welcomes infrequent Mass-goers, transforms hearts.

The poet Li-Young Lee has described this evangelizing stance in a different way in his poem called, appropriately, “Nativity,” in which he succinctly describes the goal upon which all Christian hospitality should be modeled: “Each must make a safe place of his heart, / before so strange and wild a guest / as God approaches.” In the truest sense of the word *sanctuary*, when God, embodied in so many strange guests, makes his way to our churches, our worship spaces must be safe places for them and for him. This safety begins in our hearts. ♦

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