



GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study

#7 - March 2011

A Royal Welcome: Some Secrets of Belonging (Part 5)

This month's (March 2011) *U.S. Catholic's* Sounding Board article (with a reader's survey) is entitled: "When I was a stranger...you sent me a box of envelopes." The lead-in sentence for its preliminary readers' survey proclaimed: **"If parishes lose the Catholic tradition of hospitality, they risk losing members."**

In *What Can Catholics Learn from Evangelicals?* (Visual Dynamics Publishing, www.vdpublishing.net), Fr. Bob Hater asserts: *"The impersonalism of culture accentuates people's search for community. In such an environment, an evangelistic orientation, focusing on community, presents an attractive option. Catholics and Protestants alike look for a welcoming church."*

*Consequently, Catholic evangelization needs to begin with hospitality. Perhaps, there is **no other single factor more necessary than welcoming people.** If we do not, they may not stay around long enough to be catechized and celebrate the Eucharist and other sacraments."* (This book is also available on Kindle: <http://www.amazon.com/dp/B004KZOWN2>).

Fr. Bob Hater's and *U.S. Catholic's* observations have been echoed at a recent conference. On December 5, 2010, a forum from the Woodstock Theological Center, Washington (<http://woodstock.georgetown.edu/>) was held at St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia. Fr. Ray Kemp observed that a key to a hopeful future for the church is a vital parish -- **a parish that welcomes people** and calls on them to contribute their time and talents.

Tom Reese, SJ cautioned that a **welcoming attitude**, implemented in **concrete welcoming practices**, is lacking in most Catholic parishes and is one of the major weaknesses in U.S. Catholic practice today. "When was the last time you entered a Catholic church and **actually were welcomed?**" he asked. "Our churches and our liturgies are boring. That, I think, more than theology, is what is driving our people away from our church. "What you need is good music, good preaching, programs for kids and **a welcoming community**," he said. "If you have that, you will have a full church."

St. Anastasia Parish in Troy, MI, is utilizing a best practice which illustrates what Fr. Bob Hater, *U.S. Catholic* and Tom Reese, SJ are speaking about. How would you feel if you walked into a parish and always saw the following:



Wondering Nuggets:

- If this is what the parish espouses, what would you hope to find?
- In your parish, how do people feel/experience always being loved, always being welcomed?

(We will revisit this later and let you know some of the results/advantages of this particular best practice at St. Anastasia's.)

If we have no peace,
it is because we have forgotten
that we belong to each other.

- Blessed Mother Teresa

The challenge of Tom Reese, SJ, *U.S. Catholic* and Fr. Bob Hater (and many others today) calls us more deeply to look at our practices of welcoming and hospitality. **GEMS** hasn't exhausted its reflection on this challenge and the best practices to respond. Let's continue in this issue – through a series of questions.

Do you KNOW me?

Who are the people in the pews? The people visiting? The people still to come? In the booklet for their Welcoming Ministries training session, St. Thomas the Apostle Parish, Naperville, Illinois answers that question:

“Do you KNOW me?

I am your daughter. I am your neighbor. I am your co-worker. I was your son’s math teacher. I cut you off on route 88 yesterday. I am your mother’s cardiologist. I replaced your roof last spring. I am your newspaper carrier. I am your best friend’s hairdresser.

I am your daughter’s future husband. I clean your house. I just moved across the country. I am your boss’s ex-wife. I bought your old car. You jog by my house every morning. I sat behind you in chemistry. You cheered for me on the soccer field. We were on the same flight to Phoenix last year. Our kids were in scouts together.

Yours was the first face I saw when I entered this church.

I am the body of Christ.

Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the Glory of God. (Romans 15:7)”

These quotes remind us again that the ministry of welcoming belongs to all of us, as we said in **GEMS #5** (www.janetschaeffler.com): “Whose ‘job’ is hospitality in a parish? Has welcoming/hospitality been reduced to a ‘ministry of hospitality’ or **are our parishes hospitable communities** ~ because **EACH AND EVERY PERSON** is living in **gratitude, inclusivity, welcoming and hospitality?”**

The Catholic Church teaches that the Church is the “People of God.” This implies that the entire parish must be involved in making the church a welcoming place.

Welcoming is not the sole prerogative of the priest standing in the back of church, shaking hands with people, as they enter.

- Fr. Bob Hater
in *What Can Catholics Learn from Evangelicals?*

How Do We Respond to the Real Needs?

It goes without saying, that a parish of welcome is one which responds to needs, both as individuals and as a parish.

Heather Grennan Gray says it very realistically in this month’s *U.S. Catholic* article: “...some intentional practices of hospitality were very informal and **extended by individuals rather than the church itself**: dinner invitations and baby hand-me-downs and offers to help pack and load the truck when we moved. On a Sunday morning when my four-year-old threw up in the aisle right after the closing song, two women I barely knew told me to take care of my daughter and they’d clean the carpet. That’s hospitality.”

To explore just one area of parish life: the *Order of Christian Funerals* (#9) reminds us: “The responsibility for the ministry of consolation rests with the believing community, which heeds the words and example of the Lord Jesus: “Blessed are they who mourn; they shall be consoled” (Matthew 5:3). Each Christian shares in this ministry according to the various gifts and offices in the Church.”

The many ways a parish responds and ministers at the time of suffering and death are certainly examples of care, compassion, welcoming, and belonging. Parishes which take this responsibility seriously – that the ministry of consolation rests with all, not just the parish staff -- witness practices such as:

- Responding to help families with some of the **routine tasks of daily living**
- Ministerial groups which help families **plan and understand the rituals** for burial and cremation, etc. and assist them in planning the vigil service and the funeral liturgy
- Assisting with **out-of-town family members and friends**
- **Providing music** for the Vigil Service (which can “touch the mourners and other present at levels of human need that words alone often fail to touch” (#68)

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- Helping to remember the loved one through **story-telling, pictures and videos** – a gift that is treasured by family in months and years to come
- The **presence of parishioners at the funeral liturgy**, for this is a parish liturgy, a prayer which affects the whole community
- If family members are not able to participate in **various ministerial roles in the liturgy**, can parish members respond?
- Parishioners who have formed a **choir for funeral liturgies**
- What **supportive roles** need to be filled (babysitting, transportation for those from out-of-town, etc.)?
- The Rite of Committal is *“the final act of the community of the community of faith in caring for the body of its deceased member”* (#204). Are there ways that parishioners can support the family **with their presence** in this important ritual?
- The gift of gathering and the **funeral luncheon** in the hospitality of their parish home
- **Continuing support** through phone calls, visits, thinking-of-you cards, remembrances in liturgies, support groups, etc.

This is one area, a significant one – at the time of suffering and death - in which the parish and individual parishioners respond to needs, but it isn't the only one. As Deacon Richard Manning (St. Ludmilla Parish, Dubuque, Iowa) says: *“We have many other groups who minister to the various needs of parishioners during times of need. They care for individuals who may be in a financial bind, homebound, loss of a spouse, grave illness, youth, new dwelling, and, of course, new in the parish.”*

Is our Response to Needs Intimately Connected to Eucharist?

Do we – each and every parishioner – have a real and explicit understanding of how our Eucharistic liturgy connects us – or should connect us – with those who are not present with us when we gather?

The parish staff and many parishioners may, during the week, visit hospitals, hospices, nursing homes, the homebound, prisons, but is there an articulated vision of **how these actions of care and hospitality are connected to the life of our worshipping community?**

- Are these ministers **sent out from the community** in a formal ritual?
- Does the parish know that these ministries are performed in their name?
- Are those who are absent **regularly named**, compassionately **prayed for** in the midst of the gathered community, so that they are recognized as full and vital members of the church?
- Do we recognize that these reverent actions are what it means to be **part of the Communion of Saints**, to be a church of welcome and belonging?

We are called to create a place in our hearts,
minds, bodies, homes, days, and lives
for others.
This practice of hospitality allows us to be present
to the needs of others just as God
is present to our needs. Hospitality not only means
welcoming the stranger,
it also means listening to the other,
praying for the other, and caring for their needs.
A hospitable person is a friend.
- Jocelyn Sideco
in “Right Relationships:
A Spirituality in Times of Disaster and Beyond”

Does Our Response Call Us Beyond Ourselves?

Of course, faith-filled parishes of belonging respond to **needs beyond themselves.**

“We are the body of Christ
as we receive the Body of Christ ...
may we know that it is the Body of Christ
coming to the body of Christ

that will go out into our world ...
listening to the lonely,
ministering to the needy,

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acting for justice,
working for peace.”

-A Prayerbook for Eucharistic Ministers
(Twenty-Third Publications, 2010)

The website of St. Francis of Assisi Parish, Ann Arbor, Michigan, (<http://www.stfrancisa2.com/socialministry/>) lists **more than forty-nine opportunities for service and outreach.**

Here and throughout the entire parish website, also, are constant informational/formational opportunities for parishioners (and visitors) to learn more about the issues of the day, as well as the wisdom and challenge of Catholic social teaching.

The community of St. Charles Parish in Warr Acres, Oklahoma, (<http://stcharlesokc.com/news.php>) also takes the call to live the Gospel seriously. There are **fifteen different committees within the area of social ministry in the parish.** Five years ago the parish began the Dorothy Day Center (http://thedorothydaycenter.com/resources/Social_Ministries.htm) in addition to a free health clinic, a legislative advocacy coalition, an AIDS interfaith network and many other responses for social and economic justice.

Hospitality means we take people into the space
that is our lives and our minds and our hearts
and our work and our efforts.
Hospitality is the way we come out of ourselves.
It is the first step towards dismantling
the barriers of the world.
Hospitality is the way we turn a prejudiced world
around, one heart at a time.
- Joan Chittister, OSB

In Vicki Hawkins' words (Nativity Parish, Brandon, Florida): **“Biblical stewardship (giving out of a sense of gratitude) is highly visible and encouraged through homilies, every bulletin, website, etc.”**

In Mary Robinson, OSU's commentary (St. Mary Mackillop Parish, Birkdale, Brisbane, Australia), it becomes **obvious that anyone and everyone can be involved** in being concerned about – and contributing toward the care of others. *“On Monday afternoons we have an Activities Group which knit or crochet or sew for Brisbane's needy. We belong to a group called ‘Knitting for Brisbane's Needy.’*

We make the garments; they are collected and are distributed to the homeless, asylum seekers, preemie babies at the Mater; trauma dolls go to the police, ambulance and fire brigade, etc. One lady comes along each week and prepares a tasty afternoon tea. This group consists of those who like crafty things, but we also have some migrants, who have language problems, or others who are lonely or feel outside the system. Some come and go, but we have a steady group which anchors the activity.”

Wondering Nugget: Welcoming to All?

Are we conscious of those on the journey with us **who follow other traditions or belong to other Christian communities?** There is a Christian hospitality which calls us to encourage opportunities for common prayer or collaboration in the doing of good works.

Is our community ecumenical in the spirit of what the Second Vatican Council has called us to be?

Janet Schaeffler, OP

www.janetschaeffler.com ~ jansch@juno.com



Past issues of **GEMS** is archived at www.janetschaeffler.com.

Additional ideas for Adult Faith Formation Best Practices can be found at www.pastoralplanning.com. Go to Adult Formation: *Nuts & Bolts: Planning and Best Practices for Adult Formation.*