



A Parish-Hospitality Checklist

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On a bright Sunday morning, little Jacob was going to Mass for the first time with his mother. He was very excited to be going to God's house, for his mom had told him it was a very special place. "Will I see God?" he asked. His mother pondered the question and answered that indeed he would, since God would be in all the people gathered in church.

As he came into church, Jacob looked around and saw many people with unsmiling faces. No one seemed to notice either him or his mom. As Jacob sat in his pew, his mother kneeling beside him, he grew more excited. After all, he was going to see God! He looked all around and began swinging his little legs back and forth. A very stern-faced person seated next to him leaned over and said, "Little boy, stop that! Behave yourself in church. This is God's house." Before his mother could intervene, Jacob burst into tears and blurted out loud, "Boy, God is sure in a bad mood! I don't like coming to his house. Can we go home?"

What is hospitality?

From Genesis to Revelation, the sacred Scriptures might be read as a series of "table talks" and lessons on the relationship between "host" and "guest/stranger." The root of the word *hospitality* is the Latin word *hospes*, which literally means "guest."

In the first century, hotels and motels did not exist. One of the first things set up by the early Church was the practice of hospitality so that Christians who

traveled, whether for business or missionary purposes, would have safe lodging. In the Middle Ages, the Church organized official "hospices," or places where officials could stay overnight. During the Crusades, many hospices became care centers for the sick and those wounded in battle. In modern times, hotels for travelers came into existence. We now speak of a "hospitality industry." In addition, the Church's hospices that took care of those who were poor, sick, aged, and disabled evolved into today's "hospitals." The history is long and complex.

For Christians, hospitality is empowered by the Holy Spirit. It is understood to be the desire to welcome others, to share one's concern, time, love, personal space, and resources with another without expecting a return.

True hospitality is not extended to others because of their status, age, attractiveness, influence, or social graces. We are not hospitable because of the gratification we receive or even for appreciation or reciprocity. The virtuous or habitual practice of hospitality challenges us to continually consider the "bigger picture" and to



BY PHILIPPA

refocus often on hospitality's purpose and mission. It will always seek the good of the guest; it is not about the host's personal worries, agendas, concerns, comfort, or interests.

What did little Jacob experience as he came to church for the very first time? He certainly did not feel welcome or accepted, and in his innocence attributed this coldness to God's bad mood. After all, his mom had said that God was present in all the people. If we truly believe God is present in each of us and in the whole community, then hospitality will be the visible fruit of that belief in action. There are no real strangers where the virtue of hospitality is practiced.

The ministry of hospitality

After the ministries of Word and Sacrament, hospitality is one of the most important ministries in the parish community. Hospitality is more than a program of serving refreshments or meals at parish gatherings. It is more than the responsibility of only

a few people who volunteer to greet people at the church door.

A parish community that understands this can welcome little Jacob as well as his family. Once he is welcomed into the community of faith, it will take many people over many years to reach out and guide him through his sacramental life, his formation in the faith, and his growth into young adulthood. A hospitable parish community continues to welcome each new stage of growth, each success and failure—especially the failures. Sometimes this hospitality is experienced in a direct program or service to Jacob or to his mom. Most often, hospitality will be in the simple way people welcome them and are there for them so that Jacob no longer sees God as being in a bad mood. Eventually, little by little, Jacob will be challenged to see himself as the person responsible to welcome others, to become himself the friendly face of God.

In 2004 an article appeared in *America* magazine entitled "Hospitality at Church." Students were asked to attend

liturgical services in many different places and to rank their experiences. Much to the surprise of the instructor, the twenty-year-olds' experiences of "Church" were profoundly affected by simple hospitality, that is, whether it was offered to them. They rated highly such experiences as being greeted at the door, people's moving over so they could be seated in the pew, parishioners' visiting with one another before and after the liturgy, and parishioners' simply acknowledging them.


Can a parish become more hospitable?

What does it take to transform a parish congregation from a group of individuals praying privately to a community of hospitality? It involves a conscious choice of those present to be aware of all those around them.

A pastor invited his congregation to turn toward the center aisle during the entrance procession at the Sunday liturgy. He asked the people to look at one another and to see beyond those who sat around them. At first it was awkward, but gradually people began to do this, even though some could not muster the courage to look at those across the aisle. God forbid, they might catch someone's glance and even smile. (Jacob might have noticed that.)

Why did the pastor ask this of the congregation? His intention was simple: "We need to develop a sense of the community at worship. This is hospitality in simple form. Eye contact is one important way in which to acknowledge and welcome others."

It takes planning and an appreciation and understanding of a parish's culture to shift from a congregation of individuals to a community of hospitable people. Primarily, the pastor and parish leaders must believe that hospitality is much more than coffee and doughnuts (although food and drink always help). Parish staffs should develop strategies and processes that monitor and evaluate how well hospitality is being integrated into the min-



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The following checklist has been successfully used by staff and parishioners to ensure hospitality in all aspects of parish life:

istries, programs, and activities in the parish. Everything in parish life must serve to build and strengthen healthy and reciprocal relationships among the members.

Assessing growth in a congregation (or in any group) is not a simple thing to do. Pastors often do not see change for many years. However, often strangers can give us the best feedback about how they were welcomed when they walked in the door.

An ongoing challenge

✓ If hospitality is a way of life and not simply an event, it poses a challenge to parishioners, staff, and pastor. This challenge never ends and is interwoven into every part of parish life, for the parish as a whole is the welcoming community—not isolated individuals or groups within the parish.

In Matthew's account of the Judgment of the Nations (25:31–46), those who will inherit the kingdom of God are those whose daily lives have been marked by hospitality toward others: feeding, giving, welcoming, clothing, and visiting. The passage suggests that our hunger for and participation in human community is a rehearsal for heaven. If so, we will be judged ultimately on the way we exercise hospitality toward all and welcome all as members of God's family. ■

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Parish-Hospitality Checklist



REGISTRATION/ORIENTATION OF NEW PARISHIONERS

- Is it personal? Who is responsible for meeting new parishioners and explaining and orienting them to all aspects of parish life?
- Is it practical? Are information packets or written materials about the parish presented to new parishioners? How does the parish website facilitate information sharing?
- Is it focused on the parishioner? Are new parishioners given the chance to state their individual or family needs (health issues, spiritual conflicts, sacramental concerns, and so forth)?
- Is the pastor involved in meeting the new parishioners?
- Is there follow-up at another time? If so, when? How? By whom?

PARISH HOSPITALITY

- Does the parish have clear or realistic criteria for welcoming new parishioners?
- Are these criteria and expectations shared with all parishioners?
- How and when is the parish's growth as a welcoming community evaluated?

HOSPITALITY WITHIN PARISH MINISTRIES

- Does each parish ministry rotate members and leaders to facilitate maximum participation of all parishioners?
- Is training given so parishioners feel confident and competent to perform their roles?
- Is there a policy for managing and resolving conflicts and gossip?

HOSPITALITY IN LITURGY AND SACRAMENTS

- Are sacramental-preparation requirements communicated to families early enough and in a gracious, people-sensitive manner?
- Are people with special needs given flexible options if they cannot meet program expectations or schedules?
- Is the Sunday liturgy an engaging and welcoming celebration where people can greet one another before and after?
- Is the congregation mindful of visitors who are present? Are they reminded to welcome the stranger or nonparishioner?