

Hospitality in the Liturgy

Frank Coady

Strangely, even a concept like “hospitality” is not always welcome in the Church. Since Vatican II Roman Catholic parishes have established the ministry of greeters and have encouraged people to be more friendly and conversational before the liturgy. Some parishes even encourage people to introduce themselves to strangers at the beginning of the liturgy. But not everyone welcomes these changes. Some experience them as phony and shallow. Is the greeting at the church door just another “Wal*Mart” greeting, something commercial and forced? The kiss of peace is experienced by some as a folksy intrusion on a sacred rite.¹ Some Catholics complain that their prayer before Mass is interrupted by the “noise” going on at the door.

Is there a resolution to these points of view? Can the seeming extroverts and introverts find some common ground on the issue of liturgical hospitality? Any authentic resolution must reach beyond personal preference toward the true source of liturgical hospitality: God. Like the liturgy itself, hospitality is not something manufactured by the human community but something given by God. God invites humans to salvation, and they respond in faith and love. The host of the liturgy is God, who, in each liturgy, offers once again the greatest

invitation in human history: the opportunity to share in the life of the Trinity. In responding to this invitation the community itself becomes hospitable. A hospitality based on anything else may be genuine but it is not liturgical.

In this age of the Church, the time between the first and final comings of Christ, the Son in heaven is joined to his body on earth through the power of the Spirit. The liturgy is the ritual celebration of that union, offered in love to the Father so that the eternal worship of God in the kingdom might be celebrated in the present moment. This celebration of trinitarian love and the human community’s involvement in it should never be understood apart from the daily Christian living that the ritual celebrates and for which the ritual imparts grace.

The liturgy is Christ (the head) hosting the Church (his body), coming to them through the power of the Spirit in order to invite them to become one with him and share in divine life. This union of head and body is offered to the Father as a fitting sacrifice of praise. The presence of the divine host and the response of the faithful are evident in the structure and texts of the eucharistic liturgy as well as in the functions of the various ministers involved, especially the assembly. A brief walk through the liturgy will demonstrate

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that it needs no outside help, nothing contrived, to make it hospitable. Hospitality is its heart.

Brief Walk through Liturgy

The introductory rites, designed to point up Christ's desire to be in union with his body, accompany the literal action of the faithful gathering in his name. The sign of the cross identifies the people's relationship to the triune God. The greeting welcomes them into God's presence. The sprinkling rite or the penitential rite recall their baptism, the initial celebration of God's invitation to share in divine life. These rites place the assembly's gathering in the proper context: they are forgiven and called.² The Gloria flows from these baptismal rites as the voice of the redeemed, proclaiming that the glory of God is humanity saved. The opening prayer recalls God's activity on their behalf and seeks the grace for their wholehearted response.

The Liturgy of the Word celebrates the God of revelation, the God who actively seeks out humans rather than merely waiting upon their ingenuity, the God who reveals himself so that his invitation to relationship might be clearly understood and met with the community's response. In this proclamation the same Spirit that inspired the biblical authors is active among God's people, gracing lectors and preachers and opening the hearts of the faithful. Upon hearing the word they respond: "Thanks be to God," and "Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ."

Just as the Gloria praises God in response to the penitential or sprinkling rites, the Creed flows from the celebration of the word. Hearing the word has once again strengthened the people's faith, cemented their bond with God, and recalled them to their roots. The Creed returns the liturgy to the notion of baptism wherein the faithful restate their foundational faith and recommit themselves to Christ their savior and to living the new life in the Spirit.³

The assembly presents the gifts to be offered to the Father: the bread and wine that will become the sacrament of the Son along with the monetary offerings that not only support the community and the poor but also represent their very selves to be offered along with Christ.

In the eucharistic prayer the assembly calls to mind the ultimate hospitality of God expressed through the laying down of the Son's life. The hospitality of Christ is expressed most fully in the words of institution. There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends (see John 15:13). The community makes this memorial the context for their lives. They participate, in this moment, in the once and for all sacrifice of Calvary, offering themselves along with Christ to the Father for the redemption of the world. Christ is the one priest of the eucharistic

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liturgy, but he has invited his disciples to share in his paschal mystery. They are invited to lay down their lives.

The community exercises its priestly function of offering and intercession. In the context of their self-offering, joined to Christ's, they pray for the living and the dead, for those who obviously belong to Christ and for those whose faith is known to God alone.⁴ In fact, their intercession goes beyond the human race. They give voice to all creation's praise of God. This notion is most obvious in the prefaces, which all end with some notion of the assembly's joining their voices with the angels and the choirs of heaven. Even creation itself is mentioned in various prefaces.⁵ Nowhere in the liturgy is the community's share in God's own hospitality more fully expressed than in the eucharistic prayer. Participating in the priesthood of Christ, they offer their lives on behalf of the world. No one and nothing is excluded in this offering. Swept beyond their own human vision, they intercede for people and other created realities that they do not even comprehend.

Perhaps the most obvious sign of hospitality in the liturgy is the invitation to eat and drink at the Lord's table. Indeed, what separates the eucharistic liturgy from

all other forms of prayer is precisely that the divine host who has gathered these people in his name, who has nourished them with his word and invited them into a sharing in his priestly activity, now feeds them with his own body and blood. His has not been merely an invitation to worship God but to become one with God. They are drawn into trinitarian life. What they eat and drink here is a foretaste of the heavenly Banquet, an anticipation of their share in the Son's eternal glory. But this is a dangerous place to go and a fearsome thing to become, for divine life is revealed by the Son: self-emptying, laying down one's life, becoming last, least, and servant of all. The glory cannot come without the cross.

So then, what does all this say about specific ministries of hospitality in the liturgy: greeters, presiders, eucharistic ministers, and, indeed, the assembly? First of all, the divine hospitality expressed in the liturgy should form the context out of which these ministries are performed. God invites human beings to share in the glory of the Trinity yet not without cost. It might be helpful to go through each ministry and look at how divine hospitality can be embodied in human persons.

The Ministry of Greeters

Greeters do not need to carry the entire weight of the community's hospitality, and they certainly should not delude themselves by thinking they can carry the weight of God's hospitality. They are merely signs of it. They witness to it. But if they witness well, their ministry can have a powerful effect. Greeters should be chosen, above all, for their character. They should be people who are generous and kind throughout the week, open-hearted people whose greeting is genuine.

Greeters will naturally know some people better than others. While there is no need to feign the same greeting for everyone, no person coming to Mass should be treated with disdain or even indifference.

Greeters are not welcoming shoppers to a mall or revelers to a party. They are welcoming believers to the liturgy, to an encounter with God that will take place in the context of the community's faith expression. While warmth and friendliness are certainly in order, they are not the real goal. The goal is to facilitate individuals coming together as God's family to worship. Some of the secular talk can be toned down in favor of a simple, warm "good morning and welcome." Certainly, legalism in this regard would be harmful and counterproductive, but just knowing to what they are inviting people can help greeters strike a healthy balance. Handing people a worship aid or even a parish bulletin is an unobtrusive way of reminding them what they have come to do. It sets the tone for the liturgy that follows.

The Ministry of Presider

In extending God's hospitality to the assembly, the presiding minister becomes a symbol of the presence of Christ in the liturgy. Through him Christ speaks to his body, telling them that they are welcome to the table of God's word and of Christ's body and blood. Through the presider, Christ invites his people into every aspect of their prayer: to renewal of their baptism, to attentiveness to the word, to their role as intercessors, to their identity with Christ in the eucharistic prayer, to communion with him in the sacrament, to living in the world what they have celebrated in the liturgy.

The presider's words are inviting and inclusive: "Let us pray"; "Let us call to mind our sins"; "Let us give thanks to the Lord our God." When he is not specifically inviting people to pray, he is voicing their prayer with the understanding that they are praying along with him and that the prayer is not exclusively his but both theirs and his together.

The presider acts in the person of Christ the head but he is at the same time a member of the body. The human presider symbolizes Christ so that the body of Christ may be reminded that its head is present in their prayer. When they hear the voice of the presider inviting them to this union, it is actually the voice of Christ. The presider leads the community's prayer; he does not pray in their stead. The presider is confident in his share in Christ's priesthood so that he may make the assembly confident in their share in Christ's priesthood. In fact, the presider's role is essentially to call the assembly to its priestly function: prayer and sacrifice.

If the presider's role is principally to invite the assembly to its priestly function of prayer and sacrifice, then he is in essence inviting them to become one with Christ. The presider does not invite them to share in his own priesthood but Christ's. While a certain warmth and friendliness is required, the presider should know that the experience of God's hospitality in the liturgy does not ultimately depend on him. Nor, for that matter, does the community's response. He is an important part, but only a part, of the larger project of God's addressing his people and their reply.

One way this has been expressed is that the presider must get out of the way of Christ. He must avoid drawing too much attention to himself. He should exhibit a certain transparency so that, while he is in fact leading the assembly, what they experience is Christ as much as he. While it is possible to be too stiff and dispassionate, the presider needs also to avoid exhibiting too much of his own personality. A simple rule of thumb is to do the rite and only the rite. Some presiders reinvent the liturgy to their own likeness. They give it their own personal

touch. In most cases this does not improve the liturgy but harms it. Presiders should enter the liturgy with a deep humility, recognizing that nothing they could say would be better than what the Church has composed over many centuries of inspired tradition.

Eucharistic Ministers

Eucharistic ministers should likewise draw their source of hospitality from the liturgy itself. It is possible to be overly affective when distributing Communion. If the communicant is not convinced that this is the Body or Blood of Christ when they come forth to receive it, they will not be convinced by the way the words “the body of Christ” are pronounced by the ministers. It is God who welcomes communicants to the table, and the ministers should know that they are windows on that hospitality. They are not contriving it on their own.

One reason Vatican II’s Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy insists that the presence of Christ in the liturgy resides “especially in the eucharistic species” is to remind every participant that no human being is manufacturing that presence (SC no. 6). It happens by God’s willing it and by their own ministry quietly and rather unnoticeably done (*ex opere operato*). This is not to deny the importance of these ministries. These works done carefully and with dignity help tremendously in building up the body of Christ in love. And to say that these ministries should be done almost without notice is not in any way intended to justify the age-old fallacy that liturgy is a private activity, something between the communicant and Jesus. The communicant cannot receive Jesus without his body, the Church. This is why the rule is strictly enforced that one must receive Communion from another person. The multiplication of ministers in the current rite is designed to point to the communal nature of the encounter with Christ in the liturgy. One is greeted by the body at the door, welcomed and led in prayer by the presider, has the word proclaimed to them by lectors, and receives Christ from eucharistic ministers.

The Assembly

The most important consideration of all is that of the assembly, for, if the invitation extended by God is great, then so is the response expected. Participants are asked not merely to glory in the gift given (salvation) but to become givers, saviors. They are reminded by this word and this sacrament that their lives have no ultimate meaning unless they lay them down. Through a lifetime of participating in the liturgy they are invited to become more and more transformed so that their way of seeing the world is no longer the human way but the divine way. They are to

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become, like their Savior, so filled with the Father’s love that they need human esteem less and less. They are to become so trusting in the ultimate outcome that they worry less and less about their own safety in this world.

This transformation must begin to show in their daily lives, which is the real liturgy. Their true worship is authentic witness to the resurrected life. One way of describing that resurrected life is that it is hospitable. That does not mean, necessarily, that it is friendly and warm in that extroverted way that often makes the best liturgical greeters. It means genuinely caring about the welfare of one’s neighbor. It means being willing to be made uncomfortable so that one’s neighbor can be more comfortable. It means being willing to give up some of one’s wealth so that the poor can have more. It means being willing to risk job, esteem, position, even life itself.

St. Paul reminds his readers that if they wish to be like Christ they must identify with his death (2 Cor 4:10–12; Phil 3:10). The self-offering of the Son is the backdrop

for all of Christian living. The pattern of the Christian is the life of Christ, lived for others instead of for himself.

There is a critical misunderstanding about hospitality that is evident in many eucharistic communities. Eucharistic hospitality is not warm and fuzzy but sacrificial and costly. This is why some communities that work the hardest to appear friendly and inviting do not come across as hospitable. Authentic hospitality welcomes all comers: rich and poor, black and white, male and female, old and young, strong and weak, right and left. What makes them one is not a rehearsed friendliness, nor is it the determination by each to like the others. Their unity is precisely in their identity with Christ's pasch. The extent of their unity is directly dependent upon the extent of their willingness to lay down their lives for each other and for the world. Jesus' prayer for unity (that they all may be one) occurs in the context of his passion (see John 17).

The assembly is both receiver and giver of God's hospitality in the liturgy. This does not happen automatically, any more than the constant flow of grace is automatically received and utilized by humans. People must be open to it but not in exactly the same way as to the experience of God that occurs in their personal prayer. In both prayer forms—private and liturgical—the key is surrender. Like Christ, they must surrender their own will to the will of the Father. They must submit to God's authority in their lives and learn how to be quiet before the Lord so that they may receive instruction, peace, the very entrance of God into their souls. In liturgical prayer, though, they must also surrender their individual selves to the community. The signing with baptismal water as one enters the church building signifies the surrender of self: both to Christ and to his body.

Liturgical prayer is not several people praying privately in the same room. Jesus told his disciples that he would be present among them whenever two or more gathered in his name (Matt 18:20). The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy interprets this passage ecclesologically: "... he is present when the church prays and sings" (SC no. 7). The Church strongly encourages people to pray always, and much of this prayer takes on a private and individual mode. However, the Church also celebrates publicly, communally. Sunday Eucharist is a time for communal prayer. Liturgical hospitality occurs when people surrender their individual selves and gather together to experience a presence of Christ that is mediated through the community. They do this because they believe, along with the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, that this activity not only complements their private prayer but surpasses it in importance and efficacy.⁶

Self-surrender is essential not only for the assembly to experience God's hospitality in the liturgy but also for them to signify it. The assembly's duty is not just to experience God's love but to become an instrument of it. For this to happen the members of the assembly must have, to the best of their ability and circumstance, prayed privately and lived holy lives during the preceding week. What would make them think they can pray well and become the body of Christ on Sunday if they have not been in communion with God throughout the week? People must come to the community's prayer with something to offer. If there is no prayer, no holiness of life, no moral conviction, no self-sacrifice in their daily lives, then their ability to effectively assemble in the Lord's name and to be instruments of his welcoming love is limited accordingly. Yes, God provides, the Church provides, *ex opere operato*; but presuming that Christians can come and take without giving something of themselves is like presuming that divine revelation effects salvation without the human response of faith.

Training the liturgical ministers to be hospitable is not enough. The assembly itself must sign forth the divine welcome. A rehearsed friendliness cannot substitute for a genuinely hospitable community. Such hospitality can only occur when the community members themselves take on the self-effacing love of their Lord. Such love bespeaks the very transformation that liturgical celebration is intended to effect, and this change cannot be accomplished in a few weeks. It is a long-term goal that will never be accomplished on this side of the kingdom, but perceptible progress can and must be made. This transformation is, in fact, the overriding project of the Church.

1. Columnist Maureen Dowd recently expressed her distaste for the "hootenanny handshake of peace" ("The Vatican Rag," *New York Times*, March 24, 2002).
2. The prayer over the water reminds them of their baptism and asks God to keep them faithful to the Spirit given them so that they may be free from sin and come into God's presence to receive his gift of salvation. The penitential rite celebrates God's mercy and compassion, prays for the faithful's willing response to such gifts, and asks that they may be brought, ultimately, into God's presence.
3. The origins of the creed, of course, were the baptismal creeds. Eucharist is the ongoing renewal of baptism and, in a sense, a lifetime of participation in the Eucharist amounts to a lifetime of mystagogy.
4. See Eucharistic Prayer IV. All the prayers express in some way the inclusiveness of God's call to salvation. The assembly reserves judgment and allows that God invites more people to the kingdom than may be obvious to those present at the liturgy.
5. See, for example, Ordinary Sundays V, Weekdays I, Weekdays III, Easter IV, and Ascension I.
6. "From this it follows that every liturgical celebration, because it is an action of Christ the Priest and of his Body, which is the church, is a sacred action surpassing all others. No other action of the church can equal its efficacy by the same title and to the same degree" (SC no. 7).



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