



# 7 Ways Guests Want to Be Welcomed in Your Church

Nearly 1,500 years ago St. Benedict wrote in his rule for monastic life: “Let all guests who arrive be received like Christ, for he is going to say, ‘I came as a guest, and you received me’ (Matthew 25:35).”<sup>1</sup>

Sounds like a good rule for all of us, particularly in one’s home parish, but putting hospitality into practice isn’t always easy.

Benedictines tell a joke that pokes fun at the heart of the Christian hospitality challenge. “Our Rule tells us that we must greet every guest as if they were Christ, but sometimes when the knock at the door comes we say, ‘O Christ, it’s you again?’”

That’s human nature. It takes work to be hospitable, because it means putting the needs of others in front of one’s own, even when it’s not convenient. But hospitality is a spiritual discipline we must each develop in response to how each one of us has been received by Christ.

Hospitality can be shown in countless ways: A smile, a handshake, or sliding to the center of the pew to accommodate someone looking for a seat. And while it’s not just the job of the pastor, he typically plays the largest role.

About half of U.S. adults look for a new church at some point in their lives.<sup>2</sup> More than 80% of Americans who have looked for a new place of worship say the quality of preaching played an important role in their decision. Nearly as many say it was important to feel welcomed by clergy and lay leaders.<sup>3</sup>

Although the pastor does not bear the full responsibility of hospitality in his parish, he should lead by example and not be shy in telling his congregation about the importance of welcoming others. After all, scripture is clear: welcoming and loving the stranger is a biblical mandate to anyone who follows Jesus.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Benedict, Saint, Abbot of Monte Cassino. *The Rule of St. Benedict; a Norman Prose Version*. Oxford: Published for the Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature by B. Blackwell, 1964. Print.

<sup>2</sup> Pew Research Center, Aug. 2016, “Choosing a New Church or House of Worship”

<sup>3</sup> Pew Research Center, Aug. 2016, “Choosing a New Church or House of Worship”

<sup>4</sup> Leviticus 19: 33-34, Romans 12:13, 1 Peter 4:9, Hebrews 13:1-2

# **Here are seven ways parish guests want to be welcomed when they knock at your door:**

## **A Welcoming Website**

Your website is often a visitor's first impression of your parish. According to Pew Research, 37% of first-time attendees visit your website before they visit your church.<sup>5</sup> That number increases for young adults – nearly 60% of those under 30 say they first search online when looking for a new church.<sup>5</sup> Does your website say, "Welcome!"? If not, they may move on to church #2 in their search engine results.

A welcoming site makes information easy to find. Mass times should be front and center, as should invitations to current programs – after all the devil wants them to be distracted by a ping on the phone they're searching on...make it simple, and you win!

One more thing...your online presence should be a true representation of what you are in person. If someone visited your website and then visits in person, would they feel like they came to the right place? If your site shows everyone in suits, will they know it's okay to wear jeans and a sweater? Offer an online glimpse of your church on a typical Sunday.

## **Show Them a Sign**

Is there a sign outside with Mass and confession times? When guests arrive, is it clear which door to enter for the sanctuary or the parish office, or will they have to try multiple doors before finding one that opens? When visitors arrive at a church where the door is locked and there is no sign, they have no idea if the parish is even functional, or worse, may feel like an outsider and simply choose not to attend Mass at all. You may as well put out an "unwelcome mat" for newcomers if you're making it hard for them to reach you.

Internal signage is just as important in welcoming guests and putting them at ease. There's nothing more awkward than wandering around a church, looking for the sanctuary, cry room, or restrooms. A great way to assess your internal signage is to walk through your facilities as though you are a first-time visitor or with a friend who isn't familiar with them. Also, ask your ushers and greeters what directions visitors most commonly ask for. Common directional signs point guests to the restrooms, confessionals, the parish office, meeting rooms, classrooms, and the school office.

## **They Want to Feel Welcome...but not Smothered.**

Hospitality is relative. What's just right for you may be too much for someone else. Some gestures of hospitality are always appropriate: a smile, a nod, or an offer to make space for another person is always welcome. A hug, on the other hand, might be too much for someone who is "just checking things out."

In some churches, new parishioners are asked to stand or even handed a microphone to introduce themselves. These actions, while well-intentioned, can actually make one feel even more like an outsider than a special guest. Putting new parishioners on the spot or on display is sometimes off-putting.

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<sup>5</sup> Pew Research Center, Aug. 2016, "Choosing a New Church or House of Worship"

## **Tell them What to Do with their Kids.**

It can be uncomfortable bringing kids to Mass, especially when it's an unfamiliar church. There may be a sign pointing to the nursery, but is the nursery only available at certain Masses? And what if there is no sign? Someone new to the parish could spend so much time wandering the halls that they're late for Mass, making them feel more self-conscious than welcome.

Remind your parishioners that crying children are not a nuisance, but rather a reminder that the parish has a future. In his book *Parenting with Grace*, Dr. Greg Popcak, executive director of the Pastoral Solutions Institute, reminds us "it is the duty of both the parents and the community to support raising faithful children, which means bringing them to Mass every week, even if they can't sit still for an hour." The gospels tell us that Jesus not only welcomed and blessed children, but also that children were signs of how we are to receive the kingdom of God.<sup>6</sup>

Creating a welcoming cry room is a great way to extend hospitality to parish families. In general, good cry rooms help parents stay involved in the Mass and help parents get their kids used to the Mass. It's wonderful when children have questions about what the priest is doing, but in general, they don't really get the whisper idea. A cry room is a great place to point out and explain the events of the Mass without disturbing the parishioners in the pews. Ideally, your cry room should feel like a sanctuary, be attached to the sanctuary with a large window, and have adjustable speakers so parents can vary the volume of the Mass if babes are sleeping. Of course, not all families are fans of the cry room, and when they choose to keep their children in the sanctuary, they should feel welcome, encouraged, and blessed to celebrate the Mass together as a family.

## **Recommend a Good Book**

If you have multiple hymnals or missals in the racks of your pews, don't make your guests guess which one you'll be using. Have the cantor or greeter instruct your guests, "We'll be using the 'red Glory & Praise' hymnal for today's music. You can also follow the readings in the 'blue missal' located in your pew."

## **Be Christ to the "Chreasters"**

Come, all ye Faithful. Also, ye not so Faithful.

Many Catholics complain about the inconvenience of "Chreasters"—Catholics who attend Mass only on Christmas and Easter. After all, with all these "extra" people at Mass, it can be hard to find a parking spot or a place to sit.

Encourage your parishioners to welcome new or seldom-seen Christmas and Easter worshipers... better yet, develop a welcome plan just for Christmas and Easter visitors, and share it with the congregation. Organize a parishioner "clean-up" day inviting volunteers to make simple repairs, clean the common areas, pick up trash, and do a little landscaping. You'd do the same thing if you were expecting company at home! Encourage parishioners to greet visitors, introduce themselves, and invite guests to sit with them. Create a clear "next step" by offering an invitation from the pulpit and in the bulletin to return for Mass next week.

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<sup>6</sup> Luke 18: 15-17.

Preach about it, write about it, and practice it yourself. For visitors and those returning after a long absence, the people sitting next to them in the pews are an important part of their worship experience. Encourage parishioners to view this as an opportunity to become a more vibrant parish. What if all these “visitors” came back week after week? Wouldn’t that be wonderful? As your parish prepares to welcome the Christ child and celebrate his birth, also encourage them to prepare to welcome visitors to the church on this holy day. When they celebrate the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, celebrate those who have returned to the church.

## **Finishing Touches**

After the final blessing, will your guests make a bee line for the parking lot or stick around to learn more? Offering a bulletin and a “Have a nice day!” is a great start, but what else might your visitors be looking for after Mass?

Are there opportunities for fellowship and faith formation? Some parishes have coffee and donuts available after Mass, but will guests know where to find them?

Is it clear that you want your guests to come back? Is information about registration and parish life clearly visible? Is the parish office open on weekends? Maybe it’s time to set up an information center. Your job is do anything and everything to bring your guests to Christ.

Mother Teresa said, “The biggest disease is not leprosy or tuberculosis, but rather the feeling of being unwanted.” Making a spiritual commitment to extend hospitality during the holidays helps us rethink