

A Welcoming Body of Christ

Christina Spahn



It's 10 AM on Sunday at Our Lady of the Most Holy Rosary Catholic Community in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Martha, Rick, and their two children file into the third row of chairs under the cross. A few minutes later Joe and Anna move into the row behind them. An older couple, they are visiting Albuquerque to attend to Joe's mother, who is in the final stages of terminal cancer. Jack arrives. A longtime parishioner, he has just been diagnosed with Alzheimer's Disease. He is followed by the Sanchez family, whose youngest son, Jordan, is celebrating his sixth birthday, and Marie and Allen, who have decided it is time to return to the faith of their childhood and are coming to Mass for the first time in many years. Recent arrivals in Albuquerque, the six members of the Miller family are seated. They have come from a vibrant parish in the Denver area and have heard that Holy Rosary might be a good community to check out. Finally, Laura and Bob come rushing in and sit in the fourth row. They have spent the morning serving the weekly breakfast in Rosario Hall and now look forward to joining the community in prayer.

This imaginary configuration of people is repeated throughout the entire Church—at every Eucharist. In every row of every church, individuals filling the pews carry a range of emotions and experiences. Some hearts are filled with joy and gratitude; others are crushed with grief and pain; while the majority hold emotions somewhere in between. Whether individuals leave the church restored and ready to face another week depends, of course, on how well the liturgy is celebrated and on their active participation in the rite. But their experience is also influenced by how they feel welcomed and included. The Mass is, after all, a communal prayer, and people need to feel part of the community. How is that achieved?

In every row of every church are people carrying a range of emotions and experiences. We honor each person with hospitality.

In many parishes, hospitality ministers formally welcome people as they enter the church. In some, visitors or newly registered parishioners are acknowledged before the liturgy begins. Some parishes invite people to introduce themselves to those seated around them. These are useful

practices and certainly aid in creating a warm and inviting atmosphere. But most important is each parishioner's awareness that he/she is a member of a faith community that welcomes others and has a commitment to doing just that. This commitment is expressed in many ways: a smile, willingness to move down the row to accommodate a person or family newly arriving, an inquiry about how the week has been, or a comment about the weather, the news, or anything else that comes to mind. Community is about relationships and relationships are built as people communicate with each other.

Being a welcoming faith community involves much more than just what occurs inside the church. It also involves graciousness and generosity in the parking lot and multimedia communications that respond to the needs and preferences of all members of the community. It involves pastoral sensitivity to those approaching the parish office and heartfelt thanks to the Sunday 10:15 AM altar servers. It involves an invitation to a new parishioner to consider participating in a ministry and counseling an overwhelmed catechist that it might be time to take a couple of months off. It involves warmly greeting the long-time parishioner and being just as welcoming to the homeless person. It involves shared laughter and shared tears. In short, being a welcoming faith community involves individuals and groups meeting people where they are, recognizing them as comembers of the Body of Christ, and treating them with the love and respect with which they would like to be treated.