

## CLERGY CORNER Deacon Chris Hulburt

*At the Christmas liturgies, we read an extended welcome message from the altar, including, "Single, married, divorced, widowed, gay or straight, young or old, rich or poor, disabled, employed or looking for work, Christ has come for you and you are welcome here." One Christmas Eve visitor (I'll call her "Sandra") wrote to express concern that "the welcome to everyone, including gays and straight, was hard to listen to." She felt we were confusing people and encouraging sexual sinners to join the parish without admonishing them that they must remain chaste. Because the issue arises in many contexts, I wish to share a portion of my response.*

Dear Sandra,

I am always grateful for feedback and thank you for your consideration in reaching out to share your concerns.

Your note raises an important question—a foundational question—which has challenged the Christian community since our origin. I do not mean a question as to whether homosexual sex is considered sinful. In my observation, there is no confusion as to the teaching of the Catholic Church on that question. Quite simply, I've never met anyone who does not know that the Catholic Church teaches that all sexual activity outside marriage, including homosexual sex, is sinful. That teaching is not our challenge.

No, the real challenge for faithful Christians is much more difficult. I might phrase it something like this: How are we, collectively as a Christian community and individually as disciples of Jesus Christ, called to encounter, love and serve the world, including sinners? That's the challenge!

Some seem to prefer a method that withholds the welcome and starts with condemnation and admonition. For these, the pattern to discipleship they envision looks something like this: (1) condemn the sin, (2) admonish the sinner, (3) require repentance, (4) after repentance extend forgiveness, (5) welcome the person to community, (6) and grow in love.

By my reading and personal experience, that is not the method Jesus uses. Rather, it seems quite the opposite of the way he interacts with sinners. The model that Jesus demonstrates looks more like this: (1) love the person unconditionally, (2) invite and welcome the person into relationship, (3) extend mercy, forgiveness, and healing (4) so that the person is moved to reorient his or her life (repentance), (5) then admonish against sinning, and (6) teach about the kingdom of God.

It is instructive that this is most apparent in the story of Jesus's direct interaction with a sexual sinner—the woman caught in adultery (John 8:2-11). Notice the pattern Jesus follows in the flow of the story: (1) Jesus loved her first and even looked away so as not to shame her in her sin. (2) He created a protective relationship for her with him against her condemners. (3) He forgave her explicitly— "neither do I condemn you"—without her request, prior repentance, or apology. (4) We are left to assume, though not told, the experience of God's undeserved love and mercy inspired her to begin to change her life. (5) Then—after she is loved, welcomed, protected, forgiven, and inspired—Jesus admonishes her to "sin no more." (6) And the entire episode is a teaching about the kingdom of God.

At Saint Brigid "you are welcome here" is an attempt to follow the pattern of Jesus Christ by leading with love and seeking to create relationship. We do not condone any sins. We simply welcome all people in imitation of Jesus: "The tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to listen to Jesus, but the Pharisees and scribes began to complain, saying, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them'" (Luke 15:1-2). We welcome everyone in the belief that the healing power of Jesus Christ is present in the gathered Christian community; that the best way to serve others is in the context of the loving Christian community; that the work of Christ, His Body, and His ministers is to draw people to Christ in the Christian community; and that the only way to do that is to open the door for an encounter.

Peace to you,  
Deacon Chris