

The New Evangelization: *Hospitality is at the Heart*

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The new evangelization is best lived whenever and wherever we boldly witness to our personal relationship with the Lord Jesus and His Body, the Church (the two are inseparable, because Christ is the Head of his Body). This radical way of life is rooted in the person, life and ministry of Christ Jesus, which often puts us at odds with our increasingly secular culture. But this is precisely why I believe that Christ-like hospitality must be at the heart of the new evangelization. We must be inviting, compassionate, and yes, challenging but never ostracizing. Yes, effectively-done hospitality has been a personal and passionate pastoral priority of mine. In fact, Bishop Richard Malone often says that I have a "holy obsession."

When I speak of hospitality, first and foremost, the Eucharist comes to mind. The source and summit of our faith is celebrated by the Body of Christ. Every Sunday, we gather to give thanks and praise to God for the gift of salvation, to become one — "in Spirit and in truth" (*John 4:24*) -- through Word and Sacrament, and to be sent out as disciples on a mission of mercy.

Of course, I do think of greeters who welcome both parishioner and stranger at the doors of our churches, ask for and remember their names, offer the assistance and ministries of the church, and invite them to come again, but it is more than that. I think about joining parishioners for that cup of coffee with a chocolate coconut donut after Sunday morning Mass, but it is more than that. It is about sacred music that not only lifts the heart and mind to God but inspires the voice of each and every person in the assembly to chime in, but it is more than that. It is about a homily that preaches the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God in ways that connects the traditions and truth of our faith to the modern-day lived experience of those who have come to Mass with "ears to hear," but it is more than that. As significant as all these things are, to focus solely on examples such as these would be to limit Christian hospitality to something that we do on Saturday evening or Sunday morning, but it is more than that. We are called to live this Eucharistic mystery every day.

Hospitality begins by meeting people where they are at and listening to their story, which is holy ground. It is how we learn the reasons for "the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men [and women] of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1, Second Vatican Council). And if we are honest with ourselves, aren't we all poor or afflicted in one way or another.

A prayer from Sunday Mass says, "For you so loved the world that in your mercy you sent us the Redeemer, to live like us in all things but sin, so that you might love in us what you loved in your Son ..." (Preface Prayer VII, *Roman Missal*). Our passionate God practices this kind of radical hospitality; in turn, we are called to extend such radical hospitality to family and friend, sojourner and stranger, immigrant and refugee, sinner and saint. Do we see and love in others (and yes, ourselves) what the Father sees and loves in us as in His Son? True hospitality is about sharing the redeeming love of Christ that leads to reconciliation and communion.

Every baptized person is entrusted with the mission of the Church, which "exists to evangelize" (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 14, Pope Paul VI). At the heart of evangelization is hospitality, which extends a profoundly radical invitation to every man, woman and child, without exception, to embrace a life of conversion and holiness, with the promised culmination of communion at the table of the Lord, the Divine Host. Not all will accept the invitation and everything it demands; some will walk away (*John 6:58-66*). But for the Christian, hospitality must be a magnificent, and yes, even a holy obsession.