

# Catholic Hospitality and the Mass

The Catholic Hospitality Training Institute

Catholic Mass: it is the celebration of the “source and summit” of the Christian life and the still point of our turning week. Catholics gather around the table of the Lord to be fed on the Word both in the words of Scripture, and in the receiving of the Word made Flesh, Jesus fully present in the Eucharist – it is a sacrament for believers.

In fact, during the early Church, those preparing for baptism were not even permitted to remain for the Eucharistic Liturgy. Remnants of that practice remain in our mindset for Mass attendance today – often we show up on Sunday, sit in the same pew, and rarely notice the people around us or interact with them because we are focused toward the altar. While it is right and good for our primary attention during Mass to be on the worship of God, and while Catholic Mass remains a gathering for believers and not the best ‘entry-level’ evangelistic experience, we also cannot ignore the reality that non-believers come to our liturgies. Neither can we take for granted that our regularly-attending parishioners actually have a personal faith.

Whether our thoughts are drawn toward Catholics who have come to our Mass because they are traveling, lapsed Catholics who show up (for a variety of reasons) during holiday seasons, or for non-Catholics that pop up in our pews, efforts can be made to link the practice of hospitality with our parish’s celebrations of Mass.

The role of **greeters** is not as uncommon in American parishes as it would’ve been in past decades. However, their role is impoverished if it is reduced to holding the door open for regular attendees. Greeters need training to be able to ‘spot’ someone who looks unfamiliar, especially if they are alone. Greeters also need to be careful not to be too enthusiastic – it’s not appropriate to force strangers into a hug when it may make them extremely uncomfortable to be touched.

The church pews are another crucial background for hospitality at Mass. The pastor must make clear to his congregation that they do not “own” any seat, and they are never to force someone out of a pew. Many of the horror stories told to members of CHTI revolved around the humiliation of a guest when they were ousted from seats by cranky parish members. While ‘shaming the shame-ers’ may not be the best tactic to resolve the issue, neither can this problem remain unaddressed. Perhaps the priest, or priests, of the parish can spend several weeks to talk (through homilies, bulletin articles, or a Youtube vlog) about the meaning of Christian hospitality and how it can be practically lived out at the parish, empowering the congregation to live this out in small ways – ways like not becoming possessive about what pew we sit in!

Pews can also serve as a place of hospitality when they contain a good, thorough **missal**. This not only provides formation about liturgy for congregants who handle them week after week, but they can be a lifeline for non-Catholic visitors who are overwhelmed by the details of ritual we take for granted. Being able to ‘follow along’ with what’s happening during Mass can put a visitor at ease.

When it comes to hospitable practices where young children are concerned, we should consider providing several options. Keeping Catholic and Christian children’s books and toys in easily visible

places (and being sure to keep them clean and well-maintained –ratty old books and dirty toys do not send the right message) gives parents one less thing to lug to church. If you are able to provide a 'cry room' space in your church, make sure that a quality sound system ensures that parents in that room are still able to hear what's happening in the Mass and participate as much as they are able while caring for their children.

An important note, however: we must never force a family into the cry room or make them feel that their children are unwelcome in our parishes. If we hear a baby crying during Mass, it is a sign that our parish is alive and has a future! Rather than making us angry that our prayer has been interrupted, we can rejoice that there is life in our church, pray for the child making noise, offer to help the mother or father if we are nearby, or offer them a reassuring smile– or perhaps use it as a reminder that Jesus came to us as a tiny baby, and turn our heart toward contemplation of the Incarnation! It does not have to be a distraction, and it is never okay to express anger at an innocent child or their parents who need Jesus just as much as everyone else in the pews.

In many Protestant communities, attempts to make their Sunday service more hospitable might include updating the worship to be more 'hip' or 'relevant', keeping it short, or offering a coffee bar right in the church. We are not at a similar liberty to tamper with liturgy or eat food during Mass as though we are spectators at an entertainment event, it does not mean we cannot offer something like this before or after our Masses. Some parishes offer a meal after their last Mass on Sunday mornings, providing the time for more interaction between parish members and visitors, and a freewill offering is a more affordable alternative than going out to a restaurant while still providing a break from having to cook and clean up a meal at home.

"A shared meal is the activity most closely tied to the reality of God's Kingdom...The Eucharist most fundamentally connections hospitality with God because it anticipates and reveals the 'heavenly table of the Lord'<sup>1</sup>". Mass itself is an expression of the hospitality of God; Jesus nourishes us with His very self, modeling that to welcome a stranger can never just be about food, but must be an offering of our very selves.