

# The Art of Attentiveness

The Catholic Hospitality Training Institute

“The stranger requires much attendance, much encouragement, and with all this it is difficult for him not to feel abashed; for so delicate is his position that whilst he receives the favor, he is ashamed. That shame we ought to remove by the most attentive service, and to show by words and actions, that we do not think we are conferring a favor, but receiving one, that we are obliging less than we are obliged.”

St. John Chrysostom, *Homily 14 on 1 Timothy*

Many photographs of Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta depict her in conversation with one person. Her gaze is fixed, and she often is holding the hands of the person she is listening to. Those who encountered her often said that when speaking to her, they felt they were the only person in the entire world to Mother at that moment. Cosmetics giant Mary Kay Ash taught her beauty consultants to imagine that every person they met was wearing an invisible sign that said ‘Make Me Feel Important’, and she demonstrated that by ignoring everything around her beside the person she was speaking to at the moment. Both of these women mastered the art of attentiveness.

Our Lord Himself was the Master of Attentiveness. Again and again in Scriptures, we see him patiently tending to the needs of individuals, whether by singling out a tax collector in a tree or breaking social norms to have a lingering conversation with a woman of ill repute by the well at the edge of town. Surely, in his humanity, he acquired attentiveness under the influence of his mother, who noticed that the wine had run out at the wedding in Cana – and took the initiative to get the need met without being asked!

Attentiveness is imperative to the practice of hospitality. It is not enough to say to a guest or visitor, “Let us know if you need anything”, we should try to minimize the need for those we serve to ask for our help. For some, their reason for coming to us is awkward and even humiliating. Perhaps they have not been in a church for many years, or they just lost their job and don’t know where else to turn for help. We need to be prepared for those situations.

We can exercise attentiveness in two ways – by paying closer attention to our church in the sense of physical plant, and by endeavoring to be thoughtful toward guests through our human interactions.

Attentiveness to the physical buildings in our parish encompasses a great many details. If someone comes to your parish for the first time, are there clear enough signs to navigate them around? Do custodial staff or ushers check on the status of your bathrooms between Masses (especially during Christmas and Easter)? Do you have handicap-accessible entrances and seating areas? Is there sufficient parking outside – and if that regularly includes parking outside of a main lot, will it be easy for a guest to see where they are supposed to go? Does your parking lot have reserved spots, and who are they for? “A reserved parking spot for the pastor communicates that everyone serves

the pastor, not that the pastor serves the congregation”, Jonathan Malm observes in *Unwelcome: 50 Ways Churches Drive Away First Time Visitors*.

We can also be attentive to several other details of our church buildings. If we have statues of saints, are there plaques or signs explaining who the saint is and why their statue is in our church? If we have literature available in our vestibules, what does it say about the culture of our parish? Having 500 brochures on devotions to the Infant of Prague, or chain-letter flyers promoting a novena to St. Jude or do we select what media to display based on our mission to evangelize? If we have hearing aids or Braille missals available, or low-gluten hosts for Communion, how will a visitor know these things are available and where to go if they need them?

Remaining helpfully alert in our personal interactions is as important as attentiveness to the physical surroundings of the parish church. When someone comes to speak to us, do we look up from whatever screen we are likely in front of to greet them? Do we check our phones while they are speaking?

Our body language when listening to someone can communicate powerfully that they are worthy of recognition. Listening well includes: putting aside all distractions, making eye contact with the person who is speaking, leaning toward them with our bodies and, as they speak – nodding our heads or occasionally vocalizing that we hear what they’re saying with “mmm-hmm”, or even saying: “What I hear you saying is.... Is that correct? I imagine that might make you feel...”.

To listen attentively to another person is not only work for qualified psychologists. We do not have to provide answers or solutions to every problem presented to us. Our goal is not to become a person’s Savior, but to point them to the One who is. While it may not be appropriate to offer our opinion, we can certainly ask, “What do you think you should do?” Even when a person is feeling totally lost and unsure, we can say, “Let’s place our trust in Jesus. I don’t know the answer to your problem, but I know that the Lord is here with you. Would it be alright if we prayed right now?”

A final consideration- we must not only be attentive to those we serve, but also attentive to the ways the Lord is speaking to us through those we serve. “If, when we open the door, we are oriented toward seeing Jesus in the guest, then we welcome that person with some sense with God is already at work in his or her life. This can fundamentally change our perspective and our sense of the dimensions of the relationship. We are more sensitive to what the guest is bringing to us, to what God might be saying or doing through her or him<sup>1</sup>.” To practice hospitality is never a one-way ministry. We are truly blessed by those we seek to bless.

<sup>1</sup> Christine Pohl, *Making Room*. P. 68.