

Love the Lonely Among You

Every Sunday we see someone walking in. There's a look. They are new. They don't know where anything is or whom to ask for help. Their heads are on a swivel, searching. Their quest for the sanctuary, children's ministry, or bathroom camouflages the more profound spiritual longing to be known and loved, to belong. God made us to long for what he made us to live for — and God-honoring human relationships lie near the heart of his intention for us.

Yet some who attend church gatherings struggle to find believers with relational bandwidth or genuine interest in them. Perhaps the greeter welcomes them, but they hear a similar salutation at supermarkets. Similarly, at mass “turn and say Peace” fails to meet the relational need that disconnected people crave. It is quite possible to attend and even be involved in a church without forming relationships beyond the level of acquaintance.

Jesus said that radical love for one another would distinguish his disciples ([John 13:35](#)). The early church shook the world with its countercultural heart of hospitality, especially for the marginalized, orphaned, migrants and abandoned.

In the gospel of Jesus, we see that God's heart is welcoming to people. Paul makes Christ's hospitable heart the basis for his exhortation in [Romans 15:7](#): “Therefore welcome one another *as Christ has welcomed you*, for the glory of God.” This Christian welcome is more than just a hello; it includes relational openness and heart-space. This welcome makes room for others, just as Christ made room for us. We were spiritually isolated, bringing nothing to the relationship but our sin. Yet divine hospitality, married to divine grace, made room for us in his family, his heaven, his heart.

Our world desperately needs this Christlike welcome. We live in a society of profound loneliness, and every person who gathers for Mass is longing for an authentic connection with others. Who will open their hearts to them — and so show God's heart? This is part of the mission of the local parish (church).

The lack of hospitality in our wider society means even a little goes a long way these days. For example, if you meet new people, make sure to introduce yourself, invite them to your upcoming social events or lunch after church. And we will see most of them on the following Sundays, because the unexpected hospitality signals acceptance.

By default, the responsibility for initiating relationships lies with the existing church. Take it seriously. And along the way, remember that you don't have to be a spiritual superstar to welcome like Christ. If you share your humanity and God's grace despite your failures, if you lead with your weakness and God's mercy, your life will be filled with friends.

Practically speaking, this kind of connection, the deep kind disconnected people are hoping for, won't happen merely at a Sunday gathering. So, try to find creative ways to make room during the week. If you imagine this call for hospitality requires a new church program, you are missing the point. Care for the disconnected and lonely dies in a committee. True welcome flows naturally from your hearts, softened toward others because God's heart is (amazingly!) soft toward us.

What might this welcome look like? It resembles Jesus leaning against the well, asking across social and ethnic boundaries, “Who are you, and what are you looking for?” It looks like Jesus stopping at a tree, asking to have a meal with the tax collector perched upon it. It looks like Jesus welcoming Nicodemus at night for a spiritual conversation. We cannot fake it, but we can confess our failures, admit our need, and ask God to open our hearts toward others.

The call to hospitality doesn’t mean every church member must immediately become gregarious. We imitate Christ’s love as a body when each part is working properly. We have different gifts and different stages of life. The young family with young children will likely have less capacity than singles or those with grown children. But all of us can practice this welcoming love and seek to grow in it over time.

Start by managing your expectations. We all feel the tension between how a church should be and how it is. The church should be hospitable and friendly. It sometimes isn’t. Why? Partly because many church members share the same fear and shyness you likely feel. Sure, certain extroverts don’t struggle at all. But most people do. So, rather than measuring a new church by how many people want to be your friend, measure it by the encounters, however few, with genuinely Christlike people you meet. Think of quality more than quantity.

(Acknowledged with thanks to Pastor Steve DeWitt)

Prayers

Fr.Alphonse