**A Warm Welcome in Ordinary Time**

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By Lucia A. Silecchia

I was visiting a parish not my own when a young girl of about five greeted me. With a shy smile and the quiet encouragement of her mother, she handed me a hand-colored greeting card welcoming me to her parish. I do not know if her card-making was a class project or an initiative of her own. But I do know that the petite young doyenne of the second pew truly made me feel at home. Inside the card she wrote a line or two about why she loved her Church. She signed the card “your friend,” followed by her name.

I still have that card tacked on my bulletin board. It reminds me of a happy day when a young sister in Christ warmly welcomed me to our Father’s house. It also prompts me to ask how I could and should do the same.

This seems the perfect time to ask that question. As August rolls around, with September hot on its heels, we may – if we are fortunate – see unfamiliar faces in our pews. Families who have moved before a new school year begins may be settling into new parishes. Graduates from the class of 2022 may be moving to new cities to launch their careers. Summer brides and grooms may be settling into new homes to start their lives together. University students are descending on college towns, hopefully seeking new spiritual homes. Those who have not been worshipping with their congregations during the long season of Covid-19 may be wending their ways back to Mass. As the unsettled times in which we live leave many on the move, they may be joining new parish communities.

As newcomers settle into our parishes, what do they find when they arrive?

It is easy to ask what the parish itself is doing. Is there outreach to newly registered parishioners? Are there welcome dinners for new families? Is there a hospitality committee that extends a personal welcome? Are there welcome packets and ministry fairs that acquaint new parishioners with parish activities and opportunities?

All of these are important questions, well worth asking and answering.

Yet, before that, I have to ask myself more personally what it is that *I* do, myself, to welcome others to my parish family. I may be well past the age when I can hand newcomers a crayon sketch of a flower as they come into Church. That does not mean that there is nothing I can do to make sure that those who are joining me at my parish for the first time know that they are welcome.

My young friend’s card prompts me to ask questions like;

* Do I notice when there is someone I have not met before and offer a greeting when I can?
* At parish events, do I spend most of my time with those I already know, when there are those who know no one sit alone?
* Do I offer a look of sympathetic joy when families come with their young children – knowing the effort it took them to get to Mass, and the unease they may feel about noisy toddlers? On the other end of the age spectrum, how welcoming am I to my elders who have struggles of their own when they make their way to Church?
* Do I ever do anything that makes newcomers feel as though they are outsiders in a private club where everyone else already knows each other?
* If I am leading an activity, do I welcome or invite newcomers to join in or, even, take over, so that they too become full participants in the parish community?
* Do I take the time to introduce newcomers to parish staff, clergy or others whose acquaintance they may welcome?

I have always been blessed to know the warm joy of a hometown parish where my grandparents worshipped. I know the comfort of coming home where there are still a few people in the pews who remember when I was a toddler squirming in those pews. I never felt a newcomer there in the place I was Baptized.

But, when I moved away from home for school or work, I discovered what it is like to be an outsider seeking a new family and a new spiritual home. I also discovered that it is not always easy. What made all the difference were the simple kindnesses of those who welcomed me home. To those who welcomed a stranger in their midst, I am grateful.

I am also grateful for a card with scribbled flowers drawn by a young girl who knows that the joy of gathering in the House of God is every more joyful when those who are new are embraced in a loving welcome.

Thanks, my friend, for a good example and for a loving welcome in ordinary time.

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