

PARISH PRACTICE

A barrier of silence

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Shyness inhibits many people from speaking to newcomers at church but a warm welcome can make the world of difference

BETTY HAD BEEN a regular churchgoer in our parish for several years, so I was surprised to hear her say she still felt she did not belong. "The worst time is after Sunday Mass," she told me. "I would dearly love to be part of the general conviviality and get to know people, but when I come out of church I only seem to see people's backs as they gather in groups. Nobody notices me."

So often we do not realise how hurt people can be. A friend of mine who was divorced and re-married creeps into the back of her church sensing hostility all around her – some imagined but some real. She feels cut off and judged by former friends. And an elderly doctor, when he went to Mass after quite an absence, was greeted by one of his patients as he left with the words, "Don't often see you here, Doctor!" He never went back.

Four years ago Mary, an elderly parishioner, happened to be sitting behind a young woman she had seen several times in church but had never spoken to. At the end of Mass the woman sat back, and Mary leaned over to tell her what attractive hair she had. She quite literally jumped, startled, and said, "I have been coming to this church for four years now and you are the first person to speak to me." (She was soon invited to join the Monday money counters and was so delighted she brought along her non-Catholic husband and her parents.)

But experiences can be very different. Emily had not been to church since she was a child but really wanted a Christian wedding – and her non-Catholic fiancé was happy to agree. They were welcomed with open arms by the priest. He arranged for them to attend a marriage preparation day, helped them to choose hymns and readings and went out of his way to ensure that their families were included and made to feel welcome and part of the ceremony. Because of the bond forged there they kept in touch with the parish (very loosely at first), put their child's name down for the Catholic school, and gradually became integrated into parish life, helping with children's liturgy and becoming friends with Catholic neighbours.

In the same parish a young couple brought their twin boys to be baptised. The

woman had not been to Mass for many years; her husband was not even baptised and knew nothing about the Church. Baptisms in that church always took place during Sunday Mass. Some parishioners were horrified that not a single member of the baptism party went up for Holy Communion. "It is good news that they want their children baptised," the priest replied when challenged, "and it is a great opportunity for us to give them a positive impression of the Church."

At the end of Mass, as was customary, the couple left the church with the priest and stood in the porch as the congregation filed out. Of course everyone was captivated by these two young babies, dressed in sailor suits, and made a great fuss of them.

The couple were so overwhelmed by the welcome they received that they began coming to Mass. The husband went to RCIA, the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults, sponsored by his wife, and was baptised during the Easter vigil the following year. Now they are greatly valued members of their parish community.

We are so shy when it comes to talking to strangers – even fellow worshippers, yet nine times out of 10 the person spoken to is delighted to respond. All that is needed is a little courage to start talking to a person close by. It doesn't really matter what we say. It could be, "I was really hot/cold today in church, weren't you?" Or "How did you like that last hymn?" Or "Your child was very good – how old is he?" Or "Do you have change? I want to get a paper." Or even, "I am sure I ought to know your name. Mine is ..."

We seem to have an inbuilt suspicion of the "stranger". It is as though we suspect that they have already judged us and found us wanting, unless we have already judged them and found them wanting!

We are terrified of a rebuff or, perhaps worse, becoming involved, so we leave it to the official parish welcomers and the priest. Yet welcoming is the responsibility of everyone in the congregation. A lead by the priest might help to break the barrier. In one parish the priest, at the end of Mass, invited everyone in the congregation to speak to the person sitting next to them. One or two were shocked and continued saying their Rosary or private devotions, but many conversations continued out into the church yard and spilled over to the coffee room.

Of course, there should always be welcomers at the back of the church, there specifically to greet visitors and newcomers. This is not as easy as it sounds. Most

welcomers can tell stories of welcoming a "stranger" who then tells them they have been coming to that parish for the past 20 years! Yet lessons can be learned from that story too.

Many parishes today have mission statements welcoming all-comers, a welcome by the priest at the start of Mass, welcomers at the back of the church and cards for newcomers to fill in.

But there are still far too many people like Betty, who tells us that, in spite of all this, and in spite of coming regularly to church for several years, she still feels she does not belong. Of course, we will never please everyone. One convert told her parish priest that she liked the Catholic Church because there nobody took any notice of her!

Some years ago we went on holiday with the family at Christmas. We found a little church, and were delighted to spot their mission statement on the wall, welcoming visitors and newcomers. At the kiss of peace we shook hands and smiled at everyone around us, yet at the end of Mass not a single person spoke to us. They even avoided our eyes! Clearly they were simply too shy to speak to us.

Perhaps we should learn from other Churches, which always seem to be so welcoming. It is easy for us to say that it is up to the newcomer to make conversation and join a group, but a shy, retiring person finds this so very difficult. Most people need a little help before they can feel they belong. Is that help available in our parishes? How can we Catholics overcome this barrier of silence?

*** Sheila Keefe is the author of Roots – a way back to the Catholic Church, published by Portsmouth diocese. The Ministry of Welcome – a training resource for parishes, by Portsmouth's department of pastoral formation, can be obtained from estephenson@prcdtr-parkplace.org*

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GUIDANCE IN PRAYER

Every Sunday at 5-6pm:

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