

Ushers

Very often when I am out of town I attend Sunday Mass as an anonymous member of the congregation. Without intending it, one of the things I always notice most is the ushers. Their attitude and actions have a great effect (negative or positive) on my experience of Sunday Mass.

Which means that ushering is a very, very important ministry.

By now it probably sounds like an old record: One of our problems is that we do not take ushers seriously as *ministers*. We regard them more as functionaries. Compare then, for example, with those who give out Communion. The latter are usually given some form of training, formally installed, presented with a certificate, and referred to as "*Ministers* of the Eucharist." The same is often true of lectors. This is good and should be encouraged. But what about ushers?

Jesus linked the two commandments: love of God and love of neighbor. Those who handle people should be carefully selected, trained and given ministerial recognition as those who handle the Eucharist or the Word of God.

It may seem like semantics, but it actually makes a great deal of difference whether ushers are regarded (and regard themselves) as functionaries or as ministers. Compare the following imaginary job descriptions, the first a functionary approach, the second ministerial:

- *The Functionary Approach.* "Ushers are to arrive 15 minutes before their assigned Mass, check in with the captain, and take care of the following: open doors of the church, distribute bulletins, take up the collection, etc."

"Qualities sought in ushers are: reverence, neatness, cooperation, punctuality, dependability, honesty."

There is nothing wrong with that job description as far as it goes. All the functions that would be listed would no doubt be important and helpful. The problem is, it leaves out some of the most important aspects of ushering. Let's try another approach.

- *The Ministerial Approach.* "The primary responsibility of ushers is to create a spirit of warmth and welcome and to create an atmosphere of celebration and peacefulness through the Mass. This responsibility is set forth in the prayer said at the parish installation of ushers:

“God our Father, we ask your blessing upon these ministers whom you have called to assist in the celebration of the Eucharist. Give them a special share in your love for all people. Help them to imitate your Son who reached out to old and young, rich and poor, as the Good Shepherd. Give them also a deep and manifest love for the Word and the Sacrament we celebrate in our Eucharistic gatherings.”

Before Mass ushers are above all there to welcome those who come, not only by their words, but by their general demeanor (e.g., a pleasant look). They should be especially attentive to the elderly and the infirm, to small children, and to those not familiar with the parish.

During the Mass, one of the most helpful ministries is that of “witness,” setting an example in those things we ask of the congregation: reverence, attentiveness (e.g., to the readings), full participation (singing the hymns, extending the greeting of peace, etc.) and an overall prayerful spirit.

Ushers help the celebration flow smoothly and make things easier for the congregation by fulfilling the following functions: (same list of tasks as in the first job description).

It is impossible to draw up an extensive list of services ushers render. Often, they have to deal with the unexpected. Like good waiters (which is the root meaning of the word *minister*), they should be continuously attentive to ways in which they can help create the best atmosphere and deal with any problems that might harm our celebration. Like good waiters, ushers should be unobtrusive, moving about without a flurry of activity and generally utilizing the ‘breaks’ in the Mass when it is necessary to perform some task.

Qualities sought in ushers are: above average understanding of the liturgy (training is provided), warmth, an outgoing personality, love of the Eucharist, a sense of timing, a spirit of helpfulness, leadership and good judgment.

The latter job description is not in opposition to the first one; it is an enrichment of it. Existing ushers would be capable of performing such a ministry if they were given encouragement and some training.

Incidentally, one of the invaluable services ushers might perform would be to make suggestions to the priests, the worship commission and the musicians on how Sunday celebrations could be improved. This, it seems to me, should be on the agenda of every ushers’ meeting.

Two Parables

The above two approaches to ushering might be drawn in caricature by imagining two situations:

- You are in a public place, and you are not entirely familiar with the layout or the procedures. Let us say you are visiting someone in a hospital and you aren't sure if you got off on the correct floor. You ask for some help from someone and she brusquely tells you that you are in the wrong section. (It's as if you're supposed to know this. After all, she does.) You feel like an intruder in her territory. Furthermore, you feel unimportant.
- A family is throwing a 50th wedding anniversary party for their parents. The sons and daughters and in-laws have worked very hard to make it a happy day. You've been invited, even though you hardly know anyone there – just the parents. When you arrive, one of the family members notices that you are looking around a bit awkwardly, and even though they don't know you personally, they give you a warm welcome. They are truly glad that you came to be part of their parents' celebration. After greeting you, they make sure your needs are met: they show you where things are and perhaps even introduce you to one or two others. As the celebration continues, you notice that they are quietly attending many small details to see that all goes well. You feel that the celebration is in good hands. Furthermore, you feel important, wanted and happy.

Which feelings surface in the people who come to Mass on Sunday? Therein lies the difference between the functionary and the ministerial approach to ushering.

One last comment: Ushers deserve a lot of credit. In most parishes, they have been most generous with their time. Many of them were pillars of parish involvement long before there was any talk of lay ministry. They forego the luxury of going to any Mass they wish and attend one to which they are assigned, often at some inconvenience to themselves and their families. We should be grateful for their service.

With a little encouragement and assistance, these very important ministers could help us all take a giant step toward making our Sunday celebration an enjoyable experience.