

WELCOMING

"I was a stranger and you made me welcome..."

THE IMPORTANCE OF HOSPITALITY

Often the parents approaching the Church for infant baptism are "strangers" in some sense of the word. They may not be married in the Church. They may be new immigrants to this country. They may have just moved to this diocese. They may not have attended Mass since their wedding. The parents(s) may be single, unmarried or divorced, or a woman who has chosen to have a baby out of wedlock.

The step they have taken – to phone the parish, to drop by – may be a very big one. A couple may have been bruised by their experience with marriage preparation in another parish. They may be carrying the burdens of ignorance because of poor upbringing or the guilt of past sins because of their own carelessness. In any case, the welcome they receive by the parish staff and the baptismal team insures that a "next step" will be taken toward the possibility of a life of faith. As Pope John Paul says in another setting, i.e., marriage preparation, "The faith of the person(s)...can exist in varying degrees. It is the primary duty of pastors to facilitate a rediscovery of this faith..."

(Familiaris Consortio, #68)

On the other hand, not all who seek to have a child baptized are "strangers"; rather, they are active parishioners. Some parishes might excuse them from preparation because they have a good understanding of baptism as a commitment to participation in the faith community. Yet this approach could mean losing an opportunity to have them enhance the parish preparation program. They could serve as important links between the parish community in which they are already an active part and those parents returning to the Church because of their desire to have a baby baptized. The latter need to know and experience other parents who have already chosen to be active parishioners to give witness to the value that being part of a faith community can be for a family.

Welcoming and hospitality, then, is the first step the parish takes in the process of creating an ongoing relationship with the parents, siblings, and extended family of the infant to be baptized. "Welcoming" for this person or couple can begin long before the birth, through the written word (the bulletin, the parish website); through ritual (e.g. blessings of expectant mothers); or even through home visits. It is important not to overlook second-hand communication via family networks, e.g. grandparents, siblings, and friends. Every baby is part of a web of relationships long before birth, and the parental connections to these household churches are usually stronger than to the parish itself.

PRINCIPLES FOR PARTNERSHIP

It is important that the baptismal team communicates an attitude of openness toward parents seeking baptism for a child, whatever the parents' religious background or level of faith.

If possible, the initial connection of a parent with the baptismal preparation process should be through a personal contact.

The parents should be directed to a face-to-face meeting with someone on the baptismal team. This person meets with the parents to establish or nurture a relationship with the family. Such a person should offer an inviting and listening presence, with the goal of understanding their family background, their expectations, their felt needs, their areas of strength and weakness.

The attitude of the minister should be to focus on the parental and family strengths. During the personal interview, it is important to affirm the love, the concern, and the desire for faith that leads this couple/parent to bring this infant to the Church for baptism.

The minister's role is to work in partnership with the parent, encouraging them to call on their natural personal and family – including extended family – resources to lead them further on the journey of faith for themselves and for their child.

METHODS OF WELCOMING

An informative notice in the bulletin or a parish baptism booklet located at the back of the church invites expectant parents to call or come by the parish office. Upon calling, they receive a friendly greeting and a brief explanation of the process of baptism preparation in this particular parish. They leave their name(s), address(es), phone number, and due date of the baby.

If at all possible, there should be a baptismal team member who meets personally with each family. This person should be trained specifically for this ministry and have good interviewing and listening skills. The purpose of such a visit is to evaluate this family's needs and expectations as well as their strengths and resources. It is helpful to ask about prior connections to the Church, e.g. religious education, marriage preparation, etc.

Another possible option for welcoming new parents is to have each family assigned a mentoring or "companion" couple. In this format, a mentoring couple calls the expectant parents and a time is agreed upon for a home visit. The mentors share any appropriate parish information, e.g. Mothers Day Out, nursery or babysitting services, MOMS programs, etc., and offer support as needed. If the mentoring couple find that there is something that should be called to the attention of the baptismal team (e.g. marital problems, extreme stress, etc.), they might help arrange a meeting of the new parents with the pastor or deacon.

In the case of a large parish with many new parents coming for baptism, the welcoming meeting might consist of one staff person or trained baptismal team member who would meet with 5-6 families at a time. These meetings could be scheduled frequently and on parish property, perhaps before or after Mass. This would have the additional advantage of bringing parents together with other expectant parents and help them make additional connections within the parish setting.

CONTENT OF WELCOMING MEETINGS

- **GREETING**
The priest/deacon/team member/mentoring couple greet(s) the parent(s) in a warm inviting manner.
- **CONVERSATION**
The facilitator invites those present to share around a simple question, one that promotes friendly conversation about personal experience.
- **SHARING OF INTENTION**
Parents are asked the question of why they seek baptism for their child at this time.
- **PARENTAL ROLE**
The facilitator explains the importance of parent preparation, with an emphasis on the parent's primary role in faith formation.
- **GODPARENTS**
The criteria for selecting godparents is explained; a pamphlet is helpful.
- **SCHEDULE**
A written schedule of classes and celebrations should be handed out, as well as a registration card (see PLANNING AIDS section).
- **QUESTIONS**
Allow time for questions.
- **CLOSURE**
A blessing for parents and/or a simple prayer service is appropriate.