



The Catholic Archdiocese of  
Canberra and Goulburn

# Ministry of Hospitality (Welcomers, Ushers)

## Historical Background

The ministry of “usher”, perhaps called by other names over times, has been part of the Jewish-Christian tradition for millennia.

“Keepers of the Threshold” manned the entrance to the area of worship and collected money offerings from the people (2 Kings 22:4). “Guardians of the Threshold” (1 Chron 9:22) and “gatekeepers of the camp” (1 Chron 9:18) undertook service of welcome and security. Some were rostered to stand guard over the tent of the Lord. Others guarded the religious treasures, sacred utensils, furniture and choice and purchase of substances used in worship (flour, wine, oil, incense and spices), made cakes and bread, and prepared the spice mixture.

In early Christian era, doorkeepers or porters served the church in Rome and Syria. In the medieval church, the role of porter was one of four minor orders which Thomas Aquinas described as carrying out some of the original roles of deacons in the church.

The minor order of porter was conferred on all those seeking ordination to the priesthood until Pope Paul VI suppressed all the minor orders in 1972. Even though seminarians were ordained as porters, the actual ministry was usually carried out in parishes by laymen who served as ushers. For generations, ushers have assisted parish worship by welcoming people, helping them find seats in church, taking up the collection and passing out parish bulletins. Many ushers had been serving in their role for decades before Vatican II and continued as ushers as the liturgical reforms were implemented.

Hospitality has long been a part of the Christian tradition, e.g. in caring for the sick and feeble, providing almshouses and orphanages for the destitute, refuges for pilgrims and travellers.

Hospitality is at the basis of the usher’s ministry. The usher is often the first person whom worshippers meet when they arrive at a church. The usher has then the opportunity and the responsibility to represent the rest of the assembly in offering hospitality.

The usher’s smile reflects the sincerity of the welcome from the community. The welcome needs to continue to be offered even though some may ignore or refuse help from the greeter.

**Hospitality plays a vital role in creating a sense of community for worship. A person who feels welcomed and valued is more likely to enter wholeheartedly into the celebration of the liturgy**

## Scriptural relevance

Hospitality was at the heart of the Jewish scriptures, and was highly valued by Jesus. He tells stories of feasts and banquets, was very relaxed in the company of public sinners, experienced the hospitality of many including Martha and Mary, celebrated Passover with his friends, and rescued a newly married couple from poor hospitality, to name but a few examples.

- Let some water be brought that you may bathe your feet and then rest yourselves under that tree (Gen 18:4).
- Let us arrange a little room on the roof and furnish it for him with a bed, table, chair and lamp, so that when he comes to us, he can stay there (2 Kings 4:10).
- You set the table before me... You anoint my head with oil (Ps 23:5).

- Anyone who welcomes you, welcomes me; and those who welcome me, welcome the one who sent me (Mt 10:40).
- For I was a stranger and you welcomed me (Mt 25:31,34,35).
- The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve (Mk 10 : 45).
- In the parable of the great feast, Jesus invites the poor, crippled, blind and lame to share in the banquet (Lk 14: 14-22).
- Quick! Bring out the finest robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet; take the fatted calf and kill it, let us eat and celebrate... (Lk 15:22-23).
- Love one another with mutual affection. Anticipate one another in showing respect (Rom 12:10).
- Do not neglect to show hospitality, for by that means some have entertained angels without knowing it (Heb 13:2).
- Everything the people do in a parish, every gathering that occurs, affects the formation (or decline) of the community. The faithful form one another in the ways they treat one another as members of the People of God. New growth happens, new things are born, in a parish where a hospitality ministry, that treats people as guests at family tables, is nurtured.
- Though all the assembled are responsible for hospitality, ushers and greeters are called to set an example for the assembly.
- The model for an understanding of the liturgical space is not that of a theatre or public hall, but closer to that of a home; a place characterised by warmth, friendship and hospitality; a place where all are equal before God; a place where dialogue and interaction are encouraged.
- Though Christ is the host of the liturgy, the welcomer/usher role is that of Christ's hands and feet, the living Body of Christ, someone whose presence, conversation and actions speak a genuine desire that all who come to the liturgical event enjoy their time together.

## Theological considerations

- Hospitality plays a vital role in creating a sense of community for worship. A person who feels welcomed and valued is more likely to enter wholeheartedly into the celebration of the liturgy. A friendly and welcoming usher/greeter can make God's love apparent to people as they arrive.
- Christ is present in a four-fold way in the Eucharist. "Christ is really present in the very assembly gathered in his name; he is present in the person of his minister, in his word and ... under the Eucharistic species." (GIRM, 27).
- When the people gather on Sundays, it is not as a group of people praying individually, but rather as a group involved as a community. The faithful pray together. It is their prayer. Hospitality is the first ministry of those gathering to celebrate communal prayer.
- Welcomers take the time and effort to be attentive to those who are gathering by acknowledging their presence, speaking to them and introducing people to one another. This personal contact helps each person, especially newcomers or visitors, feel welcome.
- The essence of hospitality is the quality of "being present." The invitation to relationship can transform a group of individuals into a dynamic community.

- The ministry of hospitality can also be understood as a ministry of joy. Ministers invite everyone who gathers to enter into the joy of the Lord.

## Some practical considerations that may be applicable in your parish

Local custom and practice will determine whose role the following tasks belong to. Perhaps each parish's ministers could meet and determine how to allocate these.

### *Before the Liturgy*

- Arrive fifteen minutes before the starting time.
- Ensure you are easily identifiable (e.g. by name tag).
- Check that the welcoming space is uncluttered and clean.
- See that the holy water fonts are clean and filled. Check that the presentation gifts table is properly set up, and invite the required number of people to assist the officiating usher to present them (this will depend on the local custom. Sometimes the acolyte will organise this).
- Distribute any material needed in the liturgy and/or bulletins as people arrive.

- In good weather, open the church doors to allow easy access, and ensure good ventilation by opening windows and doors in the church.
- Greet people in the welcoming space/foyer and introduce new parishioners or visitors to one or two familiar members. Capable, poised welcomers can inspire confidence and give a feeling that “something important is going to happen.”

### ***During the Liturgy***

- Escort latecomers to the most convenient location.
- If the readings have begun, ask latecomers to wait at the back until the end of the Gospel reading and then assist them to find seats. Try to do this with as much speed and little disturbance as you can manage, all the time treating them with reverence and respect.
- If there is a Children’s Liturgy of the Word, assist by opening doors and helping children who might be unsure of the venue or how to return to their families.
- The collection of money from the faithful is not just a practical matter designed to meet the financial needs of the parish, but is an integral part of the liturgy: it is their gift to meet the needs of the pastor and the Church. Taking up both collections at the same time as the Offertory gifts has a useful symbolic value and avoids unnecessary disturbance later. Pass the plate/basket as carefully, reverently and smoothly as possible. Move with style and grace: smoothly and with dignity. All of the money offered should be placed in one basket and brought forward in the procession.
- Assist in forming the procession for the presentation of the gifts at the back of the church. Lead the group confidently to the sanctuary steps.
- Join in the liturgy as part of the worshipping assembly!
- During the Sign of Peace, be especially alert to the presence of newcomers or visitors and extend a greeting to them.
- Be conscious of those with a physical disability or who cannot join the Communion procession. In an inconspicuous way, bring their location to the attention of a minister of Communion.

- Be prepared for emergencies: know the position of the fire hydrant, how and where to activate emergency lighting, which parishioners have medical skills...
- Only if necessary, guide the communion procession (symbolic of a pilgrim people) by smiles and gentle gestures.

### ***After the Liturgy***

- Hand out bulletins as people leave and say a word of farewell.
- Invite people to stay for tea/coffee when appropriate and guide them to the area.
- Ensure the collection is in a safe place.
- Straighten/tidy up the worship space and church foyer.
- If it is the last Mass, turn off sound, light, heating/ fans, microphone, shut windows, etc. (This depends on the local custom, e.g. sometimes another nominated minister does these things.)

### **Challenges**

- One challenge of this ministry is to become immersed in the prayer as it unfolds, at the same time as you continue to be attentive to the needs of all.
- Your “hospitality” should not begin and end in the church. Your Christian example needs to be evident in all you do.
- Pay attention to what is going on in your parish by reading the bulletin and knowing its history. Know the schedule of the liturgies so that when people ask you questions, your response will be direct, helpful and informative.

