

“In this essential guide, John T. Kyler invites readers—both as individuals and as a parish staff community—to explore their own willingness to embrace vulnerability, weaving in scriptural invitations to radical hospitality practices, a critical look at current events and contexts, and Kyler’s own example of vulnerability through the generous gaze through the lens of his own life’s journey. This resource begs us to remember, Church, who we are and whose we are. And for us to do so with open arms, and open heart, and the knowledge that welcoming all with the radical hospitality of God’s love will change us, too. And that is truly Good News.”

—Kate Williams, Vice President of Sacred Music,
GIA Publications, Inc

“In an age of increasing political and ecclesial polarization, where many people feel excluded and unwelcome—especially those who have been pushed to the margins of our communities—our parishes and pastoral centers need to embrace gospel hospitality with renewed vigor and kindness. John Kyler’s excellent book provides readers with accessible resources from Scripture, papal teaching, contemporary experiences, and the best of the Christian tradition to support this call to be people of encounter and communities of hospitality. It is my hope that all pastoral ministers will read this book and put it into practice within their local communities. Then, with God’s grace, St. Benedict’s instruction to ‘welcome all as Christ’ might become the true motto of pastoral ministry today!”

—Daniel P. Horan, OFM, Professor of Philosophy,
Religious Studies and Theology at Saint Mary’s College
in Notre Dame, Indiana

“In *Welcome All as Christ*, John Kyler offers parish ministers a practical, accessible, and deeply valuable resource about the need for hospitality in parish life. With empathy and honesty, Kyler cuts through the noise, framing the work of welcome as an urgent and joyful task, the responsibility of all. Weaving together theological and scriptural reflection with stories from popular culture and everyday life, *Welcome All as Christ* meets readers where they are at—but does not leave them there.”

—Susan Bigelow Reynolds, Assistant Professor of Catholic Studies, Candler School of Theology, Emory University

“In *Welcome All as Christ*, Kyler sets forth on a theology of beginnings, deftly guiding readers—faith-filled and otherwise—as they, we, join him, with all due hospitality, in thinking anew about the constant encounter that is the necessary life of the Church. Along the way he entreats us to consider how we are living the central lesson of religious life: how are we in communion with each other?”

—Kevin J. Burke, Professor of Language and Literacy Education, University of Georgia; author of *On Liking the Other: Queer Subjects and Religious Discourses*

CONTEMPORARY TOPICS IN PARISH LEADERSHIP

Welcome All as Christ

Reimagining Parish Hospitality

John T. Kyler



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*For Mom and Dad,
Dr. Kathleen Gorman-Kyler, DDS, and John Kyler,
with gratitude*

“That is not the God I know.”

Laura Snow,

a dear colleague and friend reminding high school seniors
that God is not about exclusion

“The annual ritualistic slaying over where to put the Christmas
decorations is not the mission of the Church.”

Barbara Sutton,

a dear colleague and friend inviting graduate students
to reconsider what is important in parish life

Contents

Introduction	ix
1. Welcome All as Christ	1
2. A Tradition of Encounter and an Intentional Response	8
3. First Impressions and a Common Vulnerability	21
4. Time, Place, and Context: A Typical Sunday	31
5. Language and Text	42
6. Representation and Anamnesis	57
7. Creating Space and Essential Dispositions	66
8. Hospitality throughout the Year	77
9. Hospitality in a Digital Age	89
Acknowledgments	99
Notes	101

Introduction

Growing up in a relatively large parish on the south side of Chicago, hospitality ministry always looked the same. Ushers dressed in suit jackets and bronze name tags hung “Reserved” signs over some pews before standing near the church entrance to pass out weekly bulletins. Most of the other liturgical ministers were friendly, though I don’t remember interacting with them often. The priests stood in the church foyer greeting people after Mass, and sometimes the parish women’s group served coffee and halved donuts. All these examples of parish hospitality are good, important, and holy.

But throughout my years as a parish minister, I have often wondered what a more holistic approach to parish hospitality might look like. The following nine chapters include some of my thoughts and ideas for reimagining parish hospitality. While there are practical pastoral suggestions throughout, the book mainly proposes a way of thinking about parish hospitality that goes beyond ushers, bulletins, and donuts. In many parishes, it seems there is

more effort and attention placed on assigning hospitality ministers for the day than in cultivating hospitality as the foundation for all parish activities.

There are no easy answers when imagining and reimagining parish hospitality. In fact, I hope this book raises many more questions than answers. More than anything, though, I intend this book to serve as a common ground for parish staff so they can begin—or continue—real conversation about what practicing hospitality looks like in their communities. These chapters are short and accessible enough to read before a staff or parish council meeting and can provide a foundation for theological, pastoral, and practical conversation about the ways our parish communities practice hospitality.

May we continue to welcome all as Christ as we reimagine parish hospitality.

Welcome All as Christ

On Wednesday, November 21, 2021, an icon titled *Mama*, which depicted a Black Mary cradling her dead son, was stolen from the Catholic University of America's Columbus School of Law. This particular image, by artist Kelly Latimore, drew attention and criticism for its representation of Jesus with what many describe as the likeness of George Floyd, a Black man murdered by police on May 25, 2020, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. An identical painting that replaced the original was also stolen only a few weeks later.

As Christians, we are called to see Christ in every person we encounter. The Rule of St. Benedict, which documents a long-standing way of life for Benedictine communities and is embraced as a staple of Western spirituality, emphasizes

this reality in chapter 53 and provides instructions for how guests are to be received: “All guests who arrive should be received as Christ, because he will say: ‘I was a stranger and you took me in’ (Matt 25:35). Due honor should be shown to all, especially to those ‘of the household of the faith’ (Gal 6:10) and to pilgrims. As soon as guests are announced, the superior and the community should hurry to meet them with every mark of love. . . . Christ is to be adored in them as it is he who is in fact being received.”¹

When we receive others—that is, any time we encounter another person—we are called to encounter Christ. Jesus himself shares this reality throughout the gospels. In the Gospel of Matthew, immediately before his passion and death, Jesus offers these familiar words: “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me” (Matt 25:35-36). Likewise, in the well-known parable of the Good Samaritan from Luke’s Gospel, Jesus expands the traditional understanding of neighbor, moving it beyond just family and like-minded allies to all people:

Jesus replied, “A man fell victim to robbers as he went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. They stripped and beat him and went off leaving him half-dead. A priest happened to be going down that road, but when he saw him, he passed by on the opposite side. Likewise

a Levite came to the place, and when he saw him, he passed by on the opposite side. But a Samaritan traveler who came upon him was moved with compassion at the sight. He approached the victim, poured oil and wine over his wounds and bandaged them. Then he lifted him up on his own animal, took him to an inn and cared for him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper with the instruction, 'Take care of him. If you spend more than what I have given you, I shall repay you on my way back.' Which of these three, in your opinion, was neighbor to the robbers' victim?" He answered, "The one who treated him with mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise." (Luke 10:30-37)

It seems especially problematic, though perhaps not surprising, that Latimore's painting elicited the feedback that it did. Jesus makes it abundantly clear that we are to encounter him in all people, especially those who are suffering and relegated to the margins of our society. This is easier said than done. If we turn to the Genesis creation narratives, however, we encounter not only *what* God creates but also the *way* God creates, and the way makes all the difference. While we have all heard the creation stories of Genesis so many times that we can probably recite them from memory, our exploration of hospitality needs to start at the beginning.

The Creation Narratives as a Cornerstone of Hospitality

The creation narratives reveal two significant theological realities. First, God creates people in God's own image and likeness. There is a fundamental goodness about all of creation, and this is particularly so in human beings, with whom the divine establishes and invites relationship. After creating light, water, land, vegetation, fish, birds, and "every kind of living creature," God declares, "Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness" (Gen 1:24, 26). The creation of humans is intrinsically different than the rest of creation precisely because humans are formed after God's own image and likeness. There is an inherent godliness in humans that cannot be removed or destroyed. With this, there is a binding oneness among all creation. Even before we hear of male, female, or any other distinctions and separations that will eventually arise, there is a common bond between all of humanity. There is unity in God's image.

Likewise, the second creation narrative emphasizes the reality that humans are meant for community. After breathing life into the first human, God specifically states, "It is not good for the man to be alone" (Gen 2:18). After animals and other living creatures prove unsuitable companions, God creates woman. In creating a partner for man, God literally generates community, fashioning it into existence.

Being formed in God's image and, likewise, being called to community are significant realities. These two truths

articulate the entire purpose behind our call to hospitality, as being formed in God's image is not static. Rather, being formed in the image of God means being formed in the essence of who God is. Practical theologian Kathleen Cahalan (building on the work of Catherine LaCugna) expresses this reality succinctly: "Who God is is what God does."² If we are made in the image of God, we are called to do what God does. The creation stories show us what God does: God creates and fosters community.

Pope Francis names this intention as an essential part of the creation narratives. The world did not come into existence randomly or from a state of chaos. Rather, the world was formed because of God's decision to do so. In his encyclical *Laudato Si'* (On Care for Our Common Home), Francis writes, "The creating word expresses a free choice. The universe did not emerge as the result of arbitrary omnipotence, a show of force or a desire for self-assertion. Creation is the order of God."³

It is important to remember that the purpose of Genesis is not to offer a historical account of the creation of the world. Rather, Genesis seeks to unite God and God's people by connecting the past to the reality of the present and the expectation of the future. Scripture scholar Kathleen O'Connor writes, "More than recording history, Genesis intervenes in history. It speaks of beginnings to incite hope among Israel's remnant that they too might begin again. The book offers a theology of beginnings to a people flattened by invasions, displacements, and the strong possibility that they

will disappear among the prevailing empires. Its overarching purpose is to convince its audience that the Creator of the cosmos and of all that exists is recreating them now.”⁴ This interpretation of Genesis highlights creation not as a past event but as an ongoing reality that continues day in and day out. We name this specifically in the liturgical season of Advent, where we recognize that God’s kingdom is simultaneously both “here” and “not yet.”

As God continues to create, we are each called to take an active role in this creation. While we wait for the final coming of God’s kingdom, we still work to create a world that upholds dignity and affirms life. We work to create a world that dismantles pervasive systems of injustice and labors for authentic restitution and reconciliation. We work to create a world that upholds the voices of all people, especially people who have been relegated to the margins of our society. We work to create a world where all not only are welcome but belong.

Even in the dedication of a church, which is also our common home, we give voice to the work of creation. The Prayer of Dedication concludes, “Here may the poor find mercy, the oppressed attain true freedom, and all people be clothed with the dignity of your children, until they come exultant to the Jerusalem which is above.”⁵ It is part of our mission and identity—not only as people made in the image of God but also as Christians who regularly convene for worship—to create a place where the poor can find mercy, a place where the oppressed can attain true

freedom, and a place where all people are clothed with the dignity of God's children. This is the mission a local church is given. The church is not fundamentally about Christmas decorations or rummage sales. Rather, in a world that seems to perpetuate fear and division, our call is one of hope, unity, and justice. We work toward this hope, unity, and justice by practicing hospitality, both as individuals and as a church community.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What does "Welcome all as Christ" mean to you?
2. What do you think of the assertion "Who God is is what God does"? What are some experiences in your own life where you have known this reality?

Continuing the Conversation

How does your parish community participate in the ongoing creation of God's kingdom? Now might be a good opportunity to reread and perhaps reevaluate your parish mission statement. Is there anything that needs updating or changing? Are there any parts of it that might require intentional dedicated efforts?