

ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS ON WELCOMING AT MASS

I recently wrote about the need we have to be welcoming, celebrating and remembering as a parish. It was a lead-in to beginning some practices on 1st Sunday of Advent that I hope would allow us to increase our connectedness as members of the Body of Christ. It was an appeal on the basis of our felt sense for community.

This time I'd like to reflect from a more "philosophical" point of view, perhaps to satisfy the inclinations of others in the parish. My point of departure is a book, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, by Stanley J. Grenz. Its purpose is to introduce folks to the range of what has come to be called "postmodern philosophy." If most of us have not heard of, nor read, most of the academics in this movement (names like Jacques Derrida, Hans-Georg Gadamer, or Michel Foucault don't trip lightly off all that many tongues), in fact we live in a society shaped by their thought—or perhaps we should rather say, our society's practiced beliefs have been articulated by them. One might say (and Grenz would agree) that this is the intersection of academic study with the worlds of M-TV and *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. While there are many dimensions of their thinking that I find intriguing and challenging, as well as others I find disturbing or unacceptable, I don't want to offer an analysis of their point of view. Rather, I would like to use one paragraph of Grenz's book for my purpose. He writes:

"With its focus on community, the postmodern world encourages us to recognize the importance of the community of faith in our evangelistic efforts. Members of the next generation are often unimpressed by our verbal presentations of the gospel. What they want to see is a people who live out the gospel in wholesome, authentic, and healing relationships....Participants in the inviting community will seek to draw others to Christ by embodying that gospel in the fellowship they share." (p. 169).

Insofar as we show, through the quality of our worship and the extent of our fellowship and the degree of our being welcoming, that we love to live our faith in the Risen Christ, we will by that very reality be an evangelizing people. This may be a meaningful path for us in the quest that Pope John Paul II charted for us in the year 2000 with his encyclical *Novo Millennio Ineunte* ("Now the New Millennium Is Here"). He challenged us to engage in a "new evangelization" to re-present the Christian message to a world that thinks it's already heard it and that it's "bad olds" instead of "good news."

Fr. Dale Fusek said that a youth of his parish in Arizona suddenly stopped coming to Mass on Sundays. He knew the teen well, so he sought the fellow out and engaged him in conversation about it. He told Fr. Dale, "I don't know if I believe what they say or not; I don't know what I think about where they disagree with the Catholic Church. All I know is that when I'm there I feel accepted and loved." Fr. Dale said he determined there and then that no teen in his parish would ever not feel "accepted and loved" so far as he could help it. This was the beginning of Life-Teen.

What Fr. Dale decided about teens is what we'd like to mirror for whoever comes to us, seeking "good news" and love. Our ability to welcome, to celebrate, to remember, to live the Gospel will be, if authentic, a mark of the Holy Spirit that will bring others to Christ. And this is the only mission of the Church.