

Fr. Dave Zimmer: Hospitality as a Gift

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The stewardship pillar of hospitality is the first pillar we embrace when attempting to understand parish stewardship. I suppose the reason for this is because we all know when we feel welcome somewhere and we also all know when we don't. Hospitality is a gift when it is given and it is a gift when it is received. It is also an experience we learn to pass on when the opportunity arises.

That opportunity came to my brother and me during the week that followed Christmas. The experience of hosting an open house validated my belief that the hospitality my mom exhibited in our home as we grew up would blossom into a gift we could pass on to others, much in the same way my mom used to do often and so well in our home. In retrospect, the gift of hospitality that is shared, given, and received makes an impact in our personal lives, our homes, schools, workplaces, and our parish.

I boarded a flight that left on Christmas day to Minneapolis/St. Paul to spend time with my brother and prepare my mom's home for the "Christmas Open House" that we planned as a way of reconnecting with the family and friends who attended my mom's funeral last April. "It was a learning experience," my brother said, as we now realize the work that goes into hosting such an event. Hospitality requires time, planning and details that in our case were sadly missed or neglected, but oh so necessary in order that everything run smoothly. I finally now appreciate the dedication my mom must have had to the gift of hospitality to open her home over the years to many people, friends, family, and sometimes even strangers who became friends. "It is a lot of work!" But it is also a labor of love as my brother and I would discover.

Announcements were mailed a bit too late to all who signed the guest register at the funeral of our mother in April. "Dave and Dan Zimmer announce an open house December 28th, 29th, 30th" was what it said along with the promise of food, the opportunity to help themselves to some of the collected dolls and "pig" figurines my mom had saved over the years and simply gather in the place that for over 50 years was well known as a place of hospitality. We neglected to include a time for the open house, which created a problem in itself. Dan and I spent Christmas day and the next two days frantically decorating, cleaning and preparing for a lesson in hospitality we will never forget. We were still cleaning and decorating when people started arriving early Wednesday afternoon, hence the problem with not putting down a time on the invitation. But, then, true hospitality, we learned, is not really scheduled or limited to when it is convenient. Many times, people just "dropped in" on my mom, and her talent for hospitality would kick in and people were welcomed. That is what her two sons did at the open house.

My brother spent much of his time replenishing the table with food and snacks, and at times, he would break from kitchen duty with a “stunned” look on his face. When he wasn’t cutting up cheese and salami, he was moving cars around on our lawn and several driveways. “Next year, we are buying sliced cheese,” was a comment I heard too many times from my brother over those three wonderful but exhausting days, but true hospitality “reigned.”

A guest register contained comments from the guests that continued to arrive and fill the house, wall to wall. Our invitation of hospitality brought many people to my mom’s house over those next three days, where lots of laughter, stories, food, and even some tears were shared. Despite the exhaustion my brother and I felt from hosting an event, we knew that the gift of our hospitality was shared with love and was taught to us from our dear departed mother. It was a labor of love, and that gift of hospitality prompted these two twin brothers to say with conviction and a promise, “Let’s do this again.”

So, how does one learn the gift of hospitality? How have you experienced it? Apparently, family has a lot to do with it. Therefore, my “parish family” at St. John the Apostle Church in Minot, N.D., is committed to “hosting” an open house each and every time we gather for prayer, to socialize, to learn, and to serve others. There are many opportunities to give the gift of hospitality, to receive the gift, and to share it with those around us. Hopefully, we can all say we know for certain that we are welcome at our parish, and also know it is very rare, if ever, that we know when we haven’t. Hospitality “reigns!”