Manners, Social Grace, Politeness and Other Lost Arts

Recently I observed two men at two separate events who caught my attention. One man walked into the church wearing a baseball cap and left his hat on throughout much of the Mass. At the other event I witnessed a man walking into the restaurant wearing a baseball cap, and he wore it throughout the meal. Never mind the fact that he walked into the restaurant before the woman with him, and then plopped himself down into a chair, allowing the woman to fend for herself. Let’s turn back the clock.

At minimum most people are taught to say “please” and “thank you.” In the past, upon receiving a gift, people said “thank you” to the gift giver, but then within the week, a thank you note was sent as a follow up. Gentlemen stood when a woman entered the room, and then sat down when she sat down. The same was true when the Clergy entered a room. When a gentleman knocked on the door, he removed his hat when the door was answered and he entered the room holding his hat until his hat and coat were taken by the person whom he was visiting. Gentlemen held the door for ladies and they tipped their caps as a sign of respect. By and large these several social graces have disappeared, among numerous others. Sadly, there is also an excuse for poor social graces, “Ever since feminism emerged, women don’t want me to hold the door or help them with their chair.” “Wha’cha see is wha’cha get.” Unfortunately, that is probably true.

In the 1950’s, it was not uncommon in Elementary Schools to have classes on social graces, including the appropriate way to communicate. Unconnected telephones were placed in the classroom and students were taught the social graces connected to making and receiving telephone calls. When we made a call, we said “hello” and we identified ourselves. We then asked if we were interrupting anything and if this was a convenient time to talk. If it was a convenient time, then we proceeded by stating the purpose of our call. We never were to interrupt the other person while they were talking. We were told always to conclude the call graciously before we said “good-bye. It was also commonly understood that calls should not be made before 9:00 A.M. nor after 5:00 P.M. unless it was a social call or emergency and the other person had indicated the appropriateness of calling. These points, of course, are somewhat obvious in terms of demonstrating some level of appropriate manners and social grace, but many telephone communications today are devoid of showing respect for the other person. In all things, we were taught, a telephone conversation is not a substitute for a face to face communication or meeting. The telephone was a convenience - not a replacement for rapport building and nuanced words with affirming “facial expressions” that can convey at times, more than words.

Letter writing was an art. Hand written letters were highly appropriate between friends, and in many instances, letters were kept in a scrapbook or a special drawer. These letters contained complete thoughts and, oftentimes, endearing phrases which encouraged the recipient.

Typed letters, on the other hand, were generally confined to business interactions, and while there was the allowance for a “carbon copy” (cc) the recipient always knew who would be seeing the letter. If the recipient wished to share the letter with others, then good manners dictated that the recipient asked the author for permission.

Articles in magazines and books, unless they were fiction, were well written and highly documented with footnotes and a bibliography. They were not a collection of unsubstantiated opinions. The purpose of devices, such as a “Foreword,” in the book was to indicate that someone who was well respected had read and endorsed the book or article. If something simply were in print, without any of those elements, then they often had little or no credibility, and they certainly could not be used or quoted in a serious work being done by students. Wikipedia would not have considered to be a reliable source.

The distinction between men and women was designed to show respect. Women were called “ladies” and men were to be called “gentlemen. No one was called “you guys.”

With the introduction first of email, then social media, and then texting, many of the respectful boundaries that were set suddenly were removed. Emails were sent with the expectation of a rapid response, people were encouraged to post their opinions and instant messages were sent with the expectation of an instant response. All of these are now sent at any hour of the day, seven days a week with an emphasis placed on the convenience of the sender rather than the convenience of the recipient. Unfortunately, with the new expectations came the tacit understanding that if you fail to respond to my email, post or text within the time I expect, you must be upset with me or you may be ignoring me. There are even people today who become somewhat depressed when they have been “unfriended” on a Facebook page! Sadly, today people can block the people with whom they do not wish to communicate. This may mean that the sender does not know that someone is upset with them and that they are blocked. That is the recipient’s job to discover, which promotes a new manifestation of passive-aggressive behavior.

Unfortunately, the culture seems to be winning in terms of removing all boundaries of communication protocols and the social grace that should accompany wholesome communication. Moreover, those who impulsively feel a need to express a feeling or a thought can do so without a moment of restraint. In many ways, the new “no boundaries” communication prevents disciplined thinking from occurring, whereby people formerly had to organize their thoughts in a cohesive fashion. Today it is often a “stream of consciousness.”

This new form of communication is often reflected in the new and emerging nondenominational churches. People enter the “vestibule,” get their Starbucks coffee, pick up their bottled water and without discovering a Liturgical focal point, sit in the auditorium. The people are greeted with “Good morning,” words are flashed up on screens with power point presentations and the action is directed towards the people in the seats. No Creeds, no Councils, no history, no boundaries. Wear baseball caps throughout if you wish.

Historical, Liturgical Christianity now appears to be irrelevant because the culture has judged it to be so. For Traditional Christians, we enter a Narthex quietly, renewing our baptismal vows as we dip our fingers into Baptismal water and make the sign of the Cross reminding us Who we are to meet. We enter the Nave with hat in hand, genuflect before the King of Kings in His Sacramental presence, kneel at our pews in silence as we communicate with Jesus, and then wait with anticipation. We stand as the Sanctuary Party enters, we exchange ancient greetings with the priest, and we sit and listen carefully to be instructed (Epistle.) We stand out of reverence to hear the Words that Jesus Spoke (Gospel) and we reflect on the words that God has given to the Preacher to explain the mysteries of our 2,000+ year Faith, handed down from Jesus to the Apostles to us. We recite in the Creed what the Church has always believed and taught — unstained by the world. We pray for ourselves and for each other. We take responsibility for our sins, and we offer to God that which is His by right. In conformity with the Church described in the Acts of the Apostles, we graciously exchange greetings that eventually lead us back to the Last Supper where we are nourished by the Body and Blood of Jesus.

In every element of the Liturgical event the emphasis is on God. The emphasis is placed on what God has done for us. Everything is directed towards God, and in what He has given us through Word and Sacrament, we have no need to be entertained. In the end we thank God for these gifts and we are sent out into the world to share what we have received. Before leaving, however, we once again kneel in silence prepared to re-enter a noisy world and then we carry on conversations with fellow worshippers as others remain in the church to continue to pray. No parishioner “satisfaction cards” are filled out so that Sunday morning can better suit the Christian consumer by receiving their input. We are not so concerned about how we feel as we are about how God feels about us.

This style is all very counter cultural today, but at one time it was an essential component in terms of manners, respect, social grace and politeness. We showed absolute reverence in the presence of God in His House, great respect for those around us, and more concern about the feelings of others than our own feelings. We were not called to be critics - we were called to be worshippers.

Is it possible that the more we have succumbed to the seduction of instantaneous expectations in communication, abruptness in manner, and removing all socially graceful boundaries, that we have lost God in the process? Are we not grateful that our expectations and demands of others in terms of communication are not God’s expectations and demands of us? That we respond to His call immediately, that we react immediately to His expectations, and that we check in often to see if we have missed His call; or even worse - that we looked at our “caller ID,” saw that God was calling and we refused to answer.

**Gracious communication - is it a lost art - or simply a reflection of a people more interested in themselves than in the One who created them to communicate with Him?**