



The Psalmist asks, “Lord, who may dwell in your tabernacle? Who may abide upon your holy hill? Those who lead a blameless life and do what is right,” among other things. We can go into how this was more so about a time and place thousands of years ago, but what’s to stop Bible readers from wondering if Psalm 15 can very well be meant for houses of worship today? “Lord, who may dwell in your church? Who may abide in your holy sanctuaries?” Some children of God still wonder if

they’re good enough to walk into any church building: if they need to dress a certain way, if they had to behave to a specific moral code for the week before, if they had to ensure they didn’t do anything to embarrass us regular church-going people, let alone the Almighty God, before they dare walk into a place such as this.

Now, one of the hymns we often sing throughout the year is the one we will do so shortly: it is called “All Are Welcome.” Of course, it’s not just the name of a song, but it’s a motto for countless congregations around the country. It’s the heading for endless numbers of church websites. And people may read and hear such words, but they wonder if there are any fine print details that they need to know about first, before, again, they dare walk into a place such as this.

So, I want to take you to Providence, Rhode Island, where this song is being brought to life in rather different ways within a mile of each other. The first stop is the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rhode Island, to the office of Bishop Thomas Thobin. In their monthly publication a little over five years ago, Bishop Thobin wrote about this very hymn: one that is evidently sung often amongst our Roman Catholic siblings in Christ. He starts his column by quoting the first verse: *Let us build a house where love can dwell and all can safely live, a place where saints and children tell how hearts learn to forgive. Built of hopes and dreams and visions, rock of faith and vault of grace; here the love of Christ shall end divisions. All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.*

*[Bishop Thobin continues,] Sounds pretty benign, even warm and comforting, doesn’t it? Despite its rather positive themes, however, I can’t think of any song in the Christian songbook that causes as much debate and division, anger and angst, as “All Are Welcome.” The interpretations of the song are many.*

*For some, the song has become an anthem to open doors and hospitality, admirable virtues that should characterize every Christian community.*

*Some take its inclusive theme to an extreme and abuse the well-meaning song as a protest against traditional Christian values.*

*For most Catholics, who find themselves in the neutral zone...the song is simply a pleasant way of beginning the Mass and setting a positive tone for the gathering of the community.*

*Some critics, however, find the song to be rather misleading, heretical even, convinced that it betrays the nature of the Church, minimizes her teachings, and leads to a watered-down expression of the faith marked by [indifference]...*

*When we say, “all are welcome” it can legitimately reflect an enthusiastic spirit of evangelization in the Church as we reach out to others to share the “Joy of the Gospel.” As a Catholic community our membership is not closed; neither are our doors. We should be inviting others, even recruiting others, to be part of our Church.*

*When we say “all are welcome” it’s a reminder that the educational and social services of the Catholic Church are available for all, Catholic and non-Catholic alike. In providing heating assistance, inviting guests to our homeless shelter, settling refugee families, or opening the doors to food pantries and soup kitchens, we never ask for a baptism certificate or budget envelopes. In fact, the words “all are welcome” express some of the finest instincts ...of the...Church.*

*On the other hand, the well-meaning words can be misinterpreted and abused too...When we say “all are welcome” it does not indicate that everyone is invited to march up in the Communion line to receive Holy Communion without being properly disposed. In practice that requires those who receive Holy Communion to be a member of the Church, be free of mortal sin, and intend to receive the Holy Eucharist with proper decorum, respect and reverence.*

*The hard truth is, that while all are welcome, not everyone is suited for the Catholic community. If they cannot freely accept the faith and teachings of the Church, if their conscience or lifestyle leads them elsewhere, so be it. We will wish them well and pray that God accompanies them in their journey of faith.*

*So yes, indeed, all are welcome. Go ahead, sing the song with faith and fervor. But, please, don’t forget the asterisk (\*).*

So writes Bishop Tobin in an office in downtown Providence, Rhode Island. Nevertheless, a few blocks away, stands Grace Episcopal Church, which proudly provides an Open Door Ministry during the week, as they open their beautiful church doors every weekday from 11am-2pm: the only church in Providence to do so. It allows all people to come in, pray, listen to some music, or just look around at the architecture, chat with the priest, and for those wanting assistance of whatever form, to connect them with whatever is needed. And if any show up on a Sunday morning, all are welcome at the Communion table, where the priest or the congregation are not the hosts, but the God of the ultimate hospitality.

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That isn’t to say some of our Roman Catholic sister congregations don’t extend such extravagant hospitality, and not all Episcopal or even ELCA congregations are quite as welcoming. But it serves as a reminder that Scripture and the music inspired from it continues to challenge us: just how far are we willing to welcome not just with our church homes, but with our very own hearts. If there should, in fact, be any asterisks with such hospitality. But I have this feeling that when Christ came along; all the fine print was completely obliterated with a love that not even death could stop. It may just be that this God does insist that “all are welcome,” whether the church says so or not. For in the end, “all are [emphatically] welcomed” into God’s open heart of grace and mercy brought to life in Jesus Christ, our Risen Lord, now and forevermore. And for that Greatest News, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!

[All Are Welcome\\* | Rhode Island Catholic \(thericatholic.com\)](http://thericatholic.com)

[Grace Episcopal Church – Episcopal Church in Providence, RI \(gracechurchprovidence.org\)](http://gracechurchprovidence.org)