



The Disciple as Porter

by | Chris Folmsbee

It was the ministry of hospitality in action.

A few days ago I had the privilege of visiting a monastery about an hour or so North of Kansas City called The Conception Abbey. The abbey was a remarkable place filled with beauty, reverence, hope, community, solitude, peace, and an unmistakable love for God and people.

Upon arriving I was welcomed by the abbey porter. The porter was an older, feeble, white-haired man who looked me straight in the eye, put his hand on my shoulder (while reaching for my backpack with his other hand), and with a smile I will never forget said, "Welcome son. Welcome. Please, let me carry this bulky sack for you."

The Picture of a Porter

Ever since I had read *The Celtic Way of Evangelism* by George Hunter III some years ago I imagined how it would feel to be welcomed and greeted by a porter. Hunter helps paint a picture with these words:

Put yourself in the place of a seeker, or a refugee, or an abused teenager, who has been invited to visit a monastic community, and you have found your way there. What would you likely experience? You would meet a "porter" stationed near the monastic community's entrance, whose chief role is to welcome guests and introduce them to the rest of the community. (Hunter, 52)

These words became reality as I was welcomed by Brother Mark and walked through the community's main doorway (upon which the words "Let all guests be welcomed as Christ," a quote from St. Benedictine, were etched in stone).

Lessons from the Porter

This wonderful experience of being lovingly greeted and welcomed into a new community by Brother Mark has caused me to consider my own warmth, generosity, and hospitality toward others. It makes me wonder how I am greeting the "seeker, refugee, or abused teenager" that Hunter helps us call to mind in his book. What can the actions and mission of the porter teach me?

The bottom line: I cannot experience being treated like Christ without asking myself if I, in fact, treat others as such.

I also have to ask how my youth ministry is doing at both welcoming those who are exploring Jesus and introducing them to the rest of the community. Do students and families feel the same generosity and hospitality that we would feel upon entering a community that attempts to welcome all guests "as Christ?"

Hospitality Characteristics

Hospitality is about welcoming guests and strangers in a friendly, kind, and generous way. As we shepherd students and work to develop them into spiritual porters, we need to constantly assess our youth ministry's ability to do just that. Nine key characteristics of a youth ministry determine if it's also a welcoming community:

Space. Students can choose how involved they wish to be, whether it's involved interaction or less-involved observation or anything in between.

Trust. Students are assured that they can be who they are—no questions asked—without being singled out or expected to be people they're not.

Tolerance. Students' religious, political, philosophical, etc., views are heard with dignity and respect.

Invitation. Students recognize an ongoing invitation to be involved in the activities of a "regular" as well as an open invitation to come back (or not).

Internal Initiative. Students know they should extend themselves to others in a welcoming way without you having to say, "Hey, see that kid over there? She's new. Can you go say hello to her?"

Peace. Students feel a sense of calm and composure. The youth ministry keeps intentional disturbances (yelling at each other, unhealthy competition, etc.) at bay to reduce a variety of anxieties that emerge within students.

Order. Although it's a new experience for many and often loud and raucous, youth group gatherings should still operate under a sense of direction and order so everyone knows what's going on. **Stability.** Students should feel as though their community regularly receives guests and that their arrival isn't putting anyone out or causing a commotion.

Family Atmosphere. Students should recognize that the youth group looks to relate internally as a family. Everyone knows everyone else's name; everyone is welcomed to belong, etc.

"As Christ"

just as a porter welcomes a stranger or guest to a monastery, we should attempt to welcome strangers and guests into our youth ministries.

As St. Benedictine stated, "Let all guests be welcomed as Christ." 🗨️



Chris Folmsbee
President of Sonlife ministries, a youth ministry training organization. He is the author of *A New Kind of Youth Ministry* and an upcoming book for students called *Clear: Bringing God's Truths into Focus*.

