

Why I Am Catholic

St Clement's Welcome

Our visitors constantly complement and affirm us about their wonderful experience when visiting St. Clement's. They feel immediate warmth and connection and a strong sense of welcome. We have families that come from Dalton, Rome, and Cartersville because they find us to be their spiritual home.

We are carrying on a very important and longstanding tradition. One that has not been always practiced in every place, but is something we strive to bring out here and in our everyday lives. It is not automatic. It must be consciously done and part of what a faith community and its members choose to be. And to practice.

When I was in seminary, I visited a number of different parishes in and around New Orleans. I could sense from the first moment whether I felt welcome or not. It began with the outside and inside of the church building and the "vibe" I felt. Did the church "look" friendly? These are the intangibles. But it went further. Did people welcome me or say hello? Did they smile and shake hands or did everyone look sad and kept to themselves?

How did the community interact among themselves? Were church regulars happy to see each other? Or was there a "coldness" and lack of connection? Were there quiet conversations and sometimes even laughter? Was there a spirit of prayer and reverence? Did they sing? How did that community help me to see God and to sense Jesus' presence? The parishes where I felt welcome were the ones I returned to.

Among the saints, St. Benedict is noted for his writings on hospitality. And the Benedictines today are known for their great hospitality.

"Let all guests arriving at the monastery be received as Christ Himself, for He will one day say, 'I was a stranger and you took Me in.' And let due honor be paid to all, especially, however, to those who are of the household of the faith—and to strangers.

"When, therefore, a guest is announced, let him be met by the superior or by the brethren with all the marks of charity. . . In the salutation itself let all humility be shown. Both on their arrival and on their departure, Christ, Who is indeed received, shall be worshipped in all the guests by an inclination of the head or a full prostration of the body. . . let all kindness be shown him. . . Let great care and solicitude be shown particularly in the reception of the poor and of travelers, because it is in them that Christ is more especially received." *The Rule of St. Benedict* also mentions that guests "are never lacking in a monastery."

I will never forget the warm welcome I received when I arrived at St. Clement's. The care and concern of this parish family and your prayers during my recovery from surgery and radiation treatments is something that will stay with me forever. This parish is a blessing.