

No problem after all: Better than "You're welcome"

by [Rodney Clapp](#) in the [January 13, 2009](#) issue

In recent years, “No problem” has become a customary response to a “Thank you” rendered to wait staff, service providers, hosts and gift givers. By my observation, this practice of replacing “You’re welcome” with “No problem” began with the generation now in their thirties. “No problem” is now widespread enough that Judith Martin (Miss Manners) has thought it necessary to pronounce against it. I even discovered a quiz for people learning English as a second language that discusses how to employ “No problem” properly. (Wrong answers to “Thank you” are “any problem,” “a problem” and “some problem.”)

At first I found “No problem” jarring. It seemed glib, nonchalant and maybe even a little uppity. I am paying for my meal or hotel room—of course it is no problem to provide my food or deliver my bags. Am I welcome as your guest, or merely managing not to be a major inconvenience?

Obviously, these are rote or ritual responses. The tone of voice makes all the difference in whether or not “No problem” is heard as polite. Such phrases make for a civil society and are certainly not meant to be taken strictly literally. “How are you?” is not so much a request for a detailed report on your mood or health as it is a respectful greeting.

But my discomfort with “No problem” set me to musing. Was my mild umbrage provoked by a concern about further evidence of the collapse of Western civilization, or did it reflect a snobbish (and repugnant) worry about keeping myself superior to the good people who wait tables or carry luggage for a living?

Manners matter, and yet there is always a degree of arbitrariness to them. “You’re welcome” is only about a century old as a customary response to “Thank you.” Moses dragged down from Sinai’s peak no dictates detailing on which side of the plate to place the fork or the spoon. And surely many of our customary manners derive from settings and protocol that were originally much more hierarchical and

even oppressive than we would now tolerate. So how do we judge what really are good manners, even as they (inevitably and always) evolve or change over time?

As in all other things modern, we of course have experts. The Emily Posts of yesterday and the Miss Manners of today are needed and welcome. But as a Christian I have another heuristic test of fitting or unfitting innovations in manners: How does this innovation comport with the eucharistic feast?

After all, at the Eucharist we see and enact ourselves in right relation to God, to one another and to God's creation. And the Eucharist is by its very name our ultimate "Thank you" for the gifts of life and salvation.

We might test "No problem" at the Eucharist by imagining it as God's response to our expressed gratitude. Since God gifts us with life out of sheer grace, "No problem" may actually be a more fitting divine response to our "Thank you" than "You're welcome." God's gifts are not something we earn or are owed in any way, and "You're welcome" can carry with it connotations of desert or just dues. The "No problem" innovation, by contrast, seems to say: "I give as I freely choose to give, and I give out of abundance rather than scarcity. There is much more where that came from. No problem."

Of course, waitresses and bellhops are not God. So the nearer eucharistic analogy to them might be the celebrant or pastor who offers the bread and lifts the chalice to our lips. Still, it is God's gifts that are given, and the pastors bearing these gifts bring them, again, out of God's sheer grace. For such a one to say "You're welcome" would surely be presumptuous, and would seem to steal credit for the gift from God. Or, alternatively, it could make the pastoral agent into a server at our beck and call, and God into a kind of divine restaurateur providing whatever dish we choose from our favorite menu (and for which we will pay). Truer to the occasion would be this response from the priest or chalice-bearer: "I freely give what is not my own, what has freely been given to me as well as you. No problem."

Having conducted this little exercise, I am not declaring that "You're welcome" is somehow unchristian, let alone rankly impolite. "You're welcome" can be intended and heard in ways other than those less felicitous ones I have just suggested. And we are all welcomed to God's great banquet feast. I say only this: call me a latitudinarian of etiquette if you must, but I no longer have a problem with "No problem."