

Hospitality

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Rudeness to a stranger is not decency, poor though he may be, poorer than you. All wanderers and beggars come from Zeus. What we can give is slight but the recompense great.

The city which forgets how to care for the stranger has forgotten how to care for itself.

--The Odyssey

Introduction

There have been several books on Christian hospitality in the last couple of years. Christine Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Eerdmans, 1999) studied the topic from many angles, concentrating especially on communities which specialize in hospitality. Lucien Richard, *Living the Hospitality of God* (Paulist, 2000) covered some of the same ground, with a special emphasis on welcoming refugees. Brendan Byrne, *The Hospitality of God: A Reading of Luke's Gospel* (Liturgical Press, 2000) interpreted the Gospel of Luke from the standpoint of hospitality.

Hospitality looms large in the Rule and history of Benedictines. Someone trying to convince a person to join the third order of another religious congregation emphasized to a friend of mine the nobility of that order's charism, saying that Benedictines' charism was homely hospitality. This recruiter underestimated how important hospitality is. One of the big challenges we face is how to adapt the Christian tradition of hospitality to the realities of contemporary life, where we have a "hospitality industry," and "hospitality" is usually thought of as something one offers to friends or at least friends of friends--people very much like ourselves.

Francis and Clare of Assisi and the Benedictines

When St. Francis came on the scene in the early 13th century, Benedictine monasticism had been around for seven centuries. Monasteries were generally thriving and well established, but they were a bit staid and set in their ways. The monks lived under a Rule and were attached to a single place where they usually remained. The monasteries quarreled with each other and with local bishops over rights and possessions. Francis offered a whole new form of consecration to God: mobile, in the midst of people, deliberately poor and so free in a unique way. Strikingly, Francis did not criticize the existing monasteries, nor did they condemn his new initiatives. Instead, monasteries offered Francis and his followers hospitality.

When the young Francis was attacked by brigands, he came cold and hungry to a Benedictine monastery near Gubbio and found hospitality there. Many years later in 1223 or 1224, Francis had a meeting there at the monastery with three hundred of his brothers, and the monks provided food and drink.

In 1207-08 Francis undertook to restore the dilapidated and vandalized chapel of St. Mary of the Angels in the area of the Portiuncula. It belonged to the Benedictines of Monte Subasio. Francis asked the abbot if he could restore and use it, and the abbot said yes. It was at this place that Francis heard the gospel about possessing neither gold nor silver, not staff, bread, nor extra shoes and clothes. When he heard this, Francis realized the nature of the calling he and his brothers had received. The Franciscan Order was born.

Then Francis went to Rome to have his new order approved. He was helped in the process by Cardinal John Colonna, who was a monk of the monastery of St. Paul's Outside the Walls of Rome (where John XXIII announced the calling of Vatican II). Francis approached the pope. When some cardinals objected that his Rule of life was impractical, Cardinal Colonna defended him saying that what Francis wanted to do was follow the gospel, and it would be wrong to think the gospel is impractical. Eventually the Pope approved Francis' undertaking.

Eventually Francis returned to Assisi. After being able to obtain no church from the bishop and clergy of Assisi, Francis asked the abbot of Subasio give him the little church of the Portiuncula outright so Francis and his brothers would have a place to celebrate the liturgy. The abbot and monks agreed. Thereafter, in gratitude, once each year Francis sent the abbot some fish. The monks in their turn sent him oil for the lamp which burned before the altar.

In 1211 Clare came to join Francis and the brothers. When she declared her intent to follow Francis' way of life, he took her to the Benedictine women's monastery of St. Paul near Assisi. There she was safe, because the peace of the monastery was confirmed by papal decree. She was safe there while she and Francis sought to figure out her future.¹

These stories illustrate certain aspects of hospitality. For one thing, it takes courage and detachment. The abbot of Subasio and the monk Cardinal John Colonna welcomed Francis, even though he championed a new form of life very different from their own. They saw in him the working of the Holy Spirit, and so they didn't try to protect their turf. In welcoming Francis and Clare, the Benedictines of Assisi welcomed Christ acting in the least of his brothers and sisters. Francis and Clare were strangers not in their place of origin (they came from known, local families), but in their ideas--and the monks were open enough and daring enough to welcome them and even help them put their strange, but evangelical ideas into practice. What the Benedictines of Subasio and San Pietro did for Francis and Clare was as evangelical as Francis' vision of following the poor Christ. To see why, we should begin with the bible.

Old Testament

In the OT the word for someone who lived away from his place of origin was ger. Moses says he named his son Ger-shom because "I have been an alien in a foreign land" (Exod 2.22). This word was translated into Greek as paroikos.

Generally speaking, hospitality was highly prized in the Ancient Mediterranean. The Odyssey connects strangers and divinity: "Rudeness to a stranger is not decency, poor though he may be, poorer than you. All wanderers and beggars come from Zeus. What we can give is slight but the

recompense great." In Israel the commandment to be hospitable to the stranger was rooted not only in Near Eastern customs, but in the memory of Israel's years as aliens who lived in Egypt. "You shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt" (Lev 19.34). "You shall love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Deut 10.19). "God loves the stranger" (Deut 10.17-18) and provides for him. Therefore, the Israelites were not to make strangers work on the Sabbath (Exod 23.12; Deut 5.12-15), and when gleaning fields they were to leave something behind for aliens (Deut 24.19-22; cf. story of Ruth).

Israel always had a memory of being like Abraham, a sojourner on the way to the promised land. Later Israelites identified with the generation of the Exodus. Their wandering in the desert was a time of precariousness and trial, but also a time of grace. God took care of them in the wilderness (Deut 32.10). Nevertheless, during those 40 years and again during the exile, Israel longed for home. They were of the household of God, God's people. In the land that God promised them they put down roots. The land was gift and task. It was God's, but given for the use of all (Lev 25.23-24). Greed for land, rooted perhaps in a sense of insecurity, led inevitably to loss of land, first for those dispossessed, then for the dispossessor. When Israel was settled on the land, then she could welcome the stranger and the traveler (Lev 25).

Abraham was a model of hospitality. He and Sarah welcomed three strangers, and found themselves entertaining angels who promised them a son. The hospitality of Abram became the subject of an iconographic tradition: Rub'ev's trinity is a familiar example. There are many other examples of hospitality in the Old Testament: Lot's reception of two of Abraham's three guests, whom he met at the city gate (Gen 19); Elijah and the widow of Zarephath (reversal, whereby he gives her flour and oil and she baked him a oil cake); Elisha, who prayed that the Shunamite woman who supplied him with a guest room might have a son and later restored the boy to life.

New Testament

Jesus recapitulated Israel's story. He was born away from home in an inhospitable place. As a small child he went into exile in Egypt. In his ministry he traveled about with no fixed place to lay his head (Lk 9.58; Mt 8.20). He depended on hospitality: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (Mt. 25.35). He was received hospitably by Simon's mother-in-law, by Levi, a Pharisee, and by Zacchaeus. To these who welcomed him he brought physical or moral healing. In Luke 10.1-12, the disciples whom Jesus sends out are like Jesus in depending on hospitality. They made themselves vulnerable, like lambs among wolves. To those who received them hospitably, the disciples said: the Kingdom of God has come near to you. The Emmaus story portrays this role reversal, where strangers and guests exchange places.

Moreover, Jesus taught: "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me" (Mt 10.40; John 13.20).

This lesson was not lost on the early church. There are frequent exhortations to hospitality in the New Testament outside the gospel. In Rev 3.20, Jesus says: "Listen, I am standing at the door and knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me." Heb 13.2: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some

have entertained angels without knowing it." 1 Pet 4.8-10: "Above all maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaining. Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift you have received."

In the missionary work of the early church, families and church communities provided a home (oikos) for traveling missionaries who came to them as strangers (paroikoi).

Christians both locally and universally thought of themselves as God's household (Eph 2.19; 1 Tm 3.15; 3.4-5; Heb 3.6; 1 Pet 2.5; 4.17). However, 1 Peter 2.11 reminded them that they were "aliens and strangers" in this world. Where before they felt a feeling of alienation in this world, Christians have found a new home not fully of this world. The consequence is threefold: (1) They now belong to God's household; they form a single body with Christ; (2) they are even less at home in the world which is estranged from God; (3) as recipients of Christ's hospitality, they are to be alert to welcome him in the stranger and wanderer who comes along.

In God's hospitality, as in human hospitality, meals are extremely important. The central act of the Christian household of God is the eucharist. Monika Hellwig says that the Eucharist is "the celebration of the hospitality of God shared by guests who commit themselves to become fellow hosts with God."

In his commentary on the Gospel of Luke entitled *The Hospitality of God*, Brendan Byrne shows that hospitality is a leitmotif in the gospel, which comes to the fore in the infancy stories, at Nazareth, the house of Simon, the story of the Good Samaritan, Martha and Mary, the Prodigal Son, the meeting with Zacchaeus, the institution of the Eucharist and Emmaus. Take as an example the story of Simon. It occurs at 7:36-50, after the sermon on the plain, the healing of the son of the widow of Nain, and the inquiry from John the Baptist's disciples. Jesus has been invited to dine at the house of Simon, a leading Pharisee. Jesus arrives, but he is not given the marks of respect which a hospitable reception would include: he is not greeted with a kiss, his feet are not washed, he is not anointed. Instead an unknown woman with a bad reputation comes in uninvited and supplies in a striking way what Simon had failed to offer. Simon is appalled. He thinks: "If this man were a prophet, he would know who this is and what sort of woman is touching him" (7:39). In fact, Jesus is a prophet and he knows what is going on in Simon's heart. Jesus draws Simon out with a story about a money lender who canceled debts of 50 and 500 silver pieces, asking Simon which of the debtors would love the moneylender more. Then, Jesus goes through the points of hospitality Simon omitted and the woman extravagantly supplied: "I came into your house and you offered me no water for my feet, yet she has bathed my feet with her tears and wiped them dry with her hair. You gave me no kiss, yet ever since I arrived, she has not ceased kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, yet she has anointed my feet with perfume." A likely translation of the conclusion is: "For this reason, I tell you, her sins, many though they are, must have been forgiven her, seeing that she has shown so much love. Whereas, the one to whom little is forgiven loves little" (v. 47).

Byrne draws out the meaning of this story as follows. Jesus, the divine visitor to the world, comes as a guest to Simon's house, but receives little hospitality from the one who should have provided

it. A sinner enters; Simon wouldn't want her there, but she sensed that a deeper sort of welcome or acceptance awaited her. She comes and gives hospitality to Jesus. In return she receives an outflow of the hospitality of God as Jesus declares her forgiven and at home in the community. The guests ask: "Who is this who even forgives sins?" Finally, Jesus tells her "Your faith has saved you; go in peace" (v. 50). Forgiveness is the beginning; human transformation is the goal. Simon, who didn't think he needed to receive forgiveness, remains aloof and unmoved by Jesus. This story of Jesus' hospitality is immediately followed by Luke's statement that on his missionary journey Jesus was accompanied by Mary Magdalene and some other women who provided support for him. They, too, exemplified the welcome Jesus offered, and the spirit of hospitality which that welcome evoked in those whom Jesus received.

Fathers of the Church

When Christians began to have organized communities with their own buildings, hospitality became a community practice. Three dimensions of hospitality were transferred from the house to the church center: (1) expressing respect and recognition for those from different places, social positions and backgrounds; (2) meeting the physical needs of the guest, whether stranger, traveling Christian, or local poor person; (3) hosting and building up the local assembly.

In inculcating hospitality, the Fathers of the Church used biblical models: Abraham; Lot; Rahab, who received Joshua's scouts; Akhimelek who received David and his companions at the peril of his life; and the widow of Sarepta and the Shunamite who received Elijah and Elisha respectively. Here, we can look what lessons they drew from the story of Abraham regarding the duty, motives and methods of Christian hospitality.²

Duty of hospitality. In the letter he wrote to the Corinthians about the year 100, Clement of Rome mentions the faith and hospitality of Abraham and Rahab, and the hospitality and piety of Lot which brought divine gifts of to each of them. Clement is led to say this because he says that "anyone who has stayed among you [Corinthians], has proclaimed your generosity in the practice of hospitality." However, because of the discord in the Corinthian community, their hospitality has declined (4-5, 9-12). Clement of Alexandria, writing to aristocrats who were unaccustomed to performing manual work or services, cites the examples of Abraham and Sarah to show that performing physical services to guests is required of all who live according to the Logos.

Motives. The early Christian writers give three motives for Christian hospitality: Christological, humane, and eschatological.

The dominant motive derived from the story of the Abraham is that those who exercise hospitality receive God or angels (cf. Heb 13.2). Origen says that Phoebe (Rom 16.2), who, Paul said, protected many, was exercising hospitality like that of Abraham and Lot, who received angels. St. Ambrose often reminded his readers of the duty of hospitality and the fact that in receiving strangers one received Christ. He said hospitality was no middling virtue and that it was the public form of "humanitas." John Chrysostom emphasized (against some earlier Christian interpretations) that Abraham did not know the identity of the strangers he received, and he didn't ask. He was ready to receive whoever came.

As a secondary motive for hospitality, the early church writers noted the benefits that accrued to Old Testament figures who offered hospitality to strangers. They also pointed out that hospitality was a societal need, something human beings owe to each other. We are all guests and strangers here below and we should be hospitable to our fellow guests and strangers.

The Christian writers also pointed out that those who are inhospitable to strangers here jeopardize their hopes for receiving hospitality hereafter (cf. Mt 25)

The manner and methods of Christian hospitality. Theodoret of Cyr tells of a monk named Abraham, who always had a bed ready for guests, who served them excellent food, and waited on them rather than eating with them. Many other monks, too, are said to have modeled their hospitality on that of Abraham. The Fathers pinpoint five characteristics of Christian hospitality:

- (i) Eagerness. Specifically, the early Christians were urged to imitate the zeal of Abraham, who though an aged and busy man, was in readiness at the door of his tent, ran to meet the stranger, and told Sarah and the servants to hurry to prepare for the guests when they appeared. One should be ready to receive guests at any time; in fact, one should go find them and invite them to one's house.
- (ii) Put guests before yourself. Travelers have great need of solicitude, so one should put their needs before one's own. Abraham was aged and busy, but he put the needs of the strangers before his own.
- (iii) Hospitality involves not just material benefits, but courtesy in the widest sense. What Abraham offered most of all was not a sumptuous meal, but courtesy, humility, kindness, respect, concern.
- (iv) Hospitality is to be offered to all, slave or poor. Abraham was equally courteous to all three, though he probably thought two of them were servants to the other one. Luke 14, which says that one should not invite to dinner just those who will invite you back, had a big influence on early Christian teaching on hospitality. Christian authors like Lactantius and John Chrysostom insisted that Christian hospitality should be extended not just to illustrious or suitable people, but to everyone. To entertain only the illustrious is vainglory or greed or both. St. Jerome wrote to Nepotian: "Let poor men and strangers be acquainted with your modest table, and with them Christ shall be your guest."
- (v) Hospitality is a personal duty. Chrysostom points out that Abraham didn't leave the tasks of hospitality to his servants; he performed them personally. To be hospitable it isn't enough just to give money to an institution; one must be personally involved in serving the stranger, especially the poor. Abraham washed the feet of the strangers himself, Jerome told Pammachius.

Rule of St. Benedict

With freedom and official recognition from the Empire, the church was able to begin institutional development of hospitality: hostels for strangers and pilgrims, hospitals for the sick, orphanages, and so forth. These were often associated with monasteries. Julian (the Apostate) wrote in the middle of the fourth century that the Christians' "benevolence to strangers" was one reason the

Christian church flourished. He wrote that the Christians "support not only their own poor but ours as well."

From the fourth century, monasteries were connected with providing hospitality for strangers, sick, poor, and pilgrims. The Rule of Benedict 3 reflects the tradition of hospitality which later monasticism inherited from the desert monks of the fourth century. For Benedict's Rule, hospitality is a primary responsibility of the monastery. Benedict expected that monks might travel: RB 67 provides rituals for departing and returning monks, and visiting monks were clearly a part of life at his monastery. In fact, Benedict put no limits on how long visiting monks could stay, provided they were satisfied with life there (RB61). Benedict seems to have welcomed the visiting monk into activities of the community.

In his discussion of hospitality, Benedict weaves together material from four different chapters of the Rule of the Master, but Benedict's attitude toward guests is very different from that of the Master. Benedict reflects the high value earlier Christians and monks put on hospitality, though he is also concerned with preserving the peace of the community.

The heart of Benedict's thinking on hospitality is contained on RB 53: "On Receiving Guests" (de suscipiendis hospitibus). The use of the word "receive" is a hint of the centrality of the theme. Benedict uses "receive" almost exclusively of receiving the profession of a new monk and of the abbot receiving his office. Forms of the verb "received" appear seven times in this chapter. In the first fifteen verses of the chapter Benedict repeats three times the triad: Christ, receive and show, and seven times he reiterates the word all:

All guests - received - as Christ - show proper respect to all.

Guests - adore Christ in them - for it is he who is received - show every sort of kindness.

Poor & pilgrims - Christ - especially received in them - show greatest care.

- v. 1: All guests are to be received as Christ. The Master only welcomed monks and clerics, and even they were to be regarded with suspicion. The reference "all guests who arrive" (supervenientes) suggests that travelers may be expected to arrive unexpectedly (cf. RB 42.10, where the same verb is used). The word for guests (hospites) is that used in Mt 25.35 for "strangers." In quoting Mt. 25, Benedict changes the word "you welcomed" (collegistis) to "you received" (suscepistis).
- v. 2. Proper respect: whether Benedict implies different levels of respect for different sorts of people is not clear. Benedict said "Honor all persons" (4.8), and he shows concern for the poor in RB 31 and 66. Nevertheless, he may not have considered it feasible or desirable to treat all guests the same. The Plan of St. Gall (ca. 800) has separate guest facilities for nobles and peasants. Benedict says "especially those of the household of the faith" (domesticis fidei). He may mean fellow monks, or orthodox (not Arian) believers, or monks specifically. The phrase comes from Gal 6.10, and was applied to monks by Jerome (Ep 130.7,14) and Cassian (Inst 4.5). "Pilgrim" (peregrinus) could mean any foreigner, but in Christian parlance it means someone on the way to a shrine.

- v. 3. Here Benedict refers to Gen 18, the Abraham Story. Benedict uses the retelling of the story in the travelogue called *The History of the Monks in Egypt*, 7, whence also Benedict derived much of his ritual for guests by way of the Rule of the Master. Here, as in Gen 18 and in the *History of the Monks of Egypt*, the key words are hurry to meet (*occurrere*) and reverence (*adorare*). The marks of love probably have to do with facial expression and welcoming manner.
- v. 4. "First" = primacy of the spiritual in dealing with guests as in all else. The stranger is received graciously through an open door, but there are ritual and spiritual safeguards; the guest is coming to a monastery.
- v. 5. Perhaps prayer is functioning as a test of orthodoxy, as it did in RM.
- v. 6. The guest is to be received with humility (and in v. 8 with "*humanitas*"). The humility is required by the divine presence in the guest.
- v. 7. The gesture occurs in *The History of the Monks in Egypt*, 7. This verse echoes the wording of both v. 1 and v. 15.
- v. 8. The guest is now led deeper into the life of the community: to church and oratory. There was evidently reading before the meal in the guest house.
- v. 9. This suggests that the reading was from the Bible. "*Humanitas*" may mean all that is truly human, or a meal.
- v. 10. The monastic tradition was that hospitality overrode fasting and other asceticisms. Evidently the guests ate in a separate place. The superior (sometimes here called "*prior*" and other times "*abbas*") eats with the guest.
- v. 12-13. The Abbot washes hands; the whole community washes feet. St. Martin of Tours washed the feet of guests in the evening.
- v. 14: Another use of "*suscipere*." The "*mercy*" here is the guest. As Christ has received them, the monks receive the guests.
- v. 15. This is the first specific mention in this chapter of the poor. They were the ones most in need of hospitality. "*Fear*" here is the Latin word "*terror*" which Benedict only uses elsewhere at 2.24. This verse echoes v. 1 (=an inclusion), emphasizing the duty of receiving everyone, especially the poor, as Christ.

The rest of the chapter is more pragmatic, even restrictive. v. 16-24. Guests are never in short supply and they can come at any time, but the monks need to try to minimize the disturbance to the community. People are appointed to cook for them and take care of guest quarters. Monks should not converse (*colloqui*) with guests, but they should ask a blessing of them!

In this chapter there is tension between anchoritic informality and cenobitic order. There is a deeper polarity between monastic otherness and welcoming those from the world from which the monks have distanced themselves. By leaving secular society, the monk sets up an alternative if overlapping world which other people wish to share in. At some point too much sharing will destroy the very otherness people admire. More paradoxically still, the cloister is the avenue to the world. In a medieval monastery there was the outer cloister, surrounding the courtyard, guest facilities and all that; the inner cloister marked off the monks own buildings; and the innermost cloister of the cloister walk with its garden. Put a fountain in the middle of that cloister and have the water flow out in the four directions of the compass and the cloister becomes an Eden, but an Eden which flows/opens into the whole world. As Merton and other monks have found, the more

a monastic demolishes his /her false self in the school of the cloister, the more a monastic finds his/herself one with all humanity. That oneness the monastic shares with Christ, who was open to all those around him, but especially to the marginalized. The follower of Benedict is to live in reverence--in fear and humility--for the Holy God who is everywhere. The Holy God is encountered in a special way in the poor and the needy, and so Benedict's monk is to adore the Christ present in whoever comes: faith-inspired reverence for the presence of God in the guest, humility before that God. Kardong points out another connected idea in RB regarding guests. The monastery is God's house; it is administered by the monks (53.22). Again, in the same chapter on guests: The monks sing this verse after washing the feet of the guests: "We have received, O God, your mercy in the midst of your temple" (Ps 48.10). In other words, monks, too, are guests in God's household, sharing God's merciful hospitality which they have received. (Eph 2.12-13).

Middle Ages

In the Middle Ages, three institutions were expected to provide hospitality: monasteries, hospitals, and great ecclesial and lay households. There were often two limitations to this institutionalization. There was a tendency for those who ran them to be more separated by class from their poorer guests and to have less personal contact with them. Institutionalized care tended to provide less human connection to the needy. The other drawback was that the hospitality provided tended to reflect existing social boundaries, rather than to cut across them. There was a different treatment for rich and poor, healthy and sick.

In the centuries immediately after Benedict, the hospitality afforded by monasteries was comprehensive: it included lodging for travelers, accommodations and treatment for sick people, charitable services for the poor. There were few urban centers, and monasteries were the most stable and well-endowed institutions in the countryside. So they were looked upon to provide many social services. Gradually, the medical services of the monasteries were superseded by other providers; by the thirteenth century there were church laws forbidding clerics to practice medicine. The provision of charitable services and lodging remained monastic ministries throughout the Middle Ages, but gradually municipalities and their citizens sponsored not only hospitals but also other charitable services.

In the Middle Ages monks had many reasons for traveling. Even the earliest Cistercian abbots traveled each year to the general chapter at Citeaux and to their daughter houses for visitations. Moreover, since they aimed not to employ lay people, Cistercians also traveled on business. The early Cistercian statutes lay down guidelines for reception of guests. They did not provide the same openness for monks not of their order. They also were less receptive to lay visitors than were the monks of the Cluniac observance.

Up until the emergence of religious orders like the Cistercians in the twelfth century, monasteries for the most part welcomed other monks all in the same way. The establishment of "prayer confraternities" between monasteries seems to have resulted in closer ties between some monasteries. A letter from a monastery regarding the renewal of a "confraternity" between a German monastery, Cluny and Hirsau, speaks of "your brother who was recently a guest among us." The "confraternity" between Cluny and St. Blasien provided that wherever brothers from St.

Blasien came to a Cluniac church they were to be received in the choir, chapter, refectory, and vice versa. There seems to have been a more open reception of monks from monasteries of the same federation or order or monks from those with which there was a "confraternity." However, the statutes of Cluny decree that in the provision of hospitality care must be take especially of poor monks and other religious, and especially of mendicants.

By the later Middle Ages, vagrancy ("masterless men") became a social problem and a source of fear, which helped to make people suspicious of strangers. By the later Middle Ages, hospitality (good neighborliness and entertainment) traveled a different trajectory from care for the poor and nondescript strangers. This is the basis for the modern understanding of hospitality that is narrower, safer, and more intimate than that of the ancient world and the early Church.

Social Theory

Hospitality is the invitation to someone else to enter one's home. Home is a place of physical and psychological anchorage. It is a place with historic meanings, which provides shelter, identity, a social structure. If indiscriminate, hospitality is a recognition of the humanity one shares with whoever is not at home and needs a welcome.

Hospitality exists on the boundary of the public and the private; it mediates between the two. Hospitality, like local communities and organizations, mediates between the individual and large groupings like the nation. By exercising hospitality, the hosts open up their homes somewhat to the public or the common, whereas the stranger, vulnerable and alone in the public world, then finds shelter in the private sphere of a home. Hospitality does not try to remake the guest in the image of the host, but provides space for strangers to be themselves. In that way hospitality extends community. The stranger is allowed to be himself, and that as much as his words tells a new story, which enlarges the world of the host.

Home is familial and familiar. Walls, yard and fences shut out what is different or unknown. Hospitality creates openings in the boundaries which define the home. To admit the stranger is a risk. Home has the ability to "muster solidarity and demand sacrifice" (Mary Douglas); it also has the capacity to vilify what is alien and different, to see the neighbor as competitor and the stranger as an invader. Xenophobia and xenophilia are basic options.

The Theory and Practice of Christian Hospitality Today

Among those dedicated to works of Christian hospitality today, recognition and respect are offered as well as food, shelter and medicine. Hospitality recognizes the human dignity of the other and respects it. If extended to all, Christians hospitality is subversive of cultural defined hierarchies, because it welcomes people on the basis of a humanity common to all. People who are not valued by society tend to be invisible to society. Hospitality recognizes their existence, need, and dignity. For a Christian, the humanity we share embraces the image of God and a common vulnerability and need for grace and mercy. But just as Christianity recognizes in the other a fellow human being in need of grace, the Christian also knows that in each stranger Christ is met.

Recognizing dignity is shown not just by kindness, but by inviting involvement and contribution of the guest and by respecting her privacy. The Christian host knows that she receives as much as she gives. The focal point of hospitality is eating together, and perhaps in preparing and cleaning up together. Eating is eminently egalitarian; everyone needs to eat.

When hospitality is extended to every stranger or person in need, there is a tendency for impersonality in the mechanisms of hospitality. There is a tension between the needs for universal concern and the need for personal relations. Another tension is that to exercise hospitality one must have a home and resources and identity that go with it. Too much indiscriminate hospitality can consume these presuppositions of hospitality. This tension runs through the Rule of Benedict which insists on welcoming all guests as Christ, but also warns about letting them disrupt the very home into which they are being welcomed.

There are various sorts of strangers: those about whom we know nothing; those marginalized in our own milieu; those who are mentally ill. Lot met the two strangers at the city gate. We need some sort of threshold, to know enough about the stranger so that we can decide if we can reasonably hope to benefit that person with our hospitality. Because households are now small and nuclear, homes are less able to serve as places of hospitality. Soup kitchens, houses of hospitality, and monasteries can successfully serve many whom most people couldn't host in their homes.

Hospitality is, of course, not just for strangers. Welcoming Christ in the other extends not just to those who are from far away. Incorporation of a new child into a family is an exercise of hospitality, as is welcoming a new child to a school room or a new member to a monastery. The same qualities of heart are required in each case.

Characteristics of hospitable places such as houses of hospitality, retreat centers, monasteries, or parish with a major apostolate of hospitality include the following: comfortable and cared for buildings; public areas which have nooks for private conversation; a willingness to provide relationships and individual attention for those in need; time, grace, generosity; a safe and stable environment. In such places, life is celebrated, but pain, failure and disappointment are recognized and embraced. Guests are invited to eat and celebrate. They are given space, privacy and freedom. The hosts themselves have ways to be nurtured and refreshed so they can carry on their work of hospitality.