

INTRODUCTION

“All guests are to be welcomed as Christ.”

THE RULE OF SAINT BENEDICT

The word hospitality traces its roots to the Latin *hospes* and *hospit*, meaning host and guest, respectively. If you look up the Oxford Dictionary definition, this is what you’ll find: “the friendly and generous reception and entertainment of guests, visitors, or strangers.”

In my latest visit to my native Hungary, I experienced true hospitality. My youngest sibling, my sister, and her husband offered their own room, as well as her twin boys’ room, in order to accommodate my daughter, husband, and me. They slept—the four teens and two adults—in the girls’ room, augmented by airbeds, for the better part of the week. No fuss, no hesitation to offer us shelter—in spite of the inconvenience and the inevitable backache that sleeping on airbeds entails. Yes, we are family—

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family who live on different continents and thus see each other rarely. Putting our comfort above their own is a sign of their selfless hospitality.

So what makes this kind of hospitality possible? How can it be translated to a parish setting?

In the following pages we'll explore what it takes to be able to receive people both as an individual and as a community, what concrete areas need our attention in a parish setting, and how hospitality can become a way of being in the world. But before we address these issues, we need to pose the fundamental question: Does hospitality matter, and if so, why?

Hospitality in ancient times was a matter of survival. There was no infrastructure of stores, inns, and facilities that could supply the needs of those who were on the move. If travelers found themselves in dire straits, they had to rely on the kindness of strangers in order to survive. The Pentateuch, the writings of the prophets, as well as the historical books are full of admonitions to treat well the foreigner, the widow, and the stranger because the Israelites themselves experienced those conditions. You may recall the story of the widow from Zarephath in 1 Kings, chapter 17, who at Elijah's urging baked bread for the prophet, using the very last of her flour supplies. Her faithfulness and hospitality were rewarded with her food supplies never running low again.

Hospitality or welcoming a stranger was also fraught with danger, so, frequently, a letter of introduction smoothed the way. Paul's letters, with their often long introductory verses are examples of how the introduction was meant to lend credibility to the bearer of the letter in the sight of the community being addressed.

We could make the case that hospitality is still a matter of survival, albeit on a deeper than physiological level. In a recent presentation, Jane Angha defined hospitality in the context of evangelization: hospitality sets the stage for an encounter with

Christ (“Hospitality—A Blueprint,” presentation given at Saint Meinrad Seminary and School of Theology for the Young Adult Initiative on September 20, 2019). This definition brings to our attention and gives the answer to the fundamental question asked above: hospitality matters because it is necessary for fulfilling the evangelization mission of the Church. In other words, without hospitality, there is no Church.

May this booklet affirm what is already happening, pose some challenges for expanding our common understanding of hospitality, and be a source of encouragement to seek and find the face of Christ in all whom we encounter.

CHAPTER ONE

Hospitality to Self

*You knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.*

PSALM 139:13B-14A

The title for this chapter might sound strange: what could I possibly mean by hospitality to self?

It is my attempt to draw attention to a very important concept in Christian theology that has a profound bearing on our topic of hospitality: *imago dei*, that is, our understanding that human beings are made in the image and likeness of God—that each and every one of us reflects in some measure, however imperfectly and partially, the triune God. This lies at the heart of St. Benedict's admonition about treating all guests as Christ.

Created in the image and likeness of God, we have innate dignity, are imbued with creativity, and are entrusted with free will. Our dignity does not depend on any human categories by which we might differentiate among people or by which we might measure success. We cannot earn or lose this dignity; not even through a life of holiness or sin. Our dignity has nothing to do with us and everything to do with God, whose love called us into being and sustains us in living. When we start from this understanding of the human person, hospitality cannot but flourish.

A poignant definition of hospitality, offered by a newly ordained priest friend who was addressing a group of young people, states: *hospitality is helping others see themselves as the gift they are.* His definition reminds me of a song from my Vacation Bible School days: “Every Person is a Gift of God.” The call-and-response format allowed three-year-olds to sing with gusto that every person is a gift of God, a very special gift, unique in all the world, a wonderful, marvelous gift. Furthermore, the song taught that every person has a gift to share with those they meet. Indeed!

Being a gift and having a gift to share are two sides of the same coin. Being a gift, God’s gift to the world, implies that our individual lives can and should create an imprint on the life of the communities to which we are connected. What better way to fulfill this mandate of human life than by sharing our very being—through our specific gifts, skills, and talents—with those around us? For whatever we do, whenever the opportunity allows it, we cannot help but show up with our whole self. My baking skills cannot manifest apart from my physical body: I have to actually engage in the process of baking to showcase my skills. That process sometimes includes prayer, singing or sighing (depending on how things are shaping up), and reflecting on life. The whole of me is involved.

Most of us are familiar with the saying “you cannot give what you do not have.” In other words, in order to be authentic—in living and in loving—we need to have experienced and cultivated living and loving. We need to know, beyond the cognitive dimension, in our bones and sinews, in our hearts of what we are talking. I propose that to be able to offer hospitality to others, we have to be hospitable toward our very self.

HOSPITALITY TO SELF...

Recognizes our limitations without judging, without comparing, without excuse.

Created in the image and likeness of God we might be, but we are also finite, bound by the particularities of space and time. We live in and are shaped by a given historical and cultural context. Our life span is ridiculously short. We exercise our free will often to our own detriment. Our creativity surges ahead of reflection on the merits and pitfalls of creativity's fruits, leaving us with unprecedented opportunities to self-destruct. Yet each human being is unique. Not perfect, for perfection belongs only to God, but oh, so beautiful! There has never been and never will be another you or another me. We are one tiny speck of glass in the divine mosaic composed of infinite pieces, each irreplaceable, each contributing to the whole, each loved into being. We are beloved. Sit with that thought for a while. Let it permeate every cell in your body, let it fire every nerve ending, and let it resonate in your heart and soul: you are beloved!

Is steeped in acceptance, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

An image that has been incredibly helpful in my ministry is that of an iceberg. We know that ninety percent of an iceberg is below the waterline, invisible to the observer cruising on the surface. This image helps in two ways. First, as a pastoral minister, I have to acknowledge that whatever I might observe or might understand of a given situation is probably closer to ten percent than ninety percent and that the overwhelming majority of "stuff" contributing to particular relationships and circumstances is beyond my reach; thus, I have to tread lightly in my assessment, in my conversations.

On the other hand, the ninety percent is exactly the part that can get us into trouble. (Just think of the Titanic.) Exploring the parts under the waterline is essential for becoming better ministers

who can serve with integrity, professionalism, and authenticity. Where exploration has to start is under our own waterline. Getting in touch with the myriad ways cultural norms, family of origin, social expectations, and other factors shape who we are will enable us to see ourselves more clearly. However, knowing is only the beginning. We need to come to terms with, that is, accept, the person we are in order to make changes for the better.

When we come face to face with the visage in the mirror, forgiveness and reconciliation will be the vehicles by which we can grow closer to a more Christlike image. Forgiving our own weaknesses and failures and asking for forgiveness require courage, openness, and vulnerability. Not a psychological space we like to inhabit but a necessary condition for becoming a person of reconciliation.

Follows the example set by Jesus.

Jesus was tireless in his ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing. He traversed the countryside on foot and by boat, taught in synagogues and on hillsides, and proclaimed the reign of God to scribes and the unlettered alike. He also took time to attend a family celebration (wedding feast at Cana), to visit with friends, (Lazarus, Martha, and Mary) and to draw away from company to pray in solitude. He ate with all kinds of people and was ministered to by others. He wasn't afraid to show how he felt: frustrated by the disciples' lack of understanding, weeping for a friend, chiding a host for forgetting hospitality, angrily clearing out the temple area, or crying out in pain.

The example of Jesus, the fully human child of Mary and fully divine Son of God, the Father, helps us to grasp hospitality to self.

Allowing ourselves to name and claim our own emotions is an essential aspect of hospitality to self. Being mindful of our physical, spiritual, and emotional needs is hospitality to self.

Finding healthy ways of meeting those needs is hospitality to self.