

HOSPITALITY WITHIN THE MONASTERY:  
A CALL TO OPENNESS OF MIND AND HEART  
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INTRODUCTION:

The theme of this Symposium: **LET ALL BE WELCOMED AS CHRIST ...**, is from **RB 53:1**, the chapter of the Rule which speaks of welcoming guests and strangers. Welcoming the stranger has a long history before the time of St. Benedict.

**THE ANCIENT PRACTICE OF GIVING HOSPITALITY  
TO PILGRIMS AND TRAVELLERS**

**Hospitality in Ancient Times.** Hospitality is an ancient practice. The Greeks had the concept of *Xenia* (relationship between strangers) and a code of hospitality, which was unwritten but was observed as a cultural law. This code achieved the purpose of maintaining peace among the different regions of the country, and it worked because the Greeks believed that at any moment a God or Goddess could come to one's house in disguise and if you turn Him or Her away, would have dire consequences. On the other hand, if that God or Goddess receives the best hospitality regardless of the appearance He or She presents, a reward might be forthcoming. A similar code of hospitality was present also in the Middle East.

In this code, it is the duty of the host to open his house to the one seeking shelter, whether invited or uninvited, and it is the host's duty to provide the traveler with the basic necessities: food, a bath and clothes. On the other hand, it is the duty of the guest to make no unreasonable demands, to be polite and to ask no questions of the host until the basic requirements of hospitality has been done.

This cultural law was adhered to very strictly, especially because being refused hospitality can mean death for a traveler who has no means of meeting his needs in the desert or in unfamiliar places. Travelers in the desert were at the mercy of the elements and since there were no inns and lodging houses, people were literally dependent on the kindness of others. And extending hospitality to others in turn is the only way to pay this kindness back. This story of a Bedouin (desert nomad) who welcomed two men into his tent highlights how the code of hospitality is strictly adhered to:

Two travellers asked for hospitality in a Bedouin's tent. The Bedouin welcomed them warmly and slaughtered a camel for his guests to eat. The travellers were amazed that the Bedouin would do this for them. On the second day, the Bedouin slaughtered another camel and gave the meat for the travellers to eat, saying, "I cannot serve you old meat!" When it was time to leave, the travellers could not find the Bedouin to

take their leave, so they left some money with the Bedouin's wife to pay for the camels and went on their way. When they had been travelling four days, they became aware that someone was following them. They were shocked to see the Bedouin in hot pursuit of them. When the Bedouin caught up with them, he threw the money on the ground before them and told them what an insult their gesture was. He told them that he is a Bedouin and that his hospitality was a way to pay back the hospitality accorded to him in his travels in the desert.<sup>1</sup>

**The Bible** also has similar stories of hospitality. The story of Abraham and Sarah is typical. In Gen. 18:1-8<sup>2</sup>, Abraham saw three men near his tent. He went to offer hospitality to them, bowing low before them. Then he ordered his servant to bring water for them to wash their feet and had a meal prepared for them. Abraham's gesture of bowing and the elaborate preparations for a meal may seem exaggerated to us, but this was typical of Oriental hospitality. It symbolized acceptance of the strangers. And when they left, Abraham travelled with them a short distance to set them on their way (Gen. 18:16).<sup>3</sup>

There are several elements in Abraham's hospitality that is worth taking note of:

- Inviting strangers into one's house
- Washing the feet
- Sharing a meal
- Conversation

**These elements of Abraham's hospitality** symbolize acceptance to the family. When these have been done, the host and the guest are related and cannot do harm to each other. Let me cite here a charming story that illustrates this point:

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<sup>1</sup> <http://paulocoelhoblog.com/2014/04/21/the-code-of-hospitality/>

<sup>2</sup> Gen. 18:1-8: 1 The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. 2 Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground. 3 He said, "If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by. 4 Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. 5 Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way-- now that you have come to your servant." "Very well," they answered, "do as you say." 6 So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. "Quick," he said, "get three seahs of fine flour and knead it and bake some bread." 7 Then he ran to the herd and selected a choice, tender calf and gave it to a servant, who hurried to prepare it. 8 He then brought some curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared, and set these before them. While they ate, he stood near them under a tree.

<sup>3</sup> Duke, Rodney K. *Hospitality* in <http://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionary/>

A native Moor who went to hunt the lion, having gone far into the forest, happened to meet with two lion's cubs that came to caress him. The hunter stopped with the little animals, and waiting for the coming of the father or mother, took out his breakfast and gave them a part. The lioness arrived unseen by the huntsman, so that he had not time, or perhaps had not had the courage to take his gun. After having for some time looked at the man that was thus feasting her young, the lioness went away, and soon afterward returned, bearing with her a sheep, which she laid at the huntsman's feet. The Moor, thus become one of the family, took this occasion of making a good meal, skinned the sheep, made a fire, and then roasted a part, giving the entrails to the young. The lion in his turn came also; and, as if respecting the rights of hospitality, showed no signs whatever of ferocity. Their guest the next day, having finished his provisions, returned, and resolved never more to kill any of those animals, the noble generosity of which he had so fully proven. He stroked and caressed the cubs at taking leave of them, and the mother and father went with him till he was safely out of the forest.

This story illustrates how sharing a meal, which has the symbolic significance of sharing life, changes not only the host but also the guest. The ferocious lion was ferocious no more and the hunter was not a lethal threat to the lion anymore. Here we have a story of transformation through hospitality. This shows a development from the previous story of Abraham and opens the way for the story of Jesus' hospitality, and hopefully, ours.

### **The Christian View of Hospitality.**

In the Old and the New Testaments, the recipients of hospitality were often the **stranger and the poor**.<sup>4</sup> The law in Israel protected the resident alien, (Lev. 19:33-34)<sup>5</sup> but the travelers/strangers/aliens were at the mercy of the hospitality of the people of the land. Therefore, the Israelites are repeatedly enjoined by God to extend hospitality to the stranger and the poor,<sup>6</sup> with God reminding them that they were called to be kind to the stranger because God was hospitable to them – providing them

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<sup>4</sup> The Greek word for hospitality, *philoxenia*, literally means “love of strangers”.

<sup>5</sup> Leviticus 19:33-34:

33 "When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. 34 The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the LORD your God.

<sup>6</sup> Also [Exod 23:9](#) ; [Deut 10:19](#) ; [Isa 58:6-10](#)

with food, water, and protection when they were aliens or sojourners in Egypt and in the desert.<sup>7</sup>

Jesus' hospitality was no different from his Father's:

- he loved the poor and the lost, invited them to come to him,
- he shared a meal with tax collectors and sinners as well as with Pharisees (Mk. 2:15, Lk. 14:1; 15:2; 19:1-10).
- He fed the multitudes (Mk.6:30-44), and he washed his disciples feet (Jn. 13:3-5)

But other than serving as host in those examples, he identified also as guest:

- He had to depend on the kindness and hospitality of others when he was an itinerant preacher (Lk. 9:58; 10:38).
- But more than all this, he himself became an alien, a stranger to his own people: "He came into his own and his own received him not." (Jn. 1:10-14). He did not just bend toward the poor and the stranger, he **became** poor and a stranger (Mt. 25:31-46).
- He experienced rejection and death in the hands of those who did not accord him hospitality.

### **Benedictine Hospitality.**

"Righteous behavior" in the New Testament and among Christians includes hospitality. But how is hospitality to be lived in our world that has changed so much from the time of Abraham and the Patriarchs – even from the early Church? Mobility characterizes our world today, as also war and violence against persons, property and society. The code of hospitality of the Greeks and the nomads in the Middle East just will not work in our present society. Inviting a stranger into one's home and sharing a meal with him/her carries with it many risks in our present time: you could be robbed, even killed by the stranger.

Many years ago, when I was a student here in Rome, I was waiting for my bus home, when someone called me: "Hermana, Hermana!" It was an Indian-looking man in a clerical collar. He said he was a Sri-Lankan priest working in Latin America. He was travelling home, for his father was dying, but his flight was only the next day. Could I give him hospitality for the night? I lived in Sta. Lioba then, and we had no space for a guest. As we were in Piazza Venezia, I thought of the Jesuits at the Ciesa di Gesu. I brought him there, talked to the Father-Minister, making sure I told him that I did not know the man, that for all I know he was not telling me the truth. The Jesuit priest took him in anyway, and I left. I felt so guilty and was so worried. What if he is a thief? What if he does something bad to the Jesuits? It would be my fault! But nothing

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<sup>7</sup> Heb. 11:13, cf. Gen. 23:4

happened, and I was only left with admiration at the hospitality of this Jesuit residence.

So what are we to do? Should fear condition our hospitality?

St. Benedict in chapter 53 of his Rule says that “all guests should be welcomed as Christ.” Then the Rule gives very clear instructions:

- When a guest is announced, let him be met by the superior and all the brothers/sisters
- pray together
- greet each other with the kiss of peace
- Lead them to prayer
- Let the Superior sit with them
- The Word of God is read to them
- Let every kindness be accorded to them
- Let the whole community wash the guests’ feet

**The “Guest”** that St. Benedict mentions are “the poor and the wayfarer” and not so much the rich. In St. Benedict’s time, guests were few, and the few who travelled normally were pilgrims. These days, with the number of guests that come to our doors, what St. Benedict enjoins the community is not practical anymore. But the spirit of the instruction holds. That the guests are to be welcomed as Christ is realistically balanced by St. Benedict’s caution against “deception of the Devil.” While enjoining openness to guests, St. Benedict also seeks to protect the convent/monastery community against such deception.

**The Role of Prayer.** In welcoming the guest, St. Benedict repeatedly mentions prayer and the reading of the Word of God and only when this has been done does he say that “every kindness is shown the guest.” Clearly, **the reception of guest is to be seen as a spiritual exercise**, for in the guest, we meet and adore Christ. And yet St. Benedict, unlike earlier writings, cautions against the “deception of the devil.” Thus, he says, the best gift we can offer our guests is our prayer, and they are to be welcomed in the community’s prayer. We must be able to show to the guests who we truly are: people who give priority of place to prayer.

**The Washing of the Feet.** As we have seen in the story of Abraham and Sarah at Mamre, this practice is ancient. But more importantly, it reminds us of Jesus’ own gesture of washing his disciples’ feet. This is something that servants do for the guests in a household. That Jesus himself did it to his disciples and that St. Benedict now says the monks/sisters should do this to the guests (and to each other) is to be seen as an act of humility. We need to approach the guests with humility, that is for sure, but this gesture also symbolizes opening our doors (and our hearts and minds) to the guests. By this gesture, we have made the guests part of the community.

## Living Hospitality Today

**Creating a Sacred Space through hospitality.** Hospitality has, since antiquity, invited us to be open to the other – strangers, pilgrims, wayfarers and the poor. By inviting them to our convent/monastery and to our prayer, we make the guests companions in the journey to God, for “we share the same destiny and goal.”<sup>8</sup>

But the practice of hospitality that the Gospels and the Rule require of us will not be possible until we have faced and accepted our own poverty, and have accepted, like Christ (Phil. 2:6-8), to be strangers in our world. Only thus can we meet the stranger – outside and inside the community - as equals, and only then can our hospitality be transformative and healing. How many times have I heard Sisters say of another: she is so charming and nice to people in school and to friends, but is so difficult to live with in community. And yet, this process of becoming hospitable, of facing and accepting our own poverty, has to happen first of all in community, as we relate with our monastic Sisters and Brothers, or it will not happen at all.

In our community in Manila, we have not just Filipinos but also Sisters from other countries, both from our congregation and from other communities following the Benedictine Rule. We have Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean, Ugandan, Angolan, Namibian, and an American Sister. There was some resistance at first to taking so many, with some Sisters saying: “they” will soon outnumber us, or just simply that “they” are different – and that “they” behave differently from us. But everything that we have mentioned earlier of the value of hospitality from ancient times, to the Old Testament, to Jesus and St. Benedict – as well as the fact that Filipinos are naturally hospitable, these all brought us to see that there was no way we could refuse, as long as we had something to offer to them. Our guests live side by side with us, sharing our life and prayer. We do not literally wash their feet, but we do have a lot of chances for humility, forgiveness and charity. I would like to believe that our living together has made us better people, better Benedictines.

The Role of the Superior is crucial in this process, for she sets the tone for the rest of the community. A superior who accepts/respects each person and treats everyone with compassion teaches the others in community to do the same. If the superior is afraid of strangers, for example, or is uncaring about the young, the elderly and the environment, chances are that her Sisters will also be afraid and uncaring. Thus it is the Superior’s duty first of all to work on her own conversion, for only she who has dealt with her fears and shortcomings and have arrived at her true self can be truly hospitable.

A hospitable Superior has the capacity to “listen with the ear of (her) heart” to the fears and shortcomings of her Sisters in community and be accepting of whatever turmoil there is inside and outside the community without the compulsion to “fix”

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<sup>8</sup> Burkhard, Marianne, ed. Perspectives on the Rule of St. Benedict. Chapter 53  
<http://www.books.google.com.ph>.

everything. A superior with a hospitable heart can live with the reality that, sometimes or even often, change (in behavior, or of a situation) is not possible. Who of us has not experienced calling a Sister for correction who has been called out by previous Prioresses for the same thing? The Sister will thank the superior for listening, and say that she felt understood ... but will still not change. Yet, despite this, the superior continues to trust and to pray that the Sister who felt understood and listened to and accepted will, on her part, learn to accept, to understand, to listen. For, not only the guests who come to the monastery/convent are considered “companions in the journey to God,” but even more so are our fellow monastics in community as we move together towards our salvation.

### **Conclusion**

Hospitality is not only something that we offer to pilgrims, the poor and guests who come to our convents/monastery. It is what we offer to each other also, it is part of who we are as monastics. It is when we have done our own work on ourselves that we are best able to reach out to those who live with us in community and those who come to our communities. As we open our hearts/minds and communities to others, we begin to change from the inside, just as we also change the others who come in contact with us. Thus, faithful to who we are as monastics, our interaction with others become truly transformative.

That In All Things God May Be Glorified!