

HOSPITALITY INSIDE THE MONASTERY

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First of all, I want to thank S. Judith Ann for her invitation and her confidence in inviting me to take part in this meeting. It is the third time I have come to the Symposium. The other two times I came as a translator and I have fond memories of them.

In my presentation, I am going to share with you a reflection that arises from daily observation of the difficulty that hospitality inside the community supposes and of the suffering involved. It also comes from the observation and joyful experience of many small and large expressions of hospitality, marvels of love, that I have seen among the sisters over the years.

I speak from my personal and communal experience in my monastery and also after sharing with many nuns and monks from other communities, some of them already closed. I also speak from my training in fundamental theology and the fields of humanistic psychology and experiential philosophy, which really help me to understand and to lead my personal and monastic life. They lend me their words to understand and walk my personal and monastic path.

I want to emphasize something that is a basic principle for me: the difficulties we face at the time of accepting each other in the community are not a problem for our vocation; they are not that without which we could be nuns without problem. Neither are they the price we have to pay for living in community. For us, to welcome one another is our vocation, our very vocation. We choose to seek God in community, the same as others focus on the health field, for example, seeking or serving God through those who are ill. They know they are not going to deal with healthy people but with ill people who need treatment. Thus, our vocation means finding God in the relationship itself with the sisters, in the community relationships, just as they are. It is there where we discover ourselves and discover God's mercy for each one. Our vocation is to live the Kingdom of God here on earth, in community, with our community.

A second principle: Hospitality, as said, is not a luxury; it is not something else to add to my being a nun, to add to my agenda, to my time of work or prayer. Nor is it something for some types of sisters with better characters than mine. It is the very possibility of existence of each person and of the community. Hospitality is the mutual acceptance that we offer each other to support ourselves in our unique way of being and, in this way, to create a community. (RB 72) Hospitality towards all is peace in the biblical sense, as we will see later.

And a third principle: we cannot give hospitality beyond the hospitality we are able to receive.

“Disregard for the duty to cultivate and maintain a proper relationship with my neighbor, for whose care and custody I am responsible, ruins my relationship with my own self, with others, with God and with the earth. When all these relationships are neglected, when justice no longer dwells in the land, the Bible tells us that life itself is endangered.” (Pope Francis, LS, 70)¹

And nevertheless, in our daily life, my sister often appears as a stranger, someone much more distant from me than many of the nice, sensible people that pass through the guesthouse. In spite of sleeping a few yards away from her, of having meals right across from her, I feel my sister to be miles away and I am sure that many things in my life would go much better without her. My sister sometimes becomes someone who can take up my space, resources, recognition, possibilities, my tranquility, my precious time. Someone who can give me work or problems. Someone who can let me down, mistreat or hurt me, and because of that, someone I have to protect myself from to avoid being hurt again. The other, my sister, the one I share my life project with, is sometimes experienced by me as a stranger or an enemy.

Why is it so difficult to get along? Why is it easier for me to relate to people from outside the community than to my sisters? Wouldn't it be much better for me to choose my sisters? And, at a different level, how can we be so incoherent with our faith and hold grudges after praying together and taking part in the same Eucharist where Jesus is given to us for love?

There are countless published studies which help us to understand the complexity of human relations and offer practical guidelines to live them better. From those studies, I next highlight some elements that I consider important:

1. Human relationships, like all human reality, are a gift and a chore. And for this chore there are tools that make it easier to understand and manage. Just as knowing the rules of the road helps you reach your destination without accidents or injuries, knowing the tools of communication improves understanding among people and helps you to avoid unnecessary wounds.

2. We are different and each way of being is equally good. There is no personality type that is better than another and everybody can contribute, from their own way of being, to the good performance of a group.

¹ This quotation from Pope Francis focuses on the theme of the earth. Extending the theme, I deal with personal hospitality, but hospitality as I present it includes all creation and all circumstance.

3. It is necessary to know the universe of the other person and also to share our own to be able to understand each other. Relationships require our time and dedication in order to work.

4. Relationships improve by improving the relationship. By that I mean that the solution is always a good relationship. We cannot do without relationships; what we need to improve is their quality. A wounded relationship is healed by a healthy relationship.

5. Relationship is an adventure where I leave my safe and well-known starting point, which is not easy, and I get into a new, wider landscape from which I will emerge different and enriched.

The tale of the eagle and the hen

Let me start with a tale that many of you probably know and which is the title of book by Leonardo Boff where he explains it.² I tell it to you with some slight modifications. James Aggrey, born in Ghana in the XIX century was a man who contributed to the education of his people and was also a forerunner of independence in his country. It was he who told this tale during a meeting of popular leaders. In that meeting they were debating the theme of English colonization. The leaders were divided: some wanted the liberation of Ghana using armed force, others sought a political route to liberation, others accepted the colonization as the state of many countries in Africa, and others were in favor of colonization because they believed it brought them more modernity and progress. When James Aggrey saw that some leaders were beginning to support the English cause, he stood up and began:

“Once upon a time a farmer went out to the fields and found a young bird. What he found was a young eagle. He picked it up and upon arriving home, he left it in the yard with the hens that he had there. Soon the young eagle learned to eat and drink like the hens. The years passed and the eagle was growing, much more than the hens. But nothing changed. She ate like them, she drank like them, she moved like them.

After some years, the farmer received the visit of a biologist friend, who, strolling through the farm, saw that among the hens there was a beautiful eagle.

—This bird you have in the yard is not a hen, it is an eagle! — she exclaimed.

—Yes, I know—said the farmer—it is an eagle. But I have raised it like a hen and now it is not an eagle anymore, it is a hen. Although its wingspan is nearly three yards long, it has become a hen like the others.

² Boff, L. (1996). *El águila y la gallina. Una metáfora de la condición humana*. Madrid: Trotta.

—No— said the biologist— it is and it will always be an eagle. It has got the heart of an eagle. And this heart will make it fly to the heights one day.

—Don't get your hopes up — insisted the farmer — it has become a hen and it will never fly like an eagle.

So they decided to do a test. The biologist caught the eagle, placed it on her arm, as high as she could, and challenging it she said:

—Since you are an eagle and not a hen, since you are made for flying and crossing the skies and not to be all day on earth, spread your wings and fly!

The eagle stood on the biologist's arm for a time, looking around, distracted, looking everywhere. Then, it lowered its head and saw the hens underneath eating the grain, jumped off the arm to the ground and went to join them.

The farmer said to her: I already told you; it has turned into a hen.

—No—insisted the biologist—it is an eagle. And an eagle is always an eagle. I will come back tomorrow and we will try it again.

The next day, the biologist returned. She caught the eagle and carried her to the highest point of the chicken coop. And she told it: —Eagle, since you are an eagle and you are made to fly and cross the skies, open your wings and fly!

The eagle looked around for a while at the landscape she saw before her from the top of the chicken coop, still distractedly, and when she saw the hens below pecking grain, she automatically gave a jump down and joined them.

The farmer smiled, convinced that he was right: —I already told you, she believes she is a hen and has turned into a hen.

But the biologist did not admit defeat: —No—she firmly responded—She is an eagle; she has the heart of an eagle and always will. We have to try it one more time. Tomorrow I will return and I will make her fly.

The next day, the biologist and the farmer got up early. They caught the eagle and took it outside the town, far from the houses, up on a mountain. The sun was rising and painting the summits of the mountains red and gold.

The biologist raised the eagle as high as she could and told it: —Eagle, since you are an eagle, since you are made to fly and cross the skies, open your wings and fly!

The eagle, as in previous times, looked around absent-mindedly, but this time it started to tremble. But it didn't move. Then the biologist held it firmly and pointed it towards the rising sun so that its eyes could get filled with the light and the immensity of the horizon, as mothers do with eaglets. The eagle, little by little, stopped trembling and started to breathe differently. And after a few moments, it started to stretch its enormous wings and to open them, and giving a leap, began to fly upwards, unsteady at first, and then with more confidence, until it could no longer be seen in the infinite sky....”

That's the tale. This tale, as all tales, can be interpreted in different ways, but what it is not is a critique of the hens. It is meant as an example of the possible limits and the possibilities of hospitality in the community.

Hospitality towards all is peace. Benedict's proposal.

The Abbot of Nursia presents the community, the community relationships, as a part of the structure, the means, to get to the Kingdom which is the destination, a destination which becomes the community again, the relationships, now full, liberated in God.³ My work is to travel this path, my *ascesis*, an *ascesis* which in the words of the theologian Zizioulas is nothing more than opening to love.⁴ This path, according to St. Benedict, is carried out inside the monastery (RB 4, 78) and is a process of dis-protection, of dispossession, to rebirth, naked, to our fullest humanity (RB 7). A path made more difficult the more resistance and protection I build throughout my life; and made wider the longer I follow it. (Prologue 48-49)

Saint Benedict, as St. Gregory tells us in his Dialogues, has suffered the lack of hospitality of his brothers. He has suffered in his own flesh the effects of rejection and exclusion. And he gives testimony to the conflicts which arise among his monks from so many different origins. Nevertheless, when he presents the monastic life, he does not present it as a struggle with the brothers of the community. The fight, which exists, is internal. It is a truth that Benedict makes a great effort of organization to make living together easier, but he presents the monastic life, from the prologue to the end, as a search for peace, of moving forward to honor one another,⁵ supporting one another, to have happy days.⁶

³ This idea comes from J.M. Rovira Belloso.

⁴ J. Zizioulas speaks of **ascesis** as love, as the personal process of transcending individualism and exclusivism and opening oneself to communion, to the process of being free and of living the corporal nature as a means of inclusivism. In *Being as Communion. Studies on Personhood and the Church*, N.Y., St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985.

⁵ RB 72

⁶ Prologue, 17.

Benedict invites us repeatedly, together with the psalmist, to seek peace, to run after it. And he associates this peace with life and happiness, to see happy days. And we know that the biblical meaning of peace is the absence of conflicts, but it is more.

Peace, which is how we translate the Hebrew word *Shalom*, certainly refers to the peaceful understanding between persons and peoples (1Re 5,26), it is true, but it also means economic prosperity (Sl 73,3), physical health (Is 57,18), tranquility, descendants and salvation (Is 45,7). *Shalom* can be translated as “peace” but understood as human plenitude or happiness.

Thus, peace, human plenitude or happiness, is the name we give to that wish that beats in the heart of all people. This desire or horizon that carries human beings to go beyond the boundaries that limit them in order to transcend them. Peace is the future, the “not-yet” which is beating inside us waiting to be fulfilled. The wish that never runs out.

Seeking peace means hearing the deepest beat in the human heart, being faithful to our own heart and its desire. Seeking peace is and pursuing it is to believe in our own depths, to listen to our own voices and bring them to life. Pursuing peace means taking ourselves seriously, trusting in our own goodness, and deciding to be one with ourselves.

Furthermore, Isaiah tells us that peace, following its Hebrew root, is the fruit of a type of relationship, a just relationship.⁷

Biblical theology defines what *Shalom* means for Israel as “total harmony within the community and creation, which penetrated by God’s blessing makes possible the free growth, without obstacles, of the person in all its aspects.”⁸

Peace is the fruit of a type of relationship which favors a free growth of the person, in all its aspects, without obstacles. First, it is the fruit of a type of relationship, so it is not a personal or individual condition that we can reach by isolating or protecting ourselves, nor by eliminating other people. On the contrary, it’s what occurs when we establish a certain relationship with others. Peace, well-being, is not something that we can possess or acquire, it doesn’t come from achieving something or because things are a certain way. Nor does Peace, happiness, arise from hard work or the success of what I do. Peace does not come from eliminating problems, or the sisters that cause them, but rather peace comes from how I relate to them.

Peace and well-being are not something we can possess or acquire, they are not the result of

⁷ “Peace will be the fruit of justice.” Is 32,17.

⁸ Gross, H. “Paz” in Bauer, J.B., ed., *Diccionario de la teología bíblica*, Herder, Barcelona, 1967.

getting something or the consequence of things being as they are. Peace and happiness are not the result of hard work either nor of my personal success. Peace is not the result of removing problems or the sisters who cause them, but peace is the result of the way I mix with them.

Peace, then, is both the possibility of being faithful to myself, of living my own integrity and the possibility of doing so in relationship with others. In the relationship with others, but not any type of relationship. There are relationships that are harmful, and the victims of gender violence are a good example of that. Peace is the result of a way of relating to each other which favors the full development of each person. A kind of relating to one another that enables the free growth of the person in all their aspects without obstacles. Peace does not restrict, control or dominate minds, it does not make people drowsy, it does not tame people. Peace is a type of relationship which revitalizes the uniqueness of people, promoting their capacities.

Peace is inclusive or it is not peace. There is not peace if someone is left aside. If my peace, my faithfulness to myself, leads me to not take responsibility for my sister, that so-called personal peace is not peace. I am half way, I have not yet arrived. If the type of relationship I maintain with my sister leads me to lose touch with my deep desire, that relation does not promote peace either, that peace is not real.

The type of relationship which promotes peace is what we call hospitality. Hospitality as the relationship that recognizes the person, accepts her as she is, looking after her, accompanying her and letting her walk her own path, the path of being and becoming herself, who each of us is.

Some notes on humanistic and experiential philosophy and psychotherapy: Eugene Gendlin and Carl Rogers⁹

Eugene Gendlin (1926 – 2017), philosopher, was born in Vienna in the heart of a Jewish family. When he was young he saw his father making decisions which allowed the whole family to escape the Nazi occupation and immigrate to the United States, while other family friends did not manage to leave the country. He kept wondering how his father had made such decisions that allowed them to save their lives having the same information as the families that did not manage to escape. With this question in mind, years later, as a philosopher in the University of Chicago, his investigations led him to collaborate with the well-known psychotherapist Carl Rogers (1902 – 1987). From this collaboration arose a study that sought what gave rise to change in the therapeutic process, what is it that makes

⁹ Barceló, T., “La filosofía de lo implícito de Eugene Gendlin” in *Miscelánea Comillas*, Vol. 66 (2008), n. 129.

the people who go to therapy change and improve their lives. Gendlin and his colleagues verified that there were people who attended therapy and did not show any significant change, while others did and got better. He concluded that what these people did was the similar to what his father had done to make the decisions which permitted him to save his life.

The team of investigators led by Gendlin recorded hundreds of therapeutic interviews. After looking for the reason why either the therapy or the therapists were successful, they realized that the only explanation for the change of the person in the therapy was a capacity the person did or did not have. Focusing the research on the client, they could foretell with 98% accuracy, in the first or second interview, which people would improve their lives and which would not.

The people who did not get better were people who went to therapy and talked all the time. Usually, they were people with good speech, well organized sentences and who had a way with words. The people who got better with the therapy, on the other hand, were people with a less fluent speech, stopping their story from time to time, as if to look for the words to continue, keeping still, or making a sound like “mmm”.

This external difference indicated an internal ability. Investigations showed that the clients who changed and got better were those who had the ability to connect with the corporal sensation of what they were telling, the ability to realize the way they lived inside what they were explaining, instead of expressing only what they had thought about the topic. Therapeutic change, which is to say, the good development of the person, was related then to an ability: the capacity to pay attention and listen to how what we live affects us personally. And to express it.

Gendlin consequently defined the concept of health. A person is healthy, functions adequately, is happy, when he or she is able to listen to his or her inner living, the internal experience of what he or she is living and express it. The expression can be through words but also through any type of art or the way we choose to live our life. The dysfunction appears when the internal experience of a person and its expression get far from each other or lose contact. For instance, when I insist on saying again and again that I am all right though I am aware that something is going wrong with me. The first symptom of this internal disconnection appears at the level of human relationships. These become more difficult and tense, they lose fluidity and distrust appears. If nothing is done about it, the next stage of the dysfunction may be the appearance of some kind of physical pathology.

Carl Rogers had defined the human being as an organism self-propelled by a natural tendency to the development of inherent qualities. Let's get into that in more detail.

When Rogers speaks of an organism or body he is referring to an organism which is always in a relationship, a being in a relationship. Isolated organisms do not exist. Organisms are always interacting with something or someone, they are interactions. And they affect and are affected by the relationships they maintain.

The organism that is the human body is like a network of relationships where the unique being of each person lives and expresses itself. The whole existence lives in the body as well as all experiences and all relationships; it is the expression of life; it is the expression of the life path of each person.

Gendlin, later on, states that the human being, when living from inside instead of from outside, when able to listen to her body from inside, gains access to a wisdom which is greater than that of her mental knowledge. By listening to her inside, the person gets to her most personal I, unique and original that is wiser than what she is able to think, and from this point she can walk the path to be who she is, the path that only she can travel.

Gendlin also says that this unique and personal I one gets to by listening to the body from inside, the person in its depth, is in contact with other people, in a natural connection with other people and with all beings. This I, lived from inside is in a specific place and in all places at the same time, in this moment, in the past and in the future. This internal place which is the most intimate and personal is also the widest. Thus, Gendlin, from philosophy, states that our personal I is naturally connected with all living beings, all places and all times.¹⁰ When I make decisions from my mental I, I need to create divisions, classifications, parts, competitions, opposites. When I get into my inside and reach my true I, the divisions disappear and there is a global understanding, a reality unified and diverse at the same time. We find it already in the oracle on the door of the Delphi temple: "Oh man, know yourself and you will know the gods and the universe."¹¹

This relational organism, according to Rogers, is a self-propelled process. Being a person is a process, it is becoming a person, transforming ourselves into persons. Everything we live forms part of the greater bigger process of becoming who we are. Humanistic psychology says that health means changing; illness is to stay stagnant. Gendlin said that happiness means struggling with new problems (instead of dragging along the same old ones).

This process of being the person we are is activated by a natural tendency to the

¹⁰ Your internal I, as you see yourself from inside, "It is in fact a part of a giant system from here and from other places, now and in other times, you and other people, in fact, the whole universe." Gendlin, E. T. *Focusing. Process and Technique of Bodily Focusing.*, p. 102

¹¹ In his classic study of managing the Delphic Oracle in the patristic and medieval tradition, Pierre Courcelle highlights this background in the "Habitare secum" of St. Gregory the Great. Courcelle, P., "Connais toi meme" in *Socrates to Saint Bernard, Etudes Augustiniennes*, Paris, 1975.

development of one's inherent qualities. Rogers' position is based on the fundamental concept that the human being – and after entering the fields of quantum physics through authors like Prigogine and Capra¹², he added all living beings including crystals are activated by an underlying current which moves the organism towards its equilibrium and positive fulfillment.¹³ This is so both at a psychic level – when we are sad we struggle to recover happiness – and at a physical level – the body seeks healing when it is suffering from any type of wound—, and also at a moral or fulfilment of qualities level— the human being seeks the good.

Abraham Maslow had stated about this tendency: *“If we allow it to act as the guiding principle of our life, we will develop in a healthy, useful and happy way. This nature is not strong, dominant, and unmistakable, as is the instinct in animals. It is weak, delicate, subtle, and easily defeated by habits, social pressure, and wrong attitudes. Though it is weak, it rarely disappears in normal persons and it may be that neither does it disappear in those who are ill. Even when it is denied, it perseveres quietly, steadily pushing to come to light.”*¹⁴

So, this tendency, in contrast to the strong and dominant animal instincts that we know well, is weak, delicate and subtle. Due to these qualities, it is easily drowned by the rules of politeness, social habits and wrong attitudes. But Maslow says that, though weak, it is not easily destroyed, but it lives on quietly waiting to come out to light and help us develop in a happy way.

To extend hospitality means to accept, to accompany, to looking after, and to give room to the person knowing that she is inhabited, activated by a personal and unique positive dynamism, which is fragile and delicate. This internal dynamism is self-propelled, says Rogers, and that means that the person is growing from inside, she has her own direction. Self-propelled means that it does not need to be driven from outside, but it is an inherently dynamic and energetic dynamism. The process of being comes from the inside of each living being. We see it in the plants and animals. The seed that fall on earth carries within the information which leads it to put down roots and then a stem and leaves which will create the photosynthesis. This process is self-propelled from the inside of the plant and if we want to force the growing of the plant from outside by stretching the plant, the only thing we will achieve is either cutting it or killing it. In the same way, the chrysalis inside the cocoon knows its whole process to get to leave the cocoon and fly as a butterfly. If we want to speed up the process from outside by breaking the cocoon, we will keep the butterfly from developing the

¹² Rogers was fascinated by the development of modern systems theory and backed the idea of a self-organized order. When Ylia Prigogine won the Nobel Prize for Chemistry, Rogers was the first psychologist to write about the relationship between their theories. “Person Centered Approach and System Theory: Research and Theory”. Cornelius-White, J. H. D., Motschnig-Pitrik, R., Lux, M., ed.

¹³ “Your body knows the direction to healing and life.” Gendlin, op.cit., p. 103.

¹⁴ Maslow, A., *El hombre autorealizado*, Barcelona Kairós, 1983, 30.

necessary strength in its wings which later will allow it to spread them and fly.¹⁵

Thus, the fully functioning person is the one who chooses to be guided by the wisdom residing within her organism and acts accordingly. The person who fully lives assumes the process of being herself, takes charge of her unique way of being herself and carries it forward.

This path, the process of being a person, is self-propelled and does not need an external guide, but it does need facilitation. A plant without light, water, and nutrients cannot live. I cannot force its growing, but I can farm the land, fertilize, and water it to help it. From outside we cannot force anyone to health, to a personal change, or to holiness because the change comes from her interior. But we can make it easier. We can facilitate it with a relationship that recognizes the singularity of the person, reminding her, validating her, looking after her and encouraging her to make her own way. This is hospitality.

Hospitality in the community

Hospitality with the sisters is, then, a relationship that recognizes them, looks after them and accompanies them, wishing and promoting them to be who they are and who they may become.

We have seen that relationships with the others begin to suffer when the person loses the connection, the trust with her own interior. Hospitality starts being difficult when we lose the connection and the trust with the other and/or with ourselves and we replace it with our analysis and judgements. Then, instead of seeing and recognizing my real sister, I see the sister of my interpretations, an image of her according to my fears and demands. And I lose contact with her, with myself, and with life. And therefore, also with God.

This difficulty joins with the difficulty of struggling with very different ways of being. Benedict knows it very well, “the temperaments the abbot has to serve are very different”¹⁶. The monks have different ways of being and different degrees of intelligence, each with his own needs and capacities.¹⁷

Evagrius Ponticus in the 4th century and the coaching professionals of today remind us that hospitality implies opening to a way of being and of perceiving a life different from my own.

¹⁵ Thus, once the person has discovered his inner source, the subject cannot be replaced by anybody or by something different, because he perceives clearly that no one else knows better than himself his own life as well as the steps to a future evolution. One is open to all types of knowledge, but evolution always comes from inside”. Gendlin, E. “Focusing, proceso y técnica del enfoque corporal” Bilbao, Mensajero, p.9-10.

¹⁶ RB 2, 31

¹⁷ RB 2, 32; 8, 3; 34.

Each of us has a different biography, with diverse family, political, cultural, and social backgrounds which condition our way of living and facing the circumstances that arise. And even within the same family, each person is born and develops a unique way of being. There are people who are faster and others who are slower in their way of moving, working and deciding. There are people who need to understand and explain everything in a rational way while others need to feel it deeply. There are people who are more expansive and extraverted while others are more introverted and shy. There are those who live in chaos and those who live amid lists and organizational grids. Those who plan and those who improvise. Those who respect the rules and those who like to overlook them. Those who demand public recognition and those who hide in public. Those who find rest in solitude and those who relax when they are together with the community.

Also, the same person lives different life situations and moments according to her health, age, or the changing circumstances. The same person can live moments of great strength and moments of fragility. Moments of speed and moments of slowness. Moments to decide and moments to collaborate with a decision that had been made. Moments to give and moments to receive.

In the business world they use today an idea that St. Paul had already expressed brilliantly with his image of the human body: we are one body made up of many different members; they are all necessary, and they are all good. Just as there is no human organ better than another, there is no type of personality better than another; rather each one has her own characteristics with which she contributes to the good functioning of the body. Each organ needs to be accepted, needs its space and a right relation with the rest of the organs in order to contribute positively, from its uniqueness, to the good functioning of the body.

To accept my sister is to recognize who she is with her particular way of understanding life and to respond to her. Looking after her and giving her the space she needs to walk the path of being who she is. And I can do this if I do it with myself, if I do not lose contact with myself and trust and nurture my way of being who I am.

“Love the other as you love yourself”¹⁸ does not mean to give the other what you give yourself. What can be a help for you may be disastrous for the other, and vice versa. To love the other as you love yourself means to recognize the uniqueness of the other, the worth of the other, as you recognize your uniqueness and worth, and to let her be who she is as you allow yourself be who you are.

Hospitality is the capacity of recognizing the other as other, and offering her the space of a relationship, of my love, so that she can recognize herself, open herself to alterity and again

¹⁸ Mk 12, 30; Mt 22, 39; Lk 10, 27

take up the path to being herself.

Hospitality towards myself

Of no less importance is the capacity to be a guest. Hospitality is also the capacity of allowing myself be accepted, of permitting myself be looked after and accompanied, and liberated to walk my own path.

In fact, hospitality towards my sisters is only possible if I am able to welcome myself and allow others to welcome me. “Love the other as you love yourself” is at the same time a gospel commandment and a realization. As a commandment, it is God’s exhortation to love others as I love myself because love is something we share because we all have received it. In our case, it is the exhortation to welcome others as I welcome myself. Love, hospitality, is an act of freedom, an act exercised by a free person. “Love the other as you love yourself”, as a realization is the experience that the limits we impose on our capacity to welcome ourselves just as we are, are the same limits we impose when we welcome others just as they are. We can extend hospitality to another in the measure that we are capable of extending it to ourselves.

In the same way that hospitality towards my sister means to recognize and value who she is – with her particular way of understanding and responding to life— to look after her and allow her the time and space she needs to walk the path of being who she is, just so, hospitality towards myself means to recognize and value who I am – with my particular way of understanding and responding to life, to look after myself and to give myself the time and space that I need to walk the path of being who I am. And hospitality towards my sister is only possible to the extent that I live hospitality towards myself.

The Hospitality of God

“We have asked God, my brothers, who is the one who will be allowed to stay in his tent and we have heard the conditions that allow one to dwell there: to fulfill the commitments that apply to any inhabitant of his house”, says Benedict in the Prologue.¹⁹

In the end, a nun is a woman who seeks God and aims to be welcomed by God. A nun is one who focuses her life on Godself. Hospitality has an end, which is a new beginning, and the beginning and the end of everything. In fact, it is a new birth. It is a leap to grace when one who welcomes knows she is infinitely welcomed.

Hospitality towards others and myself ends, starts, and is nurtured in the hospitality of God.

¹⁹ Prologue, 39

They are not consecutive stages, but rather relational moments which take place at the same time as in a dance.

We take the hand of an expert, Teresa de Jesús, to explain it. Her superiors ask her to write a treatise on the difficult subject of prayer, and she does so, obediently, addressing the nuns of her monasteries and whoever else who could benefit from it.²⁰ She writes the text of *The Interior Castle or the Mansions* where she compares the human soul with a castle and she describes the process of prayer as the path which goes from the edges of the soul – or the patrols of a castle where the guards, without knowing what inside, nor the value of the great secrets within the castle—to the very heart of the soul, the main chamber of the castle which is the chamber of God himself, “in the very most interior, in something very deep that it cannot describe because it is not schooled”.²¹

To begin with, Teresa reminds her sisters of “the beauty and dignity”²² of the human person in her interior, what she calls the soul, which is a precious castle she describes as made entirely of diamonds and very clear crystal where God resides, enjoys Godself and takes pleasure.²³

When Teresa de Jesús tells what happens in the interior of the castle, in the seventh mansion, with respect to what happens in previous mansions, she repeats again and again that it is very different.²⁴ You do not enter the seventh mansion, it is God who takes the soul in; you do not get there through suffering and efforts, but rather the soul is received. With God everything is grace.²⁵ God’s hospitality is at a different level, it is God who takes the initiative, houses the soul in God’s chamber and does not want to leave her²⁶, the soul sees the very Trinity and the Trinity communicates with her.²⁷

Teresa tells how she entered God’s dwelling for the first time. During Eucharist, after communion, Jesus appeared to her, as if after resurrection, with great splendor and beauty.

²⁰ Prologue 5

²¹ Seventh Mansions, 1.8

²² First Mansions, 1.1,2

²³ Seventh Mansions, 1.1

²⁴ Idem., 1.7, 2.2, 2.4

²⁵ Idem., 1.6

²⁶ “The soul becomes, I mean the spirit of this soul, a thing with God, (...) who in this way has wanted to join with the creature, and in this way they cannot be separated, he does not want to separate from her.” Idem, 2.4-5

²⁷ “Divinization is always granted, but never conquered by the individual”, says Maximus the Confessor. S. Maximus comments on the Pauline verse “it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me”, and says that this “does not imply a destruction of liberty but rather a ‘cognitive abandonment’ in the context of an erotic ecstasy in which the one who lives the life of the beloved, completely and freely embraced by him. No particular individual can survive death, that is the reality of the individual, except in and through this type of communion with the Other.” Maximus the Confessor cited by J. Zizioulas in *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church*, T & T Clark, 2006, p. 84-85.

Jesus told her that from that moment on “she had to take Jesus’ things as hers and He would take care of Teresa’s”²⁸ and other things difficult to explain, she adds.

Suddenly, according to her story, everything became simple. The mystical raptures of the saint give way to an indescribable peace which nothing or no one can disturb. There are neither levitations nor visions, but Teresa instead experiences total abandon and trust in Jesus. Not only Teresa in Jesus, but also Jesus in Teresa.

Thus, Teresa experiences God’s hospitality as that admirable exchange in which God welcomes and liberates her, asking her and trusting that she welcomes and liberates God. Jesus accepts Teresa and the resurrected Jesus asks Teresa to accept Him. And so Teresa understands that everything related to Jesus relates to her and nothing is to keep her from serving Him. She lives a profound, imperturbable peace, but this peace is a consignment, a struggle, because everything related to Jesus is now related to her. Inhabited by the “sweet guest”²⁹ there is no task big enough to stop her. And she reminds her sisters, with her gracious and direct style:

“When I see souls very anxious to know what sort of prayer they practice, covering their faces and afraid to move or think lest they should lose any slight tenderness and devotion they feel, they show me how little they understand the path to union with God since they think it consists in such things as these. No, sisters, no; our Lord expects works from us. If you see a sick sister whom you can relieve, never fear losing your devotion; show her compassion; if she is in pain, feel it as if it were your own and, when there is need, fast so that she may eat, not so much for her sake as because you know your Lord asks it of you. This is the true union of our will with the will of God”³⁰

In conclusion

Hospitality is the relationship by which the eagle comes to recognize its eagle heart when faced with the light of the rising sun and the immensity of the horizon, and begins to fly.

And it flies because this heart beats in its eagle’s body. The eagle recognizes its heart and integrates its body to fly. It does not fly in spite of its body. It is not the denial of its body that allows the eagle to fly, but on the contrary. The eagle flies as the sunlight fills his eyes and invites him to jump opening his big wings and all the possibilities of his beautiful body.

²⁸ Seventh Mansions, 2, I

²⁹ The eastern monastic tradition reminds us that the path to interiority is the path of opening to the Spirit, to the “sweet guest” who lives within us.

³⁰ Fifth Mansions, 3, I I

The monastic vocation, like every human vocation, is a call that is born in the human person, with her body. Often the monastic tradition, however, along with a part of Christian spirituality, has suspected the body, especially the woman's body. We know that the body is important and that is why we use some postures to pray, and not others. We know that the body expresses our relationship with God. But we often find it hard to believe that God saw God's creation and saw that it was good, good indeed, as Genesis says. Human body included. The shame of our nakedness appears with doubt, with suspicion toward God, does not arise from God's presence says the story. Centuries later St. Paul tells us that our body is God's temple. To be temples of God means to be inhabited by God and animated by God's spirit to love. And we need our body to love, just as the eagle needs it to fly. Jesus learned from the hugs and kisses of his parents, and he loved with his body. God frees us for life, to love, so that we can fly. With our body.

It is not the denial of the body that avoids the sexual abuses and unwanted relationships that are being discovered. On the contrary, I think we need to put light on the issue of assuming our corporeality in positive. Asceticism is to open ourselves to love, says Zizioulas, that love of God incarnated that wanted to be found and expressed in the human body, through the human body. I believe that in monastic life we have a pending reflection on the hospitality we give to our bodies.

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