

STATIO CONFERENCE

HOSPITALITY: CALL TO OPENNESS

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INTRODUCTION:

It is timely that I write about hospitality here at the Prioresses' Meeting here in Korea because our experience with our Korean Sisters is hospitality par excellence!

From the time we landed in Incheon airport and Seoul, until we moved here in Daegu, we were met with a warm welcome - and housed, fed and entertained in a truly special way. The Sisters in both Pories so generously went out of their way to also share with us the rich and ancient Korean culture and history. We were definitely enriched by everything we experienced, heard and learned here. On their part, the Sisters of both Pories expressed their joy at having us in their midst, experiencing in a concrete way the international character of our Congregation. Indeed, our experience of hospitality in this meeting is a good starting point for this statio conference.

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 underlines 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.*¹

The Bible also has similar stories of hospitality. The story of Abraham and Sarah is typical. In Gen. 18:1-8,² 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).³

There are several elements 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 belonging 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:

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 wanted 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, he showed no tokens 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/Benedictine View of Hospitality. In the Old and the New Testaments, the recipients of hospitality were often the **stranger and the poor**.⁴ The law in Israel protected the resident alien, (Lev. 19:33-34)⁵ 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,⁶ with God reminding them that they were called to be kind to the stranger because God was hospitable to them – providing them with food, water, and protection when they were aliens or sojourners in Egypt and in the desert.⁷

Jesus' hospitality was like 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.

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

St. Benedict in chapter 53 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. 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 shows himself as wise in that he cautions against the “deception of the devil.” 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, 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 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) to the guests. By this gesture, we have made the guests part of the community.

Creating a Sacred Space through our hospitality. In practicing hospitality, we open ourselves to the people outside the monastery/convent. And by inviting them to our convent/monastery and prayer, we make the guests companions in the journey to God, for “we share the same destiny and goal.”⁸ In order to be truly hospitable and open especially towards the poor and the pilgrims, and all whom they represent in our present-day society, we need to 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 as equals, and only then can our hospitality be transformative and healing.

Conclusion

Hospitality has, since antiquity, invited us to be open to the other – strangers, pilgrims, wayfarers and the poor. When we open our hearts/minds and communities to others, we begin to change from the inside. And we begin to change the others who come in contact with us. But, as St Benedict so carefully tried to do in the Rule, it is when we are faithful to who we are and faithful to the requirements of our life, that our interaction with others become truly transformative. It is when we have done our own work on ourselves that we are best able to reach out to those who come to our communities.

GUIDE FOR REFLECTION:

1. What attitudes am I called to develop in order to be truly hospitable?
2. Given the context of our times, how can we best bring about the spirit of what St. Benedict enjoins in Ch. 53 of the Holy Rule?

FOOTNOTES:

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

² 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.

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

⁴ The Greek word for hospitality, *philoxenia*, literally means "love of strangers".

⁵ 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.

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

⁷ Heb. 11:13, cf. Gen. 23:4

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