

Hospitality & the Catholic Tradition

The Catholic Hospitality Training Institute

“There [Christ] was, homeless. Would a church take Him in today- feed Him, clothe Him, offer Him a bed? I hope I ask myself that question on the last day of my life. I once prayed and prayed to God that He never, ever let me forget to ask that question”

– Dorothy Day, founder of The Catholic Worker movement

It is a great tragedy that hospitality seems to have had its Christian heart gutted by modern society – people of faith often reduce the concept to “something nice we do as an extra” because we think of it only in secular terms. It is not an option. A crucial ingredient for the transformation of our parish culture must include both the reclaiming of hospitality in general, but also restoring the full vigor of its Christian practice.

From the earliest days of Christianity, hospitality has been a central component of moral living. Even before the birth of Christ, Hebrews considered the exercise of hospitality as intimately linked with blessings that flowed from their covenantal relationship with God. In Genesis, Abraham welcomes in two strangers – and is promised that he will be given a son. The two guests sojourned on to the city of Sodom, where Lot also provides protection for them from evil men in the city.

Similarly, we welcome in strangers into the parish knowing that the Lord blesses us back – and sometimes the folks who come to us are in need of protection. One example of living this out took place recently at the New Life Center connected to Church of the Resurrection in Lansing, MI. When a frightened young woman came seeking an abortion because of pressure from the abusive father of the child (who was waiting outside), the staff locked the doors and promised the young woman they would not abandon her and would ensure her safety. After assuaging her fears, she was confident enough to choose life for her unborn child.

In the person of Christ, we see an incarnation of lived hospitality. Jesus consistently reaches out to the marginalized – and if we are to imitate Him, we must deliberately “welcome those who seemingly brought little to the encounter...to include those with whom one least desires to have connections”. As Teresa of Avila’s famous poem states: “Christ has no body now but yours – no hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes with which he looks compassion on this world...” In addition to ‘being Christ’ as we practice hospitality, it is also Christ that we are serving.

Early Christian writings used the Greek word *philoxenia* for hospitality, which connects kinship (*phileo*) with the word for stranger (*xenos*). The way they lived this out was by extending kindness usually reserved for close family members. Households (which were much larger and more communal – not the ‘single family homes’ prevalent now). This centered mostly around meeting physical needs – food, shelter, clothing. What’s important to particularly note about how they lived this out, is that the table where meals were shared did not separate people according to class. Persons of prominence were treated no differently than a vagrant stranger. All were treated with equal dignity. Today, we apply this to our practice of hospitality with a universally welcoming

attitude. We must endeavor to show the same attentive respect to a fallen-away Catholic who needs to plan her mother's funeral as we do if the Bishop of our diocese were to come in the door.

As the centuries rolled on, the practice of hospitality continued to develop. St. John Chrysostom encouraged his flock to make a guest room in the home, a set-apart place particularly for "the maimed, the beggars, and the homeless".

Nearly every Christian community which models modern hospitality for us insists that hospitality is demanding, and "can only be met by persons sustained by a strong life of prayer and times of solitude". Isidore of Seville had severe words for about clergy who neglected showing hospitality to the poor: "a bishop... unless he shall receive everyone...is unhuman" . Eventually, hospitality became a dual-track exercise – both "material care for strangers and the local poor and hospitality as personal welcome and entertainment". In great households, hospitality became something expected as justice by the master of the house to workers, but it did not compare to the "VIP treatment" given to visiting aristocracy or clergy. There was no longer the 'one table' of the early Christian communities. And yet, private residences became the primary hub for hospitality over the church community itself.

From the nineteenth century to present, households have become even more privatized, and what was once a work of mercy entrusted to the church may be the work of a specialized organization in the secular sphere. This makes life more complicated for us, not only because we outsource our inheritance as Christians to specialists, but also because we lost the simultaneous delivery of food and human connection provided at the 'one table' People were not just given food, they were given human connection.

Today, many Christian communities serve as models for us of hospitality, even if they wouldn't verbalize their work in those terms. Places like Catholic Worker Houses, Annunciation Houses in Texas, the ecumenical L'Arche community where Henri Nouwen served. In every one of these communities, the stark reality of hospitality as a demanding work is taught right alongside formation in prayer, including the necessity of solitude, also modeled for us by Christ Himself. In order for us to do this well and produce spiritual fruit, we must always begin and return to our own intimacy with the Lord. To that end, every person involved in parish ministry could benefit from a contemplative reading of *The Soul of the Apostolate* by Jean-Baptiste Chautard.

Offering care to strangers, welcoming in those without connection to our community, is a hallmark of practicing the Gospel itself. It can never be considered a luxurious extravagance. From the Christians of the first century, to the 21st century parish, a culture of belonging has been and remains an essential way to live out our identity as Catholic Christians.



Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. Hebrews 13:2
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