

A CULTURE OF HOSPITALITY

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Just five weeks on the job, Père Henri (Father Henry) is young and inexperienced, so he preaches sermons the mayor has edited about the dangers of temptation, the threat to morality posed by outsiders, and even the evils of chocolate.

Until Easter morning. By then Père Henri has seen enough to know that the life of this community is enhanced, not threatened, by diversity. He tells his surprised parishioners that he doesn't want to talk about Jesus' divinity this Easter. He is more interested in his humanity and what we can learn from his life on earth:

"We can't go around measuring our goodness by what we don't do. We measure goodness by what we embrace, what we create, and who we include."

Our world is in desperate need of genuine (not virtual) community. The Church of Jesus Christ (the true Church, not the organized façade) has the wherewithal to make it happen. But first, we are in need of genuine renewal ourselves. Can we rebuild a culture of hospitality in the 21st Century?

Think about it: Are you a better guest or host? Which would you rather be? Why?

Ancient Culture

"Hospitality" comes from the Greek word, *philoxenía*, literally: love of strangers. In practical use it means the gracious reception and entertainment of strangers (those outside one's normal circle of friends).

Hospitality was regarded as a duty by many ancient cultures. For the Greeks, hospitality was a sign of being civilized, and its religious importance is suggested by the fact that their chief deity, Zeus, was the god of hospitality. The Romans, similarly, made entertaining strangers a sacred duty. For the Egyptians, being hospitable helped to secure a favorable existence in the future life. In biblical culture, extending hospitality was not merely a courtesy but an obligation.

After all, travel in the ancient Middle East was fraught with physical danger and social tension (some things never change). Inns were few and far between, and travelers depended on locals for life-sustaining water and food, as well as for shelter and safety from attack.

According to the Dictionary of Biblical Imagery, the provision and protection extended in hospitality were well defined and elaborate. Acceptance of strangers as guests was signified by washing the guests' feet and by providing a meal. The meal might be lavish and could include entertainment, such as music or dancing, and discussion of Scripture. In order not to insult the guests and dishonor the host, the meal must be the best the host could provide, as with the choice calf, curds and milk that Abraham provided for three angelic visitors. Additional honor would be signified by inviting a guest to speak or anointing his head with oil and by giving him an honored place at the host's table. It was also the duty of the host to provide protection from harm.

Jewish Hospitality

While all the peoples of the ancient Middle East practiced hospitality toward strangers, the Israelites understood their participation in these practices in the light of their unique role as the people of God. Their traditional ancestor Abraham was a “sojourner,” and stories of the traveling patriarchs and the Hebrews who were resident aliens in Egypt for four centuries and wandering strangers in the wilderness for forty years are classic:

Deuteronomy 10:17 For the Lord your God is the God of gods and Lord of lords... ¹⁸ He ensures that orphans and widows receive justice. He shows love to the foreigners living among you and gives them food and clothing. ¹⁹ So you, too, must show love to foreigners, for you yourselves were once foreigners in the land of Egypt.

Israelite hospitality went beyond the merely customary and was motivated by something other than fear of strangers. It arose from the heart of a people whose identity and home rested in the God who had made them *no longer strangers*:

Exodus 23:9 You must not oppress foreigners. You know what it's like to be a foreigner, for you yourselves were once foreigners in the land of Egypt.

Such love is essentially outward-looking, standing ready to provide for the needs of others, and can be demonstrated only because the giver himself had received a gracious provision from God. The care of others was therefore the discharge of a debt of gratitude, expressing the character of God's people, and the character of their God.

Divine Hospitality

In fact, God's provision for Israel in the Old Testament takes on some of the qualities of human hospitality. God hosted the people of Israel in the wilderness, providing water, food and protection. He screened them prior to their entry into Canaan. He invited them into a Promised Land prepared for them as a place full of food. The application is even broader in Psalm 104, where the psalmist sees the world as God's garden in which all living creatures receive His provision.

Psalms 104:27 They all depend on you to give them food as they need it. ²⁸ When you supply it, they gather it. You open your hand to feed them, and they are richly satisfied. ²⁹ But if you turn away from them, they panic. When you take away their breath, they die and turn again to dust. ³⁰ When you give them your breath, life is created, and you renew the face of the earth. ³¹ May the glory of the Lord continue forever! The Lord takes pleasure in all he has made!

God's hospitality is actually festive, as he makes available “wine to make them glad, olive oil to soothe their skin, and bread to give them strength” (Psalm 104:15).

The Prophet Isaiah describes the kind of lifestyle that attracts God's favorable attention:

Isaiah 58:7 Share your food with the hungry, and give shelter to the homeless. Give clothes to those who need them, and do not hide from relatives who need your help.

And adds this marvelous promise:

Isaiah 58:8 Then your salvation will come like the dawn, and your wounds will quickly heal. Your godliness will lead you forward, and the glory of the Lord will protect you from behind. ⁹ Then when you call, the Lord will answer. ‘Yes, I am here,’ he will quickly reply.

Christian Hospitality

The New Testament also abounds in references to hospitality. The record of Jesus' life as a traveling teacher and miracle worker is a journal of hospitality received, such as that in the home of Mary and Martha and the house of Zacchaeus.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught that such hospitality was the key to entering the kingdom of heaven: *"For I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home"* (Mt 25:35).

When Jesus sent out His disciples to minister, he assumed that they would depend on hospitality as they traveled. Failure on the part of villagers to provide for their hospitality, Jesus said, would seal their doom.

Jesus expressed a similar disdain for His reprehensible host, Simon, the Pharisee:

Luke 7:44 Then he... said to Simon, "Look at this woman kneeling here. When I entered your home, you didn't offer me water to wash the dust from my feet, but she has washed them with her tears and wiped them with her hair. ⁴⁵ You didn't greet me with a kiss, but from the time I first came in, she has not stopped kissing my feet. ⁴⁶ You neglected the courtesy of olive oil to anoint my head, but she has anointed my feet with rare perfume. ⁴⁷ I tell you, her sins—and they are many—have been forgiven, so she has shown me much love. But a person who is forgiven little shows only little love."

The New Testament also instructs us to practice hospitality:

Matthew 10:42 If you give even a cup of cold water to one of the least of my followers, you will surely be rewarded."

Luke 14:12 "When you put on a luncheon or a banquet... don't invite your friends, brothers, relatives, and rich neighbors. For they will invite you back, and that will be your only reward. ¹³ Instead, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴ Then at the resurrection of the righteous, God will reward you for inviting those who could not repay you."

Romans 12:13 When God's people are in need, be ready to help them. Always be eager to practice hospitality.

1 Peter 4:9 Cheerfully share your home with those who need a meal or a place to stay.

Hebrews 13:2 Don't forget to show hospitality to strangers, for some who have done this have entertained angels without realizing it!

Like Father, Like Children

The Kingdom of God and Heaven are presented as places and times where God will provide the ultimate hospitality — unending feasting in God's vast dwelling place, heaven.

We first host Jesus in our hearts in answer to His request to be received:

Revelation 3:20 Look! I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal together as friends.

In turn, He promises to host us, when we request to be received in Heaven, at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb (Revelation 19:7-9).

The Revelation ends with a final invitation to all guests of God:

Revelation 22:17 “The Spirit and the bride say, “Come.” Let anyone who hears this say, “Come.” Let anyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who desires drink freely from the water of life.”

Outside the Comfort Zone

Sometimes hospitality requires that we cross boundaries and dismantle some of the barriers erected to keep “the others” out. Sometimes it means entertaining ideas that might be foreign to us.

Fear of strangers is rampant in our times. The terrorist attacks of September 11 created an environment of distrust and paranoia that has been heightened by a series of abductions and crimes against children. Parents are more cautious than ever about teaching their children the ancient virtue of openness to others.

Henri Nouwen wrote: “The German word for hospitality is *Gastfreundschaft* which means friendship for the guest.... It means the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy.’

On an interpersonal level, hospitality is a good prescription to balance a tendency to be critical of and unaccommodating to others. People who are distrustful of the world, who become fearful and paranoid when strangers approach, or who are suspicious of ideas unlike their own will also benefit from practicing hospitality.

Rebuilding a Culture of Hospitality

Criminologists have shown that the crime rate in a neighborhood is lowered when neighbors know one another well. This is the basis of the Neighborhood Watch program. The creation of social networks amounts to “social capital,” an investment in community.

Robert Putnam defines two kinds of social capital: *bonding* social capital, which is the linking together of people who are similar (this network tends to be inward-focused), and *bridging* social capital, the linking together of different types of people (this tends to be outward-focused).

Bonding social capital is a kind of sociological Super Glue. A society that has only bonding social capital will look like Northern Ireland or the former Yugoslavia — segregated into mutually hostile camps.

On the other hand, bridging social capital creates a sociological WD-40, for smoother interfacing between the varied parts. Because “birds of a feather flock together,” bridging social capital is more difficult to create. But in an increasingly diverse society like ours, it is the most essential kind.

But, make no mistake, this is not a political agenda, it cannot be effectively legislated. This is a spiritual agenda. No one possesses the grace for developing a culture of hospitality like followers of Jesus Christ. He knows no strangers. But we are in need of a healing ourselves.

The tragic fact is that we are so inundated by modern culture, so much “of the world,” that there is scarcely any discernible difference between the inward-focused isolation of the Church and the world around it.

We fear what they fear — the loss of our “stuff” or our comfort or our lives, those gifts from God for which we feel not so much grateful as entitled — and are intimidated by similar threats into inaction

and reclusiveness, while the Bible describes us as “more than conquerors” because of the life of Jesus in us and our faith in Him.

If we are afraid even to dialogue with people who hold different ideas than we do, what hope is there for change? Who will take Marin County beyond the prison doors of fearful isolation? If not us, who?

Where is that joyful boldness today? Where is that unashamed, risk-it-all attitude?

Hasn't God given us the Holy Spirit? Has He no power to help us? Have we no heart to seek Him until He does?

Where Do We Go From Here?

We must begin with prayer, unrelenting, desperate prayer. It's not that God is reluctant to hear; we have contracted such a checklist mentality that we no longer know what is meant by “praying through” — we can't give attention to one area of need for more than 17 seconds.

The Church must change. We must learn how to pray “and not give up.” Praying in small groups can teach you that. You “catch” it from those who already know. Don't be intimidated just because you're unfamiliar with it. Rub shoulders with those who persist in faith and you will be changed.

We must break out of these four walls, what one author called the “stained glass barrier.”

Make your home a place for meeting new people, or at least getting better acquainted with those you only know slightly. Maybe you want to develop a plan for making your home a safe haven for others, instead of just a cave for your own. Host a monthly dinner; invite two people you know and two people you don't know.

Take a church visitor out for lunch on a Sunday, just to get acquainted. Learn about their world. Find out what motivated them to visit. Discover their impressions — both good and bad. Don't be defensive; just listen and enjoy getting to really know them.

Volunteer to be part of a welcome wagon project in your area. If you can't find one, create one! Work with a couple of your neighbors to produce an introduction to the community, illustrating it with pictures of special places and common locations, like schools, banks, churches, and shopping centers.

I think it would be fantastic for a local church like ours to provide a Welcome Wagon service to newcomers to Marin! What a great way to make friends for Jesus!

Is there a Neighborhood Watch group in your neighborhood? If not, why don't you find out what it would take and host one? What a great way to meet your neighbors, provide a service that they appreciate, and make friends for Jesus!

The possibilities are almost endless, but the obligations are not unbearable. It begins in our hearts.

Are we grateful for what God has done for us? Are we showing that gratitude in some tangible way to others? It's not enough to say, “Thank you, Jesus!” Paying it forward was originally God's idea.