Preface: The Nature and Necessity of Hospitality

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THOMAS A. MAIER, PH.D.
The Nature of hospitality

The idea of hospitality dates back to evidence found at the first centers of civilization such as Mesopotamia in present-day Iraq, to biblical references of washing of guests’ feet, to later accounts of English innkeepers receiving weary travelers over a mug of ale. The provision of hospitality services has spanned across geographical and cultural boundaries for several thousand years.\(^1\) Historians have traced the practice of providing shelter and food for weary merchants and travelers in China, Egypt, and later in other parts of the world, opening hospitality establishments across the globe as more trade routes emerged.

Today, the concept of hospitality has remained the same, to welcome, satisfy, and serve others. It is also manifested in an openness and charitable spirit: a willingness to receive others when they are in need, an authentic desire to lead and serve others with a specific orientation towards the common good. With hospitality in mind, the metaphor of God as host is evoked in the biblical story of the Exodus. With the people of Israel utterly dependent on God for their survival in the wilderness, God provided both protection and food.\(^2\) God’s hospitality in the wilderness prepared his people for life in the Promised Land, which is described as flowing with “milk and honey.” Hardly limited to an abundance of cattle, goats, and bees, this phrase pictures life in the Promised Land as if eating a rich banquet from God’s own table.\(^3\)

Moreover, hospitality explores the nature, meaning, and commonality of practices exemplified in the Judeo-Christian tradition beginning with the singular hospitality event of Abraham’s welcoming and hosting traveling visitors.\(^4\) Such hospitality entails more than food and drink. The communion, community, and communication of this biblical event revealed that hospitality is primarily an occasion of spiritual reciprocity, of mutual recognition, acceptance and delight. It implies the look of love that is contemplation, our being glad to see one another, our capacity to enjoy one another’s company and surroundings. Genuine hospitality is possible only when persons know who they are, having a self to give, and are happy to share that self with others. The humanizing and personalizing power of hospitality is limitless, and hospitality is relevant to individuals, organizations, groups, and societies at large.\(^5\)

The Necessity of hospitality

In order to offer and express hospitality towards others we must first take a look around and ask ourselves: Who is in need and what do they need? Who among us are

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2. Ex 15:24-25, 27; 23:20-23.
3. Deut. 6:3.
excluded? How can they be welcomed? Who among us are unheard and how do we help them to be heard? How does one personalize one’s own hospitality and align it with a sense of purpose in life that is in collaboration with others for the benefit of others? The answers to these questions and the necessity of hospitality are evident in the post-apostolic era wherein hospitality can serve as the conduit for the reappearance of grace in graceless times. Hampton Morgan Jr. argues a post-modern era of individualism and an ethic of self-accomplishment over the common good of others have seized the day. Moreover, John J. Navone, S.J., contends, “the value of hospitality may be found in the promotion of the solidarity of a loving communion, community, and communication; Of civic friendship under the sovereignty of God’s love, overcoming the gaps between rich and poor, powerful and powerless, strong and weak, successful and unsuccessful.” Such hospitality promotes equality that grounds the equalizing friendship among diverse individuals within institutions, communities, and societies.

Accordingly, hospitality offers a charitable component both unique and applicable to individuals, groups, societies, and nations. Throughout time Vincentian practitioners have promoted and delivered said hospitality by serving and valuing others among and within diverse communities, societies, and nations at large. Vincent de Paul himself took on the pain of others through companionship and compassion for those left without hospitality in their lives.

**The Centered and hospitable leader**

Perhaps one of the biggest challenges facing leaders in today’s global society is their

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7 Navone, Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome, Italy. Personal interview.
ability to operate in complex institutional, societal, and cultural environments with true motives and a sense of hospitableness towards others. Seeking positions of leadership and influence are honorable quests if the motivation is true service. The issue at hand is the motive, nature, and ambition behind one’s desire to lead. Is the desire to lead motivated by the glory of God and for the good of others? Is it motivated by the desire to develop in others a genuine sense of hospitality in a godly way? If so, then these are the motives of transformational leaders reflected in today’s churches, institutions, and secular organizations of merit. Christ’s approach to leadership, and the approach he asked of his disciples, is one that glorifies God and serves the welfare of others. It does not seek personal glory for acts of service or manipulation of others to achieve one’s own self-interests.

The legacy of Vincent de Paul and the contemporary practice of Vincentian stakeholders worldwide provide us with extraordinary examples of transformational leaders who are grounded in the daily practice and delivery of hospitality. Vincentian hospitality praxis provides us with examples of the use of godly means for the pursuit of excellence in leadership. It reflects a results oriented approach toward serving others. Vincent is a perfect example of Christ’s teachings concerning persons in positions of authority: “whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant.” Vincent was not interested in personal glory for his heroic and unending acts of service; rather, he was a well-intended hospitality practitioner. He acted in the interest of God as host, relying on God’s blessings, strength, protection and rewards to serve the most cherished and needy among us. There are no signs in Vincent’s leadership of manipulation or coercion but only of a desire to do what is in the best interests of God’s people. In the face of numerous obstacles, Vincent provided leadership spanning vision, competence, planning, motivation, encouragement, optimism, and the nourishing spirit needed to create and sustain the Vincentian mission of unconditionally serving and caring for others.

9 Mark 10:43.

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