The Grace and Call of the Hospitable God

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Section I

THEORETICAL, THEOLOGICAL, AND PHILOSOPHICAL CONSTRUCTS OF VINCENTIAN HOSPITALITY
The Grace and Call of
the Hospitable God

JOHN J. NAVONE, S.J.
Introduction

The transforming meaning of Jesus’ life and mission can be understood in terms of the divine hospitality. Jesus encounters inhospitality from the time of his birth when there was no room for him at the inn,¹ to when Herod tries to do away with him,² and he continues to encounter it throughout his entire life. He came to his own people and even they did not accept him.³ Jesus counters this inhospitality of the human heart with the hospitality of his heavenly Father. In the light of the crucified and risen Christ, the community of Christian faith proclaims that God the Host of the world has given us his Son and Spirit to transform humankind into hospitable selves in his own hospitable image and likeness. The Triune God of Jesus Christ is the hospitable God of three eternally self-giving persons, open to one another without forfeiting particularity or identity.

The grace and call of God finds expression in the many biblical hospitality narratives. God as Host provides a garden for Adam and Eve, and walks with them in that garden.⁴ The primordial hospitality of paradise is a paradigm for human hospitality. Abraham and Sarah reflect God’s primordial hospitality in hosting their guests.⁵

Jesus reveals God’s call to hospitality when he summons his hearers to extend God’s hospitality, which we can never repay, to others who cannot repay us.⁶ God’s hospitality is not given on a quid pro quo basis. God offers it even to the inhospitable. He is not hospitable because he is lonely and in need of festive company, it is not out of necessity; rather, his hospitality expresses the goodness, joy, and happiness that he is.

The Communion of the Eternal Three: The Hospitality that Saves the World

The God of Christians is interpersonal; consequently, our being in the image of the Christian God is our being interpersonal or relational as opposed to being a solitary monad. Hospitable persons image the interpersonal/relational Triune God of Christians. Unlike the God of Jews and Muslims, the Christian God is not a divine person alone, but tri-personal, interpersonal, three-in-one, the originating love of the Father, the welcoming love of the guest (Son) in the communion-community-communication of reciprocal love (Holy Spirit of Father and Son). It images the tri-personal God of Christians who is love. There is no hospitality without a host/giver, without a guest (welcoming recipient), and the resulting reciprocity of communion-community-communication-friendship.

² Matt 2:13.
³ John 1:11.
⁴ GN 3:8.
⁵ GN 18:1-5.
Parables of Hospitality

Jesus, teller of banquet parables, is the universal integrator, the ‘Catholic’ par excellence in that he is the One who includes and unites the many. Vertically Jesus unites humankind to his Father; horizontally he unites himself to everyone. He is ‘the second Adam’ as also the eternal Son. He is the one ‘through whom all things are made’ and re-made so that ‘all things hold together in him.’ In fact, “there is one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things come and through whom we exist.” He is the mediator of unity in all directions. Through him, the Word made flesh, we have access to the Father in the Holy Spirit and come to share in the divine nature. St. Irenaeus was in the missions of the Son and the Holy Spirit, the outstretched arms of the Father calling and enfolding his children. The eschatological banquet community, to which all humankind is invited, is a participation in the Trinitarian relations at the core of the Christian life. “God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts by which we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’”

Jesus’ parable of the talents tells us of a generous God who shares his abundance that we might enjoy life abundantly. It implies that our God-given abundance should enable us to become hospitable sources of abundance for others. The parable extends the divine imperative of Genesis to increase and multiply beyond the limits of demography. The abundance of hospitable children evidences the life/spirit that they have received from their hospitable Creator. They are the true image and likeness of God as host. The servant who buried his two talents is indicted for his failure to enjoy and employ his God-given

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7 John 1:3.
8 Colossians 1:17.
9 1 Corinthians 8:6.
10 Ephesians 2:18; 2 Peter 1:4.
11 Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:6.
abundance as God himself did. This servant recalls the warning of Jesus that the fearful person who tries to save his life will lose it. Such fear and insecurity reflects the absence of God’s abundantly self-giving spirit/life.\footnote{13}{The central liturgies of Jews and Christians are participations in the hospitality of a self-giving, generous, saving, and merciful God, who so loved the world that he gave his only Son. The Eucharistic words, “take my body and eat it, take my blood and drink it,” express the self-giving hospitality of the Incarnate Son of God inviting all humankind to life in the family of God. The Mass is the divine banquet table that even now presages the eschatological banquet feast of the world to come. For the Christian community, the messianic banquet that Isaiah prophesied (25:6-10) has begun with the self-giving hospitality of the Crucified and Risen Christ. If God is Spirit, and those who worship God worship him in spirit and truth, we may also say that God is the Spirit whose self-giving hospitality in his crucified and risen Son is the Gift that saves the world.}

The banquet parables imply the communion, community, and communication of both the host and his guests in freedom.\footnote{14}{The Mass is the extension throughout human history of the Father’s self-giving hospitality in his incarnate Son to communion, community, and communication under the sovereignty of his love. The banquet motif of many of Jesus’ parables is a hospitality theme in which God, the Host of the World, invites everyone to share in his hospitality. The Father, Host of all humankind, sends his Son to call everyone to his universal banquet community. When Jesus attends a banquet (Luke 14), he underscores the universality of his Father’s hospitality when he teaches that we, like our heavenly Father, should be hospitable/welcoming/self-giving/generous towards all persons, and not merely to those who can repay us.}

The host freely prepares his banquet and freely invites his guests. All who are invited may freely accept or decline the invitation. Always an act of freedom, love is never violent. God forces no one to love him. The banquet parables tell of both the freedom of God’s grace and call, and of the freedom of our accepting or declining God’s invitation to the communion, community, and communication of the banquet—divine and human hospitality express divine and human love and freedom.\footnote{15}{Freedom is linked to God’s hospitality: We should, like our heavenly Father, be free to be welcoming and generous towards everyone. We must learn to freely give what we have freely received. God wills to free us from an attitude which limits our freedom to the small circle of persons from whom we can draw profit. Divine love is never profiteering. The true children of God, those whose life is from God, share his universal, disinterested, non-profiteering love.}

Matthew 25 associates hospitality with the joy of eternal life. Persons who, even though unwittingly, had been hospitable to the Son of Man are welcomed into the Kingdom of God.\footnote{16}{The basis for predicating sacred of hospitality is the biblical revelation of God’s acceptance of and reward for the hospitality of Abraham and Sarah. They, like the blessed in the Last Judgment scene of Matthew 25, were unaware of their having hosted the Host of the World/God. The blessed in Matthew 25 were defined by the godly spirit of hospitality, giving food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, and clothing to the naked. They were generous, not selfish; they were givers, not takers; they were thoughtful, not thoughtless; they were godly, not godless.} Jesus’ parables of banquets and wedding feasts associate God’s hospitality with joy. Invitations to banquets are a call to share the joy and festivity of the host. The elder son in the parable of the prodigal son is the resentful refuter of festivity. The parable of the wise and foolish virgins associates participation in the hospitality of the bridegroom’s wedding feast with wisdom. It is an eschatological festivity and hospitality that eludes the foolish.

The Beauty of God’s Saving Hospitality

The Fathers, from Justin (165 a.d.) onwards, were convinced that the beauty and attractiveness of the faith are the best evidence for its truth. We are drawn to Christ, according to Augustine, when we delight in truth, in blessedness, in holiness, and in eternal
life. Beauty is the unerring pointer to truth and the good. “Something that has existed since the beginning, something that we have heard, and have seen with our eyes; that we have watched and touched with our hands: the Word, who is life—this is our subject. We are writing this to you to make your joy complete.”17 God has let his glory-beauty radiate on the face of his beloved incarnate Son and from there into the hearts of believers.18

Without the beautiful, the good loses its attractiveness and its true cogency. The beautiful, its revealed equivalent found in glory, is the most ‘influential’ of the transcendental. Christ came not only to teach the truth and to bring about the good but, above all, to radiate the splendor of the love that saves the world. His intention is that we might forever participate in “what no eye has ever seen, nor ear ever heard, nor the heart of man ever imagined,” namely to experience, “all God has in store for those who love him.”19 He is the Son who allows us to see his glory as of the only begotten Son who is nearest the Father’s heart and is full of grace and truth.20 Hospitality is associated with beauty. The Greek word for beauty derives from the verb “to beckon.” Beauty beckons or attracts us. The hospitable banquet giver of the parables invites guests to his festivities. Beauty is the inviting quality of the self-giving host. The adjective kalos means both “good” and “beautiful”; hence, the Beautiful Shepherd is the Good Shepherd whose beauty consists in the love that lays down his life for others and draws them to him. The Eucharistic hospitality of bread and wine in communion celebrates the self-sacrificing love of the Beautiful Shepherd whose beauty draws us to him.

The transforming power of messianic hospitality in Isaiah 25 liberates us from sadness and death. The hospitality of God’s messiah makes us joyfully hospitable persons (the sacramental effect of the Eucharist) just as God’s love makes us lovely, and his friendship makes us friendly: “See how they love one another.”21 We are all God’s guests on planet earth, much like an airport hotel. It is here God hosts us until the next flight to the mansions where he will host those who love their divine host. Each day, flights arrive with all God’s newly-created persons to whom he has given free tickets as his guests on planet earth. None of the new arrivals paid for their ticket. And God not only hosts everyone on planet earth, but he also knocks on our doors looking for hospitality. “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.”22 Our generous Host (gratia operans) has provided us with all the resources for becoming reciprocally hospitable (gratia cooperans). Beginning with Adam and Eve in paradise, God hosts all persons within his creation.

17 1 John 1:1-4.
19 1 Corinthians 2:9-10.
20 John 1:14, 18.
21 John 13:35.
22 Revelation 3:20.
Abraham is the paradigm of human reciprocity in hosting the three angel guests, unwittingly hosting his divine Host who rewards this hospitality with the promise of which Jesus Christ is the fulfillment.\textsuperscript{23} Abraham’s hospitality is that of the welcoming human heart that hears the Lord knocking at the door and opens it for communion with him.\textsuperscript{24} Mary’s “Let it be” is that of the welcoming human heart of the new creation. The hospitality of Abraham achieves its fulfillment in the hospitality of Mary’s welcoming heart, hearing the Lord who stands and knocks at her door, and welcomes him into her life. Mary’s hospitality participates in that of the Triune God, whose Son became man that all humankind might enjoy God’s eternal hospitality in the mansions that his crucified and risen Son has prepared for those who open their doors in hospitality to him.

Three Key Moments of Divine and Human Hospitality in Salvation History

The Abraham pattern of divine and human hospitality recurs throughout the Bible. From the time of the promise to Abraham, to its fulfillment in Christ and at the Last Judgment, the Host of the world and all humankind is welcomed and shown hospitality in three key moments of salvation history by persons who had no idea who they were hosting. Abraham hosted his three visitors; the Samaritan woman at the well is asked to host Jesus with the water he had requested; and the blessed of the Father had no idea they had hosted the hungry and thirsty Son of Man:

- Abraham: At the time of the promise (Genesis), Abraham unknowingly hosts the Host of the World.

\textsuperscript{23} We predicate “sacred” of hospitality on the basis of the historical biblical revelation’s account of the hospitality that Abraham and Sarah showed to their three visitors, the foundational event of the world’s three great monotheistic religions. Abraham and Sarah did not realize that they were being hospitable to the Host of the World, the God of Israel who would eventually liberate Abraham’s people from Egypt under the leadership of Moses in the Exodus.

The table fellowship of the Jewish Seder was the central liturgical commemoration of the Exodus at which an empty seat was left for the promised Messiah. Jewish Christians believe it was eventually occupied by Jesus at the Last Supper, the table fellowship of God, Host of the World, and humankind.

\textsuperscript{24} See Revelation 3:20.
• Samaritan woman: At the fulfillment of the promise in Christ the messiah (John 4), the Host asks for hospitality.
• The just at the Last Judgment, at the end of time (Matthew 25), unknowingly hosted the Host of the World.

The scriptures of the Christian community of faith tell us in these three key moments of salvation history that we encounter the Other in our hospitality to others—we encounter God in our hospitality towards strangers. In all three stories, there is an implicitly theocentric self-transcendence, transcending ourselves, our families and our nations, in welcoming the transcendent Ultimate Reality that is the Origin, Ground, and Destiny of all humankind. In hosting those whom the Host of humankind is hosting, we are hosting the Host.

That the hospitable persons in the above three instances were unwittingly hosting the Host of the world implies that their hospitality was not calculated on a *quid pro quo* basis. Their hospitality had all the freedom and sheer gratuity of divine hospitality, what we mean by “grace.” By the grace of God we are what we are. Our worth is a gift given to us from the moment of our creation. The marvel of our life in Christ is not in getting something from outside to inside by achieving. Instead the marvel is in coming to recognize what is *already* inside by the grace of creation and learning to bring this outside, through sharing and serving, divine and human hospitality. It consists of seeing the first thing that happened to us—our birth—in the way God sees it, and regarding it with God as something “very, very good.”

The abundance of the Generous One is the ultimate source and resource of our Christian hope in the face of death, grounding our conviction that after death there is more. There is an artesian well in everyone, and its Source is the abundance of the Generous One, the Host of the world. We are what we are because of who our Parent is, and once this identity becomes deeply rooted in us, then an unself-conscious giving of self will become our way of life. This is another way of saying that we “inherit the kingdom prepared for us from the foundation of the world.”²⁵ Our creation is, at end, an act of generosity—God sharing his bounty. We have been created in the image of the Generous One for generosity. Our Creator’s magnanimity lies at the root of our being the kind of creatures that we are meant to be. Just as there is delight in our recognizing how much we have that we do not deserve or create, so there is a godly delight in seeing our hospitality bless and energize others.

**The Hospitable City of God**

The City of God is the community that welcomes and enjoys the hospitality of God. Its hospitality implies a real relationship among those who are different, and the willingness to be moved out of our comfort zone to be transformed in the encounter. The German word for hospitality, *Gastfreundschaft*, which means friendship for the guest, captures the meaning of this transformation with its implication that hospitality creates a free space.

²⁵ Matthew 25:34.
where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an alien. The Christian community of faith believes that God extends to all humankind a divine and inexhaustible welcome in the transforming experience of hospitality, where the door is always open, the table always set, the arms flung wide, outstretched.

The hospitable spirit of the City of God transcends mere tolerance, or passive magnanimity of the powerful towards the less favored. The Rule of St. Benedict (Chapter 53) contributes to our understanding of Christian hospitality, when it affirms that “All guests who arrive are to be received as Christ…. for he himself will say, I was the stranger and you took me in.” That Christ is the stranger implies more than merely giving food and board to a passing guest. “All guests” implies and emphasizes the importance of inclusiveness and its particular link to strangeness or otherness, in contrast to the familiarity of only those who are like us. The second phrase, those “who arrive,” underscores this point even more. It suggests the unexpected, not merely those who did not communicate in advance, but those who are a surprise to us in broader terms. Christian disciples are not to be choosy about the company they keep. The nicely ambiguous Latin word hospes can be translated as ‘stranger’ as well as ‘guest.’ The former sense is reinforced by the Rule’s reference to Matthew 25:35. And finally, suscipiantur is literally ‘to be received,’ but its deeper meaning is ‘to be cherished.’

The spirit of hospitality in the City of God can be identified with the concept of solidarity, the moral imperative based on a belief in the fundamental unity of the human family rooted in the doctrines of the Trinity and the Communion of Saints, and demanding a profound conversion of heart and a conscious commitment to the quest for the common good as an essential ethical virtue. With the spirit of hospitality, the City of God sees the world with the vision of God—as a mixture of good and bad—but most importantly it realizes that from all eternity the gaze of God is redemptive, transforming, and enlivening.

Closing Scriptural Readings on Hospitality

The Sunday preface 8 in Ordinary Time proclaims the unifying power of the Triune God operative in the Eucharistic liturgy:

It is truly right and just, our duty and salvation, always and everywhere to give you things, Lord, holy Father, almighty and eternal God. For when your children were scattered afar by sin, through the blood of your Son and power of your Spirit, you gathered them together again to yourself, that a people formed as one by the unity of the Trinity, made the body of Christ and the temple of the Holy Spirit, might, to the praise of your manifold wisdom, be manifest as the Church. And so, in company with the choirs of angels, we praise you, and with joy we acclaim: Holy, holy, holy Lord God of hosts.
Hebrews 13:2 (New International Version [NIV])

Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.

Romans 12:13 (Jerusalem Bible)

Be joyful in hope, persevere in hardship; keep praying regularly; share with any of God’s holy people who are in need; look for opportunities to be hospitable.

Romans 12:13 (NIV)

13 Share with the Lord’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

Isaiah 25:6-9 (NIV)

The Messianic Banquet Prophecy of God’s Universal Hospitality Creating the Communion, Community, and Communication of all Humankind under the Sovereignty of God’s Love.

6 On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare
a feast of rich food for all peoples,
a banquet of aged wine—
the best of meats and the finest of wines.

7 On this mountain he will destroy
the shroud that enfolds all peoples,
the sheet that covers all nations;
8 he will swallow up death forever.
The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears
from all faces;
he will remove his people’s disgrace
from all the earth.

9 In that day they will say,
“Surely this is our God;
we trusted in him, and he saved us.
This is the Lord, we trusted in him;
let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation.”
The Lord has spoken.
Christ the Savior (Pantokrator).
Sixth-century encaustic icon from Saint Catherine’s Monastery, Mount Sinai.

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Abraham and the Angels by Aert de Gelder (1645-1727).
Oil on canvas circa 1680–85.
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