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Brothers of Charity: Hospitality as a Community of Brothers

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Introduction

Hospitality is a key foundational value from which we derive part of our name, ‘Hospital Brothers of Saint Vincent.’ Living hospitality in the spirit of Saint Vincent de Paul was laid down as one of the key pillars of our charism. Later, when by name we officially adopted ‘Brothers of Charity,’ this phrase became a meaningful addition to both our name and charism: we would be practicing hospitality in a loving way in the spirit of Saint Vincent.

What is hospitality?

In ancient civilizations, practicing hospitality was already considered to be one of the cornerstones of humanization and morality. We know the Greek word xenos, meaning ‘stranger’ but also ‘guest.’ The stem is found in the words xenophobia, which indicates a negative attitude towards the stranger, and philoxenia, which means love and hospitality for the stranger. Another Greek word is oikos, which means ‘house,’ the place where I belong, where I have rights and obligations. In Latin, we have the word hospes, meaning ‘guest.’ This word is cognate with hostis, which means ‘enemy’; the word ‘hostile’ is derived from it. So, the word ‘hospitality’ is derived from the Latin hospes.

When we reflect on offering hospitality to others we always have to start from the notion of privacy, which everyone searches for in their very own way and claims for themselves. Having a space where you can be yourself is an important aspect of life. Hospitality exactly expresses the will to share this privacy with the other in a very personal way. We break down the walls that we have built around our privacy and we allow the other to enter the safe enclosure. Hospitality signifies welcoming the stranger; the stranger becomes a guest and receives the liberty to be himself and to express himself. Henri Nouwen says it very aptly: “The paradox of hospitality is that it creates an emptiness, not a fearful emptiness, but a friendly emptiness where strangers can enter and discover themselves as created free; free to sing their own song, speak their own languages, dance their own dances; free also to leave and follow their own vocations.”

The image of the friendly space is very typical of hospitality; in this space, the stranger becomes a guest, where he is accepted as the other without having to adjust. The fact that he is a stranger is respected and even appreciated; he can speak his own language, sing his own song, and dance his own dance. A space is created where he can feel at home; a subculture is created where he can cultivate his own culture. This means that practicing hospitality is not an easy matter because we allow another person in the space which, initially, was meant for us and which we naturally want to protect. The closed space is opened, with the risk of being misused by the other, the stranger, inappropriately occupied to such an extent that, ultimately, I do not feel at home there anymore. The entire problem

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with strangers or foreigners, xenophobia, and the fact of whether or not they are accepted in another country rests on this experience.

A brief philosophical reflection

When he discusses hospitality, philosopher and theologian Karl Barth defines a theory of circles within which he describes the relationships between people of the same family, the same neighborhood, the same town or city, and even of the same nation. We can all draw circles in which we will place our neighbors closer or further away from us. It is a well-known exercise in psychology and group dynamics. Every circle that we draw around ourselves includes and excludes at the same time. People are accepted into the circle while others are excluded from it based on family ties, race, skin color, ethnic background, language or religion, all grounds for a discriminating attitude. Sometimes, the circle becomes a border, a wall, a curtain. We all know the Berlin Wall, the Israeli West Bank barrier, the Korean wall, the Iron Curtain. They were all put up out of fear, allegedly to protect people against the strangers on the other side. Hospitality commences when we take down these walls, including the walls that we put up, when we allow more people into the inner circle and make it bigger.

Only once these walls are down can freedom commence and can we add quality to our hospitality, as Barth calls it. To do so, he recommends a four-step method. First of all, we must look the one we meet in the eye. This seems quite logical, yet it is not. We often tend to look the other way, we avert our eyes and refuse to see the other. It does happen that sometimes the person to whom we are talking suddenly finds someone else more important and looks away. When that happens, we may feel we no longer exist to that person.

Vincent de Paul helps a sick man to his carriage.
Oil on canvas by Pierre-Nicolas Brisset, 1858.
Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online
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Secondly, we must give the other a hearing; listen to him. There are people who can only listen to themselves and turn a deaf ear to the stories of others. In his pedagogy, the psychologist Thomas Gordon teaches us the importance of listening actively, which is so much more important than talking.

The third step is the willingness to help. After having looked the other in the eye and having listened to him or her, one will reveal a willingness to help. This is where humanity remembers that, first and foremost, we are fellows, our brother’s keeper, accountable and jointly responsible for our neighbor’s well-being, for the respect and possible restoration of human dignity.

Finally, we must do all of this with joy. The joy that radiates in our relationship with the other will determine the quality of the hospitality that we wish to display. The joy with which we approach the other should ease or relieve tensions, which the other can experience when entering unknown territory. It is a reflection on how we should take these points into account in our encounters with others; how do we look at the other, how do we listen, how do we show that we want to help, and that we will do so with joy and gladness.

**Obstacles for hospitality**

The great migration wave near the end of the previous century resulted in the fact that hospitality became a very important topic, even on a social level. At the same time, we see that there are many obstacles on the road that make practicing hospitality rather problematic. The biggest obstacle for hospitality is probably individualism, which has thoroughly permeated our modern-day culture. In individualism, a person fully turns to himself and every bit of energy goes into self-realization, as it is called, while everything that blocks this is painstakingly avoided. Modern-day society thrives on an ethic of absolute self-realization, in which everything is focused on the well-being of the individual as the highest good. This individualism contrasts sharply with personalism, in which men and women are considered our neighbor, and through which our development, including our self-realization, is linked to and even made subordinate to our neighbor’s development and care. In a personalistic morality, the presence of the neighbor—and the guest—is considered a wealth and an invitation; in an individualistic morality, the neighbor—and the guest—is rather a threat.

In a narcissistic society, which we can label our modern-day society, there is only room for the individual. We are what we own, consuming only reinforces our individualism. When we find ourselves in an environment with limitations, restraints with regard to space and consumer goods, every increase in the number of other individuals is a threat to our own individualism. Every other becomes a competitor in our pursuit for possession and consumption. The entire Christian message offers a strong counterbalance to this mentality of ‘every man for himself.’ The Gospel urges us to consider our ‘being a man’ as ‘being a
fellow man,’ and to give shape to the love of neighbor in our readiness to share with each other, be hospitable to one another, help those who are in need, literally making ourselves subordinate to the well-being of the other. This Christian message and praxis can cause a certain counterculture, a realization of the commandment of love for the neighbor, for the guest, for the stranger, for the enemy. It is a commandment to see God in the neighbor, not just as a possibility but as a reality, and even to see the stranger as our neighbor. Therefore, every time we turn down a stranger, refuse hospitality, we turn down God; we refuse to offer hospitality to God Himself.

Hospitality as a community of brothers with a Vincentian mentality

The basic attitude that is fundamentally important when practicing hospitality is that of the encounter with Jesus, the actualization of the commandment to see God Himself in every neighbor. We all know that this is not easy, for Jesus sometimes succeeds in disguising himself rather well. Sometimes it is hard to descry his likeness in that concrete neighbor and we feel greatly challenged to see, meet, and love Jesus in this person. However, in these difficult situations the commandment of love truly becomes a commandment, and hospitality becomes a task. Receiving friends and making time for them does not require much of an effort; for people who we do not get along with, or who bear some sort of threat, the duty is quite a bit harder. In those moments we must be very heedful of the words of Jesus: “Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine (for this difficult neighbor, for this stranger who repels me…), you did for me.”3 To Saint Vincent, it was seeing the icon of Christ in the face of the poor.

As a young student, when I took part in a summer camp with severely mentally challenged children, a brother teacher asked me to see Jesus in these children. When the

3 Matthew 25:40.
first camping session was over, I had not succeeded in realizing his request. It required
more time and effort, and probably the work of God’s mercy, to open my eyes and see Jesus
himself in these children. The miracle happened when I was washing these children’s feet.
Jesus had done so as well.

A Brother of Charity’s hospitality will particularly take shape in care for the poor,
the sick, persons with disabilities. We are to provide a real home for them. Many of them
cannot find a place in society, sometimes they literally have not got a roof over their heads,
or they are cast aside by their families. By our actions, they should experience that we love
them, that, in them, we discern the face of Jesus, that we accept and appreciate them, and
that we want to move forward with them as their brother. The value of our name is done
full justice here: brother, becoming and being a brother to those who no longer have a
brother, or who had no one who considered them a brother.

A Cambodian psychiatrist’s question has left a lasting impression on me: “May I call
you brother?” He had lost his brothers during Pol Pot’s regime. It was so important for him
to see me as his brother. For just one moment, I could be this man’s brother. When we are a
brother to another person, it means that we want to create a home, like brothers feeling at
home in a family. It is therefore our task to make sure that our homes and institutes where
people reside or stay temporarily become and are places where people can feel at home,
where they can feel safe and secure. We know that for many it is only a temporary home,
but that is not a reason it should be less of a home.

I especially felt this hospitality when I was a pupil at a school of the Brothers of
Charity. The brothers, and the brother headmaster most of all, understood the art of carrying
out their role as brother through their capacity as teachers. The school had its very own
atmosphere; it was a nice place to be. They addressed the pupils by their first name, they
knew the parents, they empathized with the ups and downs of their pupils. And it was
definitely not a small school. The moment when, after a few days, the brother headmaster
addressed me by my first name on the playground, and asked me how I was doing, that
sense of feeling unfamiliar, like an outsider or a stranger, completely disappeared. Indeed,
I felt a bit lost in that big school with no fewer than 80 students the first year of grammar
school. The head master expressed his concern for my minor distress and found time to
talk to me about it, as a brother, as a concerned father or mother.

When I became the director of a large psychiatric hospital one of the patients addressed
me. He said, “Brother, you are always here and you sleep under the same roof.” Indeed, our
quarters were on the same floor as the dormitory where this patient was accommodated.
It gave him a feeling of safety, of security, possibly. Unknowingly, we made sure that this
patient felt at home in our institute. It was during a time when many chronic patients were
still staying in our hospital, and several of them had small tasks to do. Some cleaned the
refectory of the brothers, and did so proudly. Others performed the shopping, and one
patient faithfully brought me my mail every day. When he was asked what his job was, he
proudly replied that he was my secretary. We were one big family, even though there was a great distance between our way of life and theirs. Such things are somewhat lost in our modern-day, over-structured institutes. Still, it pleases me when I see that during a visit to an institution the director who accompanies me knows the names of the chronic patients, and to witness the fact that they are glad to talk to him. These are small signs that say a great deal about the hospitality experienced in the institute.

As a community, we find that discrimination is still ubiquitous. Psychiatric patients are still excluded from society, drug-dependent persons are still looked at askance, and persons with disabilities are still considered inferior. Making a stand against discrimination can best be achieved through offering very specific examples of hospitality toward these oppressed groups. It is ever so painful to find that we are sometimes driven away in certain countries when we wish to develop a home for chronic psychiatric patients in a certain neighborhood, or a therapeutic community for drug-dependent persons. “No addicts, psychiatric patients, or disabled people in my backyard,” remains a harsh declaration. However, today, we are happy to say that a gradual change of mentality is occurring. The words spoken in Yamoussoukro, Ivory Coast, by the bishop and minister at the inauguration of our new psychiatric nursing home still echo in my mind: “Brothers, thank you for cleaning up our city.” And, indeed, a number of psychiatric patients who were once wandering the city streets, completely neglected, are now rehabilitated and functioning relatively normally in the city once again.

Today, we must also take heed of the strangers and refugees around us. This is an acute problem in some countries where brothers are in close contact. After the genocide in Rwanda several brothers devoted themselves to be near to the refugees; they even shared a part of their life in the camps. It was a very powerful experience; a new form of apostolate even grew from it. The care afforded to education in the camps, especially in Tanzania, was a new and fresh interpretation of our apostolate in education, and involved nothing but hospitality. Our community life was thoroughly changed by it. In other places, brothers are living in open communities with guests, strangers, and persons with disabilities. Sometimes, new reception centers for specific groups come into being—for instance, for the Romani in Belgium. There are brothers who dedicate themselves to refugees and help them find a way to integrate into their new environment. Some provide additional support in teaching children who come from abroad. There are also communities that offer temporary accommodation to strangers until a more permanent solution is found. These are specific, contemporary interpretations of our mission of hospitality as ‘Hospital Brothers.’

In our Rule of Life, we read that the visitor to the community should be welcome. He should feel that he is accepted with consideration and attention. Are our communities truly capable of creating this open space where our guest can be himself, where he can have a breather? Are we offering him or her that security and, at the same time, that freedom to be themselves? The fact of whether or not one feels at home in an unfamiliar community will
depend on little details: the care that went into readying the guestroom, a clear schedule for the day that clarifies when one is expected in chapel or at the table, bottled water, some fruit, etc. These are all expressions of a mentality of hospitality.

Let us recall Karl Barth’s scheme: do we see, listen, and help the other with joy? Is our first reaction in an encounter a reaction of joy, of spontaneous welcome? Does our time also belong to others, and do we enjoy sacrificing it to welcome, to guide our neighbor, and to listen to his or her story? When we are able to answer affirmatively to these questions, as is our hope to do so, then we will live and experience the virtues found in our original name ‘Hospital Brothers of Saint Vincent,’ not simply as history or heritage but as a permanent task, a mission constantly in process.
Vincent de Paul helps a sick man to his carriage.
Oil on canvas by Pierre-Nicolas Brisset, 1858.

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Vincent de Paul and the poor. Giving alms to a kneeling man.

Original in Vincentian house, Udine, Italy.

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