

HOSPITALITY IN THE TIME OF COVID – TALK

The recent headlines speak of ‘hospitality thrown under the bus.’ The change in human interaction brought about by this crisis has seen online meetings, online shopping, experience exponential growth, while traditional hospitality businesses face ruin. This very retreat is an example of how even monasteries have had to adapt.

Now hospitality has always been central to the life of monasteries. I can still remember my first visit here more than 30 years ago, and the warmth of the welcome I received as a guest. Over the centuries, in different contexts, guests have found monasteries places of refuge and recreation.

The current change to hospitality has hit monasteries, as it has hit businesses, and as it has hit you in your families and friendships. Either we cannot meet up physically, or, if we do meet up, we cannot express hospitality in the usual way, handshakes, embraces, hugs, the companionship of sitting alongside guests, the intimacy of sharing a meal or a drink. How do we prevent these necessary restrictions becoming a permanent mindset? How we resist the understandable temptation to withdraw, almost to welcome isolation, so that lockdown becomes a sort of shutdown?

Any crisis contains a call to change, to break through to a greater depth. Perhaps we had been guilty of reducing hospitality to a department in our monastery, a sector of our economy, a slot in my diary. What would it mean once again to see hospitality as a sacred duty, rather than an optional extra, to be filed under leisure, part of my social life, how I entertain and impress?

Hospitality cannot be reduced simply to being nice to guests, to a set of social skills. How we respond to this crisis is not simply to make our drinks parties online. Can we see hospitality not as part of my social life, but as part of my spiritual life, the practice of my faith, something central to how I see the world?

I’ve come to see that as well as the more obvious external hospitality to strangers there is an internal hospitality we can offer to those we already know, to the families, the monks we live with, those we can so easily take for granted. And this hospitality is not just a physical welcome. I think prayer is a form of hospitality, particularly for those with whom we cannot now meet up. I hope it is not too sentimental to say - if we can’t hold them in our arms, we

can hold them in our hearts, if we can't wrap our arms around them, we can wrap our prayers around them.

In this month devoted to Mary, praying the rosary for our family and friends is a form of hospitality. When I pray for you, it is not as a generous host showering my largesse on you. I ask Mary to *pray for us sinners* – I am alongside you, I am asking the grace of God for both of us. I am welcoming you as a guest so that we both become the guests of God.

Because this sort of hospitality is not one way. We might like to be the host, welcoming guests into our home, welcoming back family members, even welcoming the lord at communion, to enter under my roof, But that doesn't mean we remain in control. When Abraham welcomed three strangers, they brought about the unexpected blessing of a son Isaac. When Zacchaeus welcomed Jesus into his house, his life changed completely. When we receive communion, we become part of the body of Christ. These are not private moments.

When a host shares his generosity to show his power, he trumps you with his tower, so to speak. But Jesus at the last supper was not inviting his disciples to an act of fealty, I am your lord providing this for you, do you swear allegiance, loyalty, commitment in return? He left us a simple, specific invitation, take and eat, this is my body, this is me giving myself to you, not expecting you to give yourselves to me. This is the whole dynamic of the incarnation, God coming to us. Behold I stand at the door and knock. We will make our home with you. The word became flesh and dwelt among us. Throughout the gospels Jesus is a guest in all sorts of different homes. One of the more memorable graces I grew up with was 'Lord, be our guest at all times'. Even if it is still not possible for us to get to Mass, we can welcome Jesus as Mary welcomed him into her home, listening as his feet, as we do in Lectio. This is the welcome the good soil gives to the word, receiving it at the depth needed for a rich harvest.

This sort of hospitality is a sort of discernment. In the sacraments, we discern the grace of God coming to us through the elements of creation, through bread, wine, oil, water. Benedict urges his monks to recognize Christ coming to them through surprising channels – through new monks, through sick monks, through visiting monks, and through guests. Again, this hospitality is not just 'welcome to my world, receive my generosity' but 'how can I engage with your world, receive your gifts?'

In a recent letter on the 1600th anniversary of the death of St Jerome, the great biblical translator, Pope Francis described the work of translation as a form of linguistic hospitality, building the bridges needed for genuine encounter. And in the even more recent encyclical Fratelli Tutti, there is one brief but pithy paragraph on the monastic contribution to fraternity. ‘Hospitality was one specific way of rising to the challenge and the gift present in an encounter with those outside one’s own circle. The monks realized that the values they sought to cultivate had to be accompanied by a readiness to move beyond themselves in openness to others.’

Does this sort of hospitality need to be religious? Religious people are not automatically more hospitable – as Jesus pointed out in his story about a priest, a Levite and a Samaritan. In fact, Fratelli Tutti includes an extended discussion of this parable. The Samaritan gave up time, energy, resources but without any self-conscious ‘look at me’. Likewise, in the parable of the sheep and goats, the righteous did not realise what they were doing – when did we see you a stranger and welcome you?

It does not seem, however, as if our increasingly secular society has become noticeably more hospitable. More obvious is the desire to protect and defend particular interests. Pope Francis comments ‘We have gorged ourselves on networking and lost the taste of fraternity.’ This crisis gives us the chance to reflect - how can our faith provide both the reason and the resources for a deeper hospitality’.

Otherwise we can end up compartmentalizing the different categories of guest, the different moments of Hospitality, the different types of welcome. Ultimately, however, there is only one guest, Christ, and our life is called to be one great act of welcome

This view of hospitality is a necessary corrective to those images of life as a journey, where we can be anxious to get places, rather than welcoming those we meet on the way – West Africa punctuality, and to those images of life as building, a career, a home, a family, where we can be anxious to succeed, rather than welcoming others into what we build. Can we even see death as a mutual welcoming – at the end we welcome the God who welcomes us.