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Hospitality: Expanding the Heart

DAN HOMAN

There is an old story making the rounds again. The story involves a mother trying to awaken her son for Sunday morning church. “Time to get up and get dressed son,” she says. “It’s Sunday, and you need to go to church.” “But I don’t want to go,” replies the son, “and I’ll give you two good reasons: they don’t like me there and I don’t like them.” “Well,” responds Mom, “I’ll give you two good reasons why you *need* to go: first of all, you are 51 years old; and second, you’re the pastor!”

It seems to me that since the events of September 11, 2001, we have more reason than ever to want to stay “under the covers” like the son in the story. Look at the way we live. If you shop, you have to prove you’re not a shoplifter by going through *their* equipment on the way out of the store. If you travel, you have to prove you’re not a terrorist by going through *their* equipment in the airport. On the surface it would seem we have more reason than ever for fear and prejudice and hatred. But as Christians, we cannot give in to that!

I believe we can learn from a man who lived 1,500 years ago. I am referring to Benedict of Nursia. If someone had told Benedict in his lifetime that we would talk about him and his vision of the world today, he would have laughed. But Benedict was a spiritual giant; he is considered the patron of Europe and the father of Western monasticism. Benedictine monks are credited with saving Western civilization. They accomplished that in two ways: they hid much of the literature and art up to that time in the basements of their monasteries to protect it from the barbarian hordes; and secondly, they taught the barbarians how to farm. Can you imagine the courage it took to approach barbarian men and women, and teach them that there is another way to live without stealing and destroying other things? What kind of vision would enable one to attempt something like that?

From the beginning, Benedict’s monasteries were known for their hospitality. I hesitate to use that word because for many people, the word conjures up Martha Stewart-type linens and correct place settings. But the word hospitality comes from the Latin word for guest, the same root word from which we derive hospital, hotel, hostel, hospice, etc. *Hospitality is not about using the correct fork, but about mutual reverence, about seeing the divine in the stranger with the eye of the heart.*

Many of the first monks previously were barbarians. Some of the early monks were former Roman soldiers; some had been slaves. Some were highly educated men, others were illiterate. Some had been wealthy before joining the monastery; others had been



poor. Benedict brought them together in the love of God through mutual reverence. He taught the monks to reverence one another and to reverence the guests.

Benedict was a realist. He knew the monastery would never be without guests. Instead of treating guests as a problem, he saw them as a means of grace for the monks. "The guest should be treated as Christ," says Benedict's famous Rule.

Because as humans we were created as social beings, most of the grief and the joy in our lives comes from being in relationships. Our most important relationship, of course, is with God. But then there are his people. Jesus said to love your neighbor. Hospitality is how.

Hospitality answers hostility. Hospitality is a vision, a stance toward life, an openness of mind and heart. The people we encounter daily at the gas station and grocery store and flower shop are not incidental to our lives. Lives have been changed forever over a few words spoken at a bus stop.

As a priest for many years, I have, of course, visited many nursing homes. For the last year of her life, my own mom was a resident in one. At that time I walked, by habit, at a very brisk pace. (I am the son of a door-to-door milkman.) And so at the beginning of my mother's stay I would walk swiftly from the front door of the facility to the back corridor where her room was located. I believe I usually had a smile on my face, but as I hurried past maybe 30 residents on the way, I didn't look any of them in the eye. When I realized what I had been doing, I was ashamed. I slowed my gait and looked directly at each person I passed. I smiled or waved or touched the shoulders of each one. The difference was startling. As human beings, we

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have the powerful ability to connect with others. It's a shame when we don't. *If we close ourselves to the stranger, we close ourselves to the sacred.*

I can't help but notice in recent years the number of shows on television that feature eliminating people. It all started, I believe, with *Survivor*, the show on which you lie, cheat, betray, schmooze, make promises, and then don't keep them. If you are the best at all that, everybody else gets voted off the island and you win! How many bachelors, "bachelorettes," Joe Schmucks, weakest links, and appren-

tices can you stand? Notice they interview the "losers" on the way out: "How come *you* lost?" or "How come they voted you off?" These shows must be popular for a reason. I'm not a psychologist, but I wonder if deep down many of us are afraid that we are "losers." And so we're more comfortable when somebody else is in the spotlight. That's just a guess. What I know for sure is that Jesus was not about eliminating people. He was about embracing people: treating each person we meet as a brother or sister.

To be a hospitable person, one does not need to change one's personality. An introverted person need not become an extrovert. We had a visiting monk from Sri Lanka, Fr. Thomas; he was definitely an introvert. He was always busy in his room, reading, writing, planning classes, etc. But if you knocked on his door, he said pleasantly, "Come in!" He didn't even know who you were yet, but he was glad to see you. No matter what he was involved in, Father Thomas felt that a knock on the door represented what God wanted him to do now.

According to St. Benedict, reading between the lines of his rule, we are all guests on this earth, we are all a little lost, and we are all looking for a place to rest awhile. This place of rest is not always going to be a monastery; this place of rest could be your heart or mine!

During the winter of 2003, a madman broke into a monastery, Conception Abbey in Missouri. The man shot and killed two of the monks, wounded two others, then killed himself in the Abbey Church. Nobody knew the motivation; the man lived 60 miles from the monastery, and none of the monks knew him. When

the monks died, many people came quickly: police, ambulance attendants, friends, and neighbors of the monks. The wounded monks were placed in an ambulance and sent to the hospital. The bodies of the dead monks were loaded in another ambulance. Then one of the policemen said to Abbot Gregory, "We will get a separate ambulance here for the shooter, Father." And Abbot Gregory replied, "No, put them in together—they were all children of God." Can you believe that? So soon after two of his brothers were lying dead at his feet, the abbot could say with conviction, "They were all children of God." If we lived like that, we would truly light up the world the way Jesus said we could.

A summary of this article could be found in a song by Jewel called "Hands." These are excerpts from the song, which was recorded on her 1998 album, *Spirit*:

"If I could tell the world just one thing, it would be that we're all OK, and not to worry, because worry is wasteful and useless in times like these ... I will gather myself around my faith ... where there is a man who has no voice there ours shall go singing ... In the end, only kindness matters ... I will get down on my knees and I will pray ... We are God's eyes, God's mind, God's heart; we are God's hands."

DAN HOMAN

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