

Mission of Hospitality

One day Elisha came to Shunem, where there was a woman of influence, who pressed him to dine with her. Afterward, whenever he passed by, he would stop there to dine. So she said to her husband, “I know that he is a holy man of God. Since he visits us often, let us arrange a little room on the roof and furnish it for him with a bed, table, chair, and lamp, so that when he comes to us he can stay there.”

2 Kings 4:8–10

Nickolas Kleespie, O.S.B.

There is something profound about the actions of the unnamed woman of influence from Shunem. She sensed the prophet Elisha’s holiness, and she not only invited him in for a bite to eat and something to drink, but she also went beyond the norm and arranged a guest suite for him on the roof! If we hear, with Benedictine ears, her story and interaction with Elisha, we cannot help but think of her *hospitality*. She reminds us of Saint Benedict’s call to offer warmth, acceptance, and joy in welcoming others.

In chapter 53 of the *Rule* (On the Reception of Guests), Benedict challenges us to “Let all guests who arrive be received like Christ, for he is going to say, ‘I came as a guest, and you received me’” (53.1). Yes, this can be an overused catch phrase to describe a cliché Benedictine value, “Let all be received as Christ.” However, the Shunammite woman extended hospitality not out of a sense of duty or responsibility but as a very part of who she was. Hospitality became the

identifying character of this unnamed woman—just as today monks extend hospitality, not out of an obligation to our observance of a Benedictine value but as an expression of our very identity. Benedictine hospitality means seeking Christ together, seeing Christ in the other and welcoming him or her into our midst.

A key element of how our community extends hospitality is through the ministry of the Saint John’s Abbey Guesthouse. The guesthouse mission states that “the Benedictine monks of Saint John’s Abbey welcome guests of all faiths to experience the abiding presence of God with a praying community.” Extending hospitality, however, is not merely the responsibility of those who minister at the guesthouse, nor the responsibility only of Benedictines. Rather, it is central to Christian identity. Indeed, all of us are called to a life of generous hospitality. All are called to welcome Christ in each person we meet.

It can be easy to take for granted why we do the things we do or even lose sight of our Christian mission. So, it is good for us

at times to assess what is at the center of our lives, to recommit to the mission, and to put Jesus and living the Gospel front and center in our lives. Hospitality is just one way we are called to take seriously what it means to live in newness of life.

Jesus’ mission discourse (Matthew 10:40–42) elaborates on the theme of hospitality and its rewards. Jesus assures his disciples that mission in his name will involve them in the adventure of hospitality and will abundantly bless those who receive them. He makes hospitality central to the identity of a person who is to follow him. As in the case of the Shunammite woman and Elisha, Jesus promises, “whoever receives a prophet because he is a prophet, receives a prophet’s reward” (Matthew 10:41). An even larger context is revealed in the words “whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me” (10:40). In other words, Christian mission and hospitality are nothing less than living out a relationship with God.

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The Christ of the Breadlines, woodcut by Fritz Eichenberg, 1951

The adventure of hospitality is central to the mission of Catholic Worker houses across the country—an expression of their relationship with God. Through hospitality, through the sharing of our abundant resources and love, God is revealed. By feeding others, welcoming the homeless or those with criminal backgrounds, and advocating for peace and justice, the members of the Catholic Worker Movement demonstrate their commitment to the Gospel call to receive Christ and to offer a simple cup of cool water, the simple gift of love and hospitality. Dorothy Day writes, “When you love people, you see all the good in them, all the Christ in them. God sees Christ, His Son, in us and loves

us. And so we should see Christ in others, *and nothing else*, and love them. There can never be enough of it. There can never be enough thinking about it” (*The Catholic Worker*, April 1948).

Our Christian identity matters. It changes us. It calls us to rethink our value system, to review what truly counts, to

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recommit ourselves to what will last against all odds. Jesus asks us today and every day to reimagine our commitment to hospitality, to be a community of people dedicated to witnessing to the world what life could be like if we were willing to be transformed and changed. In the Eucharist, Christ offers us his body and blood—like a cup of cool water shared with a guest, the sacrifice of total self-giving. This is a strong reminder of the abiding commitment God has to sharing eternal hospitality with each of us.

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