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The Art of Biblical Hospitality

Biblical Reflection for 16th Sunday in Ordinary Time C

By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, JULY 13, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://zenit.org)).- What does it mean to be hospitable? Biblical stories extol hospitality as both a duty and a work of mercy. The desert "Bedouin" hospitality is a necessity for survival; and since this necessity falls upon all alike, any guest is entitled to hospitality from any host. The guest, once accepted by the host, is sacred, and must be protected from any danger even at the cost of the life of members of the family.

The good host makes a feast for his guest as is never prepared for his own family. The duty of the host to protect the guest is illustrated by the stories of Lot at Sodom (Genesis 19:1,8) and the man of Gibeah (Judges 19:16-24). Job boasts of hospitality (Job 31:23). God is certainly the generous host (Psalms 15:1; 23:5).

Many stories from the Books of Kings speak of hospitality. Each of the four stories of Chapter 4 describes in some way the power of God, through the prophet Elisha, breaking into hopeless situations and shattering them with a word of life. One of those stories is about a couple from the village of Shunem (just over the hill from the New Testament village of Nain in northern Israel) who provide food and lodging for the prophet Elisha; he in turn promises them a son, even though they had been married for a long time and remained childless.

The couple cares for a stranger who had impressed them by his dedication to God, prayer and social concerns. What the couple does seems quite simple at first -- after all, they seem to be influential people. Nonetheless, they interrupt their ordinary activities and private lives to care for Elisha, first with food at their table, then with overnight accommodations. And in their giving to him, they received so much more in return -- the promise of new life, despite the bitter years of barrenness. Their own gift to Elisha was magnified beyond their comprehension.

Abraham and Sarah welcome the world

Today's first reading from Genesis 18:1-10 presents Abraham as the model of the generous and hospitable host. In the charming biblical story, Abraham and Sarah welcomed the messengers of God with opened arms at the oaks of Mamre. Abraham is host, bringing water for the washing of feet and providing the shade of a tree for rest. The meal is a banquet, humorously described as "a little bread": a bushel of flour, curds, milk, and a choice calf! Sarah remains in the tent; society's customs forbid her from mingling with the male guests. She does the cooking, and nine months later the promise is fulfilled in the birth of her son, Isaac.

During the outdoor meal at the oaks of Mamre, God's word was shared in a carefully staged play. Hospitality is an art form that requires careful staging! The strangers at Mamre (who we know are God and angels) come to dinner to deliver a message: God promises Abraham and Sarah that the barren will rejoice.

Abraham's hospitality may appear to us to be a bit too lavish and excessive, but we must never forget the

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demanding tradition of the Middle East from which springs the Christian conviction regarding hospitality: in the guest, Christ is seen. In our every conversation, he is the silent listener.

Hospitality in the New Testament

The Greek word for hospitality is "philanthropia" meaning love of human beings, kindness. The virtue of hospitality is praised in the New Testament and it is enumerated among the works of charity by which we will be judged (Matthew 25:35ff). Jesus depends on it (Mark 1:29ff.; 2:15ff., etc.) He regards it as important in the parables (Luke 10:34-35; 11:5ff, etc.). God's hospitality is an essential part of his message (cf. the divine generosity in Luke 14:16ff; 12:37; 13:29, etc.). Jesus had no home and was frequently a guest (Luke 7:36ff; 9:51ff; 10:389ff; 14:1ff).

It was the practice of Paul on his journeys first to visit the Jews and to stay with them, and to stay with the Gentiles only if the Jews refused him (Acts 14:28; 15:33; 16:15, 34; 17:1ff; 18:3, 27; 21:16). With the rapid growth and expansion of the Church, organization was needed, and we are told that fourth-century Antioch cared daily for 3,000 widows, sick and strangers. Bishops and widows were especially expected to be hospitable both privately and officially. Bigger churches and sanctuaries later set up hospices, and where care focused on the sick these developed into hospitals.

Hospitality, Bethany style

Today's Gospel is the delightful story of Martha and her sister Mary in Bethany (Luke 10:38-42). It illustrates the importance of hearing the words of the teacher and the concern with women in Luke's Gospel. The Gospel story about Mary and Martha has often been used to provide guidelines as to how women are to act. The truth of the matter is that it doesn't have much to do with the roles which any particular people should play. It points out that God doesn't just look at how well we carry out our duties. No woman -- and no man -- should lose him/herself in busyness. Mary of Bethany understood that.

Martha is so caught up in the many demands put upon her by society's and culture's rules for serving guests. But really, there is little that is needed -- or only one thing. Much of Martha's anxiety and concern in serving has more to do with conforming to society's demands or with the desire of the host or hostess to shine as a model of accomplished and generous hospitality.

Verse 39 presents us with a unique image: Mary sitting at the feet of the Master. Against the backdrop of first-century Palestinian Judaism, that a woman would assume the posture of a disciple at the master's feet is nothing short of remarkable (see also Luke 8:35; Acts 22:3)! It reveals a characteristic attitude of Jesus toward women in the third gospel (see Luke 8:2-3).

Activity, passivity or receptivity?

Mary of Bethany, disciple of the Lord, has chosen the most important thing required in welcoming others -- her presence and full attention, so that it is her guest who shines. Martha and Mary stand forever as symbols of the two modes of life between which we continually oscillate. Activity can become a shield against facing issues and questions and truths which must be allowed to surface if we are to survive. There are times when we simply must contemplate, must step back, must think, if we are to be capable of returning to meaningful activity.

The key of the Gospel story is not found in the tension of activity versus passivity, but in receptivity. The one necessity in welcoming others into one's home or community is being present to them -- listening to what they have to say, as Mary does in today's Gospel.

Hospitality's enemy

Thus far we have considered the positive aspects, elements and manifestations of hospitality. But hospitality has an enemy: selfishness and pride. When we are so wrapped up with ourselves, our own problems and difficulties, or we wish to jealously preserve what we have and exclude foreigners and strangers from our lives and riches, we are inhospitable. Too much introspection and inwardness will prevent us from truly being present to others. Or perhaps we are so concerned with external appearances, and so caught up with the details and activity, that we have no time for listening and welcoming.

At the dinner party in Bethany, Martha learned a profound lesson: perhaps a simple pita bread was better than a full Middle Eastern feast, if it got her out of the kitchen and in the company of such an important guest as was sitting in the living room with her sister, Mary. Perhaps Martha was finally able to sit down and grasp the full impact of what was unfolding in her very home- that her own sister was a real disciple of this man Jesus. And hopefully Martha discovered that the meal was only the scenery, not the script!

Hospitality, Cardinal Newman style

On Sept. 19, 2010, in Birmingham, England, the long awaited beatification ceremony will take place for the beloved and great Victorian Catholic theologian, John Henry Cardinal Newman. Cardinal Newman was born in troubled times, which knew not only political and military upheaval but also great turbulence of soul. He journeyed from Anglicanism to Catholicism and used his great intellect and masterful writing ability to win over thousands of people to Christ and the Roman Catholic Church. He was an exemplary model of graciousness and hospitality, especially to young men and women at the university. He is the patron of university Catholic chaplaincies around the world known as "Newman Centers."

In preparation for Cardinal Newman's beatification, I have been reading once again his homilies based on the Sunday Gospels. I was struck by [his reflections on today's Gospel of Martha, Mary and their honored guest in Bethany.](#)

Newman wrote about today's Gospel scene: "There are busy men and men of leisure, who have no part in Him; there are others, who are not without fault, as altogether sacrificing leisure to business, or business to leisure. But putting aside the thought of the untrue and of the extravagant, still after all there remain two classes of Christians; -- those who are like Martha, those like Mary; and both of them glorify Him in their own line, whether of labour or of quiet, in either case proving themselves to be not their own, but bought with a price, set on obeying, and constant in obeying His will. If they labour, it is for His sake; and if they adore, it is still from love of Him.

"And further, these two classes of His disciples do not choose for themselves their course of service, but are allotted it by Him. Martha might be the elder, Mary the younger. I do not say that it is never left to a Christian to choose his own path, whether He will minister with the Angels or adore with the Seraphim; often it is: and well may he bless God if he has it in his power freely to choose that good portion which our Saviour especially praises. But, for the most part, each has his own place marked out for him, if he will take it, in the course of His providence; at least there can be no doubt who are intended for worldly cares. The necessity of getting a livelihood, the calls of a family, the duties of station and office, these are God's tokens, tracing out Martha's path for the many."

Questions for Reflection

Here are some questions to reflect upon this week, as individuals and as parish communities.

How do I (we) practice hospitality?

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What are the signs of a hospitable community?

What are the enemies of hospitality?

How can we become more hospitable?

Do I (we) really love other human beings?

[The readings for 16th Sunday of Ordinary Time are Genesis 18:1-10a; Colossians 1:24-28; Luke 10:38-42]

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Basilian Father Thomas Rosica, chief executive officer of the Salt and Light Catholic Media Foundation and Television Network in Canada, is a consultant to the Pontifical Council for Social Communications. He can be reached at: rosica@saltandlighttv.org.

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