

THE AGELESS VIRTUE OF HOSPITALITY

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Hospitality is an ageless virtue in the church, although of late we do not hear homilies or read much about it in church magazines. The earliest Christians, on the other hand, said much about this practice at a time before modern separation into different denominations took root. Their counsel as to being hospitable therefore applies to all Christians alike.

According to my dictionary, hospitality is the friendly and generous reception and accommodation of guests and visitors. Saint Paul in his Letter to the Romans 12:13 encouraged his readers to be 'given to hospitality' as well as to contribute to the needs of other Christians. First Peter 4:9 exhorts us to practise it ungrudgingly, as well as to be engaged in other forms of charity. One New Testament author and some other ancient Christian writers highly commended hospitality to strangers, of which more below.

In the middle of the second century AD, a brother of a pastor-bishop of Rome put forth commandments for the Christian life in a book called *The Pastor of Hermas*, which he said were revelations from the divine. In hospitality, the book said, is a fruitful field for goodness. Half a century later, Clement of Alexandria in Egypt was dean of the world's foremost Christian educational institution. He encouraged Christians to be 'given to hospitality', like St. Paul, in a long list of what he considered desirable conduct for Christians, such as helping the poor and weak. In another book Clement wrote 'akin to love is hospitality'.

Clement's successor as dean was Origen, the most outstanding Christian professor, writer and preacher of the first three centuries. So great was his knowledge of the

Christian faith that he was called upon as a theological consultant by pastors throughout the eastern Mediterranean. In his *Commentary on Romans*, he regarded receiving guests as a Christian virtue, along with rescuing the innocent and helping the poor, such as the hungry and naked. He said that great grace is to be found in hospitality, both with God and with people. In one of his homilies he valued hospitality in the same list as justice, mercy, patience, gentleness and helping the poor.

Strangers were singled out as special objects of hospitality. The New Testament Letter to the Hebrews 13:2 says 'Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.' The most prominent examples in the writer's mind were probably Abraham and his nephew Lot in Genesis 18 and 19. Clement of Alexandria called hospitality 'a congenial art devoted to the treatment of strangers', and also 'Hospitality, therefore, is occupied with what is useful for strangers'.

In some localities, hospitality for fellow Christian strangers was a standing institution. A first- or second-century church manual from Syria or Egypt called *The Didaché* prescribed detailed regulations for the reception and accommodation of travelling Christians, especially clergy. About the same time as Origen, the church father Tertullian in Tunisia placed hospitality to Christian travellers in the same class of Christian activity as relief of the poor. A little later, early papyrus letters of recommendation for travellers indicate that there was a network of hospitality among the churches.

Although especially for strangers, hospi-

tality was not confined to travellers by the earliest Christians. Clement widened the scope of the term 'strangers' as a category: 'guests are strangers; and friends are guests; and brethren [i.e. Christians] are friends.' In an even more universal statement, he wrote 'And those are strangers, to whom the things of the world are strange.'

The Bible considers being hospitable as a desirable quality especially for clergy. First Timothy 3:2 recommends it in the same passage as such qualifications as being above reproach, an apt communicator and not a lover of money. The New Testament book of Titus 1:7 includes hospitality in a list with such necessary traits as self-controlled, upright and a lover of goodness. In a paraphrase of 1 Timothy, Origen in his *Commentary on Romans* considered a hospitable nature as necessary for clergy, as also being above reproach, vigilant and respectable. Such linking reveals early Christians' high esteem for both the office and the practice: while it demonstrates how dedicated clergy must be, it also shows the centrality of hospitality in church life.

The early authors' frequent listing of hospitality along with relief of the poor was probably not accidental. Christian hospitality, as well as Christian life in general, has always been concerned for guests and strangers no matter what their financial circumstances. The ancient authorities promote the virtues of generosity and helping all people, including strangers, regarding them as brothers and sisters in



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Christ and as being entitled to the same reception and accommodation as is Jesus. In his *Homilies on Luke* Origen exhorted his hearers to invite into their homes Christian friends, even the poor ones, and also people who have trouble expressing themselves, the retarded, and other persons who are intellectually impaired. Jesus himself commanded: 'when thou makest a feast, call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind' (Luke 14:13).

The New Testament and other early Christian writings and homilies were directed to all readers and to all people present in congregations. Their admonitions are put to all of us to provide generously to people we barely know or even not know, simply for the name of Christ and without regard to their means, status or circumstances. Jesus himself provides a special blessing for the hospitable: in Matthew 10:11f and Luke 10:5 he instructed Christian travellers to salute and wish peace on the homes of hosts who showed them hospitality. These hosts might well have been hospitable to angels unawares. So might you.

We must not forget the generous response of many men and women, associations and organisations which, seeing the sufferings of countless persons caused by emigration, are struggling for the rights of migrants, forced or voluntary, and for their defence. The commitment of these people can be attributed above all to that compassion of Jesus, the Good Samaritan, that the Spirit stirs up everywhere in the hearts of men and women of good will and in the Church too.

—The Love of Christ towards Migrants, Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, 2005, no.3.