



Daring Hospitality – “I was a stranger and you welcomed me”

Aíocht, hospitalidad, manaaki, kagiliwan, hospitalité, ukarimu, gutpela lukaut, hospitality – this life-giving word strengthens us on our global Mercy journey into the Year of Consecrated Life, the Year of Religious Life. Although seemingly simple, warm and comforting, hospitality at its best is radical and prophetic. Let us hear this word spoken in our scriptures and tradition, inviting us into new thinking, challenging us to “daring hospitality.”

Hospitality was an essential aspect of Israelite culture, embedded in sacred codes of conduct requiring that strangers be given food, water and shelter. Abraham’s first action after God’s call into covenant was to offer hospitality to three strangers, not knowing that God sent them, “Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree” (Gen 18:4). The Shunammite woman spoke to her husband about Elisha, the holy man of God, “Let us make a small roof chamber with walls, and put there for him a bed, a table, a chair, and a lamp” (2 Kgs 4: 9-10). God is described in Ps 23:4, “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.” About Woman Wisdom, celebrated in Proverbs, we are told, “She opens her hand to the poor, and reaches out her hands to the needy” (Prov 31:20).

The same sacred code is embedded in the New Testament. Elizabeth welcomed the newly pregnant Mary into her home, “Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth” (Lk 1:39-40). Jesus invited the first disciples to his home, saying, “Come and see” (Jn 1:39). He shared meals with the most likely and most unlikely people: his friends, Martha, Mary and Lazarus; Peter’s mother-in-law, tax collectors, rich men, a prostitute, five thousand men, women and children; his apostles. He met a Samaritan woman at a well and asked for a drink. He defined “neighbour” by a Samaritan traveller’s response to an injured man, “He put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him” (Lk 10:34). The first Christian community “broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts” (Acts 2:46).

When Jesus was asked how to become a faithful follower, his words were stark, clear and reflective of his people’s code of conduct, “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me” (Matt 25:35-36).

Like Abraham, Jesus began his ministry with a meal, attending the wedding feast at Cana. He ended his ministry by serving his disciples bread and wine at the supper before his death. After his Resurrection, he helped the disciples know him as transformed by sharing a meal with them: Mary and Cleopas at Emmaus, the disciples in the Upper Room, the disciples on the beach. Key moments in Jesus’ life and moments in which he led the disciples to significantly shift their thinking were marked by hospitality.

In later Jewish culture, there were *haknasat oreḥim*, houses where travellers obtained lodging. Rabbis suggested that every house should have doors on all four sides, so that poor people might find easy access from everywhere. In a remarkably similar way, in ancient Irish culture, the Breton Laws mandated hospitality for the stranger, newcomer and traveller. The *bruideans* were public houses designated for this purpose and placed strategically at major road intersections with doors open to every direction.

Like Jesus, Catherine began her ministry with an act of hospitality – she built a house on Baggot Street as a school for poor girls and a shelter for homeless servant girls and women. Mary Sullivan, rsm, records that, after the first Sisters of Mercy returned from their profession of vows, “the Christmas dinner for the all the neighbourhood children was held as usual, again with plum pudding, and Catherine once more waiting on the hungry, ragged children she loved.” Again like Jesus, Catherine’s last action on this earth was to direct her community to engage in hospitality, “Get a good cup of tea – I think the community room would be a good place.” Following the *haknasat oreḥim* and the *bruideans*, Catherine’s House of Mercy was and is a place of hospitality, the wellspring for Mercy alive today in forty-five countries.

In our history as women of Mercy, true to our Jewish and Irish roots, we have faithfully followed Jesus and Catherine in creating places of ministry – hospitals, orphanages, hospices, boys’ homes, women’s shelters, shelters for refugees, affordable housing units – all places of hospitality. One poignant example, the [Gathering Place in St. John’s NL](#), is a community centre for vulnerable persons who are homeless or living with inadequate supports. In this place enlivened by Sisters of Mercy, Presentation Sisters and more than two hundred volunteers, a sculpture of hands, created by artist [Gerald Squires](#), reflects Jesus’ words, “I was hungry, thirsty, naked, imprisoned, a stranger . . .” The sculpture confirms that daring hospitality creates community marked by inclusion, equality and respect.

Throughout this rich history, consistent echoes startle us out of our comfortable complacency. Radical inclusion challenges us to look more closely at those we invite to our tables and to ask how we relate to guests who are strangers, convicts, persons not properly dressed for our meals, or persons not sharing our values. Hospitality at its most daring will lead us to take risks, make us uncomfortable and cause us to challenge a social order which keeps people poor. To quote Joan Chittester, osb, “Hospitality is the way we turn a prejudiced world around, one heart at a time.”

Seeing ourselves first not as hosts but as guests is most disquieting. God, self-described in Ex 34:6 as “merciful and gracious,” chose to graciously accept our hospitality. The early Rabbis called God *Shekinah*, the divine presence among us. The angel told Joseph that the baby born of Mary would be *Emmanuel*, God-with-us. Our God – Shekinah, Emmanuel – is, by choice, a guest in our homes and in our hearts. In most of his encounters of hospitality, Jesus was guest not host – at the Cana wedding, in Martha’s home, at Zacchaeus’ home, at the last supper prepared by the apostles, at the house in Emmaus. We will know daring hospitality when we can say, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”

Hospitality is lived in welcoming places. One such welcoming place is Earth. As we begin to know ourselves as members of a sacred community of all life, we are coming to realize that we are not masters of Earth but guests of this life-sustaining place. We are behaving as ungrateful guests, slowly destroying the home into which we have been graciously invited. Through an understanding of hospitality embedded in the Eucharist, theologians are leading us to greater wisdom about what it means to be guests of Earth. Beatrice Bruteau says it this way, “I want to perceive Earth as a Eucharistic Planet, a Good Gift planet, which is structured as mutual feeding, as intimate self-sharing. . . A sense of

the Eucharistic Planet, of the Real Presence of the Divine in the world, is something we need now for the protection of the planet.”

“Cead mile failte! A thousand welcomes!” In this Year of Religious Life, let us renew our promises to give a thousand welcomes to the stranger, to receive respectfully a thousand welcomes from Earth, to be radically inclusive, and to be gracious guests and gracious hosts. May Mercy alive in this twenty-first century be marked by daring hospitality. May we know the reassurance of hearing again and again, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”

QUESTIONS RELATING TO REFLECTION ON HOSPITALITY

1. **Welcome to the stranger:** Who are the strangers whom we Sisters of Mercy invite to our tables? Who are the strangers whom we find it difficult to welcome? Who are the strangers whom we would not even think about welcoming?
2. **Guests not hosts:** When and where are we as Sisters of Mercy the strangers who are being welcomed? What does being guests, receivers of hospitality, mean for being Sisters of Mercy in the 21st century?
3. **Guests of Earth:** How does our thinking change when we realize that we are not masters of Earth but guests of this planet? How are we behaving as guests of Earth?
4. **Eucharistic hospitality:** What does an understanding of Eucharistic hospitality as ecological hospitality mean for a community of Sisters of Mercy who celebrate Eucharist together?

RESOURCES FOR REFLECTION ON HOSPITALITY

Beatrice Bruteau, “Eucharistic Ecology and Ecological Spirituality,” *Cross Currents* 40, no. 4 (Winter 1990/1991): 499-514. Online: <http://www.crosscurrents.org/eucharist.htm>

Joan Chittister, *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily: Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today* (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991).

Denis Edwards, “Celebrating Eucharist in a Time of Global Climate Change,” *Pacifica: Australasian Theological Studies* 19, no. 1 (February 2006): 1 – 15. Online: <http://dspace.flinders.edu.au/xmlui/bitstream/handle/2328/14953/2006003339.pdf?sequence=1>

Anne Elvey, “Living One for the Other: Eucharistic Hospitality as Ecological Hospitality,” chapter 10 in *Reinterpreting the Eucharist: Explorations in Feminist Theology and Ethics* (eds. Anne F. Elvey, Carol Hogan, Kim Power and Claire Renkin; Routledge, 2014). Online: http://repository.divinity.edu.au/1319/1/Elvey-Living_one_for_the_other-proof.pdf

Lonni Collins Pratt and Daniel Homan, *Radical Hospitality: Benedict's Way of Love: Benedict's Way of Love* (Paraclete Press, 2011).

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