

## What Is Hospitality?

When we think about hospitality, what comes to mind? Perhaps it's having friends over for a special dinner that we've spent time planning and preparing. We may use our best china with the coordinating silver and elegant crystal wineglasses or offer a relaxed and fun barbeque or party. We might prepare favorite foods for the children and even have fun activities for them so they'll enjoy the time together while the grownups converse around the table. Certainly this is hospitality. Yet hospitality can be so much more.

The word *hospitality* derives from the Latin word *hospitalitas*, which comes from the word *hospes* or *guest*. We show hospitality to others when we receive them as guests. We can receive people in this way every day, every hour, and not just for a meal. I can even show my hospitality to you as a guest by receiving you warmly into this book. (Hello and welcome again!)

## Benedictine Hospitality

Benedict believes in hospitality. In Benedictine monasteries and convents, visitors are to be received promptly, with respect and in love. To do this, Benedict requires that someone always be available to greet a visitor. Find a brother who has some sense, Benedict says, and knows how to receive a message and relay a response; someone who is older and not apt to wander away. Give him a room by the door (66.1–2). Instruct him to greet all visitors with words like, “Thanks be to God” and to attend quickly to their needs with gentleness and warmth (66.3–4).

The utmost humility is shown to all guests regardless of their station in life, and every effort is to be made to make them feel welcome. The key to Benedictine hospitality is the recognition of Christ in each visitor.

All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ, for he himself will say: *I was a stranger and you welcomed me* (Matt 25:35; RB 53.1).

Benedict says that the poor and pilgrims are to receive a special welcome because in them Christ is especially received (53.15). Benedict asks us to live a life of love and service, reaching out to others because we see Christ in everyone. So when you and I receive a guest at home, in a soup kitchen or in the seat next to us on an airplane, we are receiving Christ.

The truth is, however, that we can be manipulative and self-serving. We disregard another person's viewpoint. We consider others as annoyances that must be dealt with. We fail to see need around us. We close our fists and hold in our love. In short, we become self-protective and, in the process, miserable. Episcopal priest and author Elizabeth Canham reminds us “that people do not enter our lives to be coerced or manipulated, but to

enrich us by their differences, and to be graciously received in the name of Christ.”<sup>2</sup> Looking for Christ in others keeps us living according to the Gospels. Think about it: if we really thought the other person was Christ, would we not lovingly serve her or him? In your own mind, imagine if Christ came to the door and you received him into your home. Once overcoming your awe and astonishment and seeing that he would immediately put you at ease, how would you treat him? What words would describe the qualities that you would convey to our Lord? Words like warmth, love, appreciation, adoration, respect, and joy might come to mind.

When we acknowledge Christ in others we acknowledge the part of them connected to God in Christ. I know people who, when they meet someone new, will silently greet the Christ in the person. We are to honor and adore the Christ within each person. This is what Benedict describes as hospitality. He instructs the superior and all the brothers to receive each guest with charity and humility. Acknowledging and adoring the Christ within the visitor, they are to bow their heads or even prostrate their bodies completely (53.2, 6–7). For Benedict, care for the guests of the monastery is a manifestation of a monk’s willingness not only to be obedient but to also be open (*conversion of life*) to what each guest, as Christ, might teach him.

Not only are we to *receive* Christ in others as guest; we are to *be* Christ to others. Esther de Waal suggests two questions that we might ask ourselves to see if we are doing both.

Endless people encountered, a mass of entertaining, constant coming and going, countless numbers of people and at the end of all this activity St. Benedict faces us with two very simple questions: Did we see Christ in them? Did they see Christ in us?<sup>3</sup>

At the end of a busy day, we can ask ourselves these same questions: Did I see Christ in the people I was with today? Were they able to see Christ in me?

## **Benedictine Balance: Hospitality and Solitude**

An important part of Benedictine hospitality is that it balances the needs of the community with the needs of the individual. While monks are to show hospitality to guests and strangers, Benedict sets limits that respect the needs of the monks and life in the community (chapter 53). This reminds us that while we respect others and care for them, we also need to respect ourselves and care for our own needs. Too often immersing ourselves in the needs of others can lead to resentment. Benedict has us strike a balance; even Jesus went off by himself to pray and to refresh his spirit.

The balance of Benedictine hospitality and self-respect reveals that Benedict realized that human beings need time together and time alone. We need a balance of community and solitude. Esther de Waal writes that “the time for me to re-create myself is amongst the most urgent of all my needs. Only as I find time to live with myself and to love myself will I be able to live with others and love them as they need to be loved.”<sup>8</sup>

## **Love and Hospitality**

The teaching of Jesus could be summed up in one word: *love*. We are to love God and our neighbor as ourselves. The entire Rule of Benedict could also be summed up in this same word. Love is the underlying motivation for all the actions that Benedict describes for his monks and for us. Everything in the Rule points to Christ and to the Christlike love that we are to model in our lives. This indeed is as countercultural today as it was in Benedict's time. Benedict says,

Your way of acting should be different from the world's way; the love of Christ must come before all else. You are not to act in anger or nurse a grudge. Rid your heart of all deceit. Never give a hollow greeting of peace or turn away someone who needs your love (RB 4.20–26).

The Rule is “lived-out love,”<sup>9</sup> in the context of daily life and work. Benedict devotes a section of the Rule on mutual obedience as a way to show this love to others. The monks are to be obedient not only to the abbot but also to one another (71.1).

*They should each try to be the first to show respect to the other* (Rom 12:10 RB), supporting with the greatest patience one another's weaknesses of body or behavior, and earnestly competing in obedience to one another (RB 72.4–6).

They are to pursue what they judge better, not for themselves, but for others and to “show the pure love of brothers” (RB 72.7–8). “The Tools for Good Works,” found in chapter 4 of the Rule and discussed in chapter 5 of this book, provide many other ways to show love by the way we treat one another.

One of the challenges is that the need for hospitality often comes when we're most occupied with other concerns. We're busy at home and a child runs to us with a picture scribbled in crayon, seeking our undivided attention and praise. We're at work frantically writing a report that's due today and a coworker hurries into our office, asking us to listen to some concern. What to do? Our choice to provide hospitality becomes a direct response to God's call to serve a person in need. It is an opportunity to practice Benedictine obedience, listening, and responding to God's call. When our hearts are “overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love” (RB Prologue 49), we will become more open to the situations in which God calls us to act. We'll set aside our plans and respond to one another with gracious hospitality and Christlike love.

When these interruptions happen to me, I often recall the story of Jesus after hearing of the death of John the Baptist. He'd gone alone by boat to a deserted place, but the crowd, hearing where he'd gone, followed him. We read in Matthew that when he came ashore and saw them “he had compassion for them” (Matt 14:13–14). This is the kind of compassion that you and I are to show. Esther de Waal writes, “The central message that I learn from St. Benedict is that Christ is the model for all our loving. It is in and through him that our loving must take place.”<sup>10</sup>

### **Hospitality, Love, and Forgiveness**

Forgiveness is key in Benedictine love and spirituality and critical to life in community. Benedict includes the Lord's Prayer in Lauds and Vespers, the prayer services that come at the beginning and at the end of the day,

“because the thorns of contention are likely to spring up” (RB 13.12). His rationale is this: “Thus warned by the pledge they make to one another in the very words of this prayer: *Forgive us as we forgive* (Matt 6:12 RB), they may cleanse themselves of this kind of vice” (RB 13.13).

In the chapter “The Tools for Good Works,” Benedict gives repeated instruction on forgiveness, often quoting verses from the New Testament:

*Love your enemies* (Matt 5:44 and Rule 4.31).

If you quarrel with someone, make peace with him before sunset (Rule 4.73).

*Do not repay one bad turn with another* (1 Thess 5:15 RB; 1 Pet 3:9 RB; and Rule 4.29).

The content of the Rule models forgiveness. For example, when explaining the disciplinary procedures for mistakes in the chapel, in the kitchen, in serving, or for failure to follow the Rule, Benedict insists that repentant brothers are to be readily forgiven (Rule chapters 44–46).

“Forgiveness is the greatest factor for growth in any human being.”<sup>11</sup> When we chew over past resentments, past hurts, and past slights, lack of forgiveness hurts us more than the person we can’t forgive. Our relationships with God and with others suffer, too. Lack of forgiveness saps energy, creates black holes of negativity, and takes up too much of our time. If we’re to live, as Benedict says, with death before our eyes, we need to recognize that we must live fully *now*. Each day is precious and forgiveness is a path to whole and healthy living. Forgiveness builds up. Grumbling tears down. Forgiveness leads to freedom.

The truth is that sometimes all we can do is to pray for the *desire* to forgive. Yet, that is a beginning.

## Discipline and Forgiveness

Although disciplinary measures are explained carefully, Benedict’s underlying goal is forgiveness and reconciliation with any wayward brother. Yet for the protection of the monk and his soul as well as for the community as a whole, the Rule offers specific steps for each area to be disciplined. Even grumbling can be punished. From rebukes, to excommunication, from meals and prayers, to physical punishment, the abbot would determine the degree of the reproof to be employed. The abbot is to be especially concerned for brothers who have difficulty following the Rule. In a spirit of hospitality he is to recognize that he has care of souls that are sick (27.6) and to model the Good Shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine in the wilderness and goes after the one sheep that is lost (Luke 15:4 and Rule 27.8). Benedict cites a passage from Matthew’s Gospel to explain the abbot’s mindset as he makes decisions regarding punishment: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those

who are sick” (Matt 9:12 and Rule 27.1). The abbot is to treat the wavering brother with the skill of a wise physician. Older and more mature brothers could be sent to unofficially talk to the wayward brother, to encourage him to humbly make amends and to comfort him so that he may not be “overwhelmed by excessive sorrow” (2 Cor 2:7 NRSV and Rule 27.2–3). Benedict instructs the other monks to pray for the errant monk, again emphasizing the desire not for punishment but for reconciliation.

If a monk refuses to make amends, the punishment increases in intensity to include, for example, beatings (28.1). Though this seems harsh to us, Benedict was concerned that such a sheep might “infect the whole flock” (RB 28.8). The last step is the surgeon’s knife: the monk would be asked to leave. Benedict again draws on Scripture and says, “Drive out the wicked person from among you” (1 Cor 5:13 and Rule 28.6). The door may not be shut, however. According to the Rule, brothers who leave and want to come back can be readmitted up to three times (29.3). Benedict was willing to give his brothers repeated opportunities for forgiveness and reconciliation. You and I might pause for a moment and consider if we’re willing to do the same.

### **Hospitality and Good Zeal**

The word *zeal* derives from the Greek *zelos* or *zeal*. This word occurs in the New Testament as both a positive and a negative attribute. In its negative sense, *zeal* can mean jealousy, passion, fervor, or ambition. This is what Benedict would term as “wicked” or “evil zeal,” which separates us from God (72.1). It’s self-serving, lacking in moderation, and void of consideration for others. Benedict asks us to practice instead what he calls “good zeal,” which draws us to God and to eternal life (72.2).

Good zeal is rooted in hospitality. It means supporting one another without murmuring or grumbling. It also means giving “oneself to others with joy, to seek what is agreeable to one’s neighbor, to console [them], to cheer [them]—such is the true zeal of charity.”<sup>12</sup> Benedict encourages his followers to practice this “good zeal” that is fostered by energetic love (72.3). He describes good zeal in action: showing mutual respect, being patient with one another’s weaknesses, outdoing one another in showing obedience, pursuing the best for the other rather than for oneself, loving others, and fearing God (72.4–9).

The bottom line for hospitality is this: good zeal is marked by a deep consideration for others. But most importantly we must “prefer nothing whatever to Christ” (72.11).<sup>13</sup>

## **Benedictine Hospitality and Our Baptismal Covenant**

When we practice Benedictine hospitality we are putting into action the promises that we make in these three questions from our Baptismal Covenant:

- Will you seek and serve Christ in all Persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?
- Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?
- Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

Our Covenant reminds us that not only are we to *see* Christ in others, we are to *seek out* Christ in the lives and faces of those around us. Love makes this possible. We're reminded also of Benedict's instructions to be hospitable to ourselves, loving ourselves enough to take the time and effort to "replenish the well," and tend to our own physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. And as we seek Christ in others, so, too, are we to be Christ to others.

We're to be justice keepers and peacemakers, and to respect each human being as a child of God. Benedictine hospitality provides us a way to fulfill this promise.

### **Hospitality: The Gift of Presence**

Hospitality is an incredible gift that we can give one another. It all begins when we can be truly present to another person. When we are present, focusing on the person before us or acknowledging the need of people who live far from us, we become channels for the Spirit of Christ. This is what I saw in soup kitchen volunteers as they served the both the physical and emotional needs of the guests. To be channels for the Spirit is what I pray for all of us.

## **Tool #2: Hospitality to Those Who Are Near**

- **Be present to others.** The greatest gift you can give others is your presence. This is an important way to practice hospitality. When you give others your full and complete attention you welcome them into your life. They know they're respected and cared about even if they're strangers or casual acquaintances.

Being fully present often takes great patience and understanding. So, as Christ emptied himself to become human (Phil 2:7), you will need to empty yourself of whatever is pulling you away. These may be pressures such as responsibilities, a need to control, or to hurry another person along. Whatever distracts you, ask God to help you

concentrate on the person before you right at that moment. Ask God to help you listen for who God needs you to be for that person.

- **Expect interruptions.** The opportunities for hospitality happen on God's timetable, not ours. Be flexible. The most important work we have to do each day is with the people Christ brings to us. Be open to interruptions for that is where life happens!

We often encounter opportunities to make room in our schedules, in ourselves, for another person. Yet the moment can come and go quickly. Consciously be aware when someone needs a moment of kindness, a little attention, a gracious gesture. Do this both at home and at work.<sup>20</sup>

- **Receive the other as Christ.** When you meet someone, be it a friend or someone new, greet the Christ within that person. You can even imagine that you are talking to Christ. How does that change your interaction? Remember that seeing Christ and serving others as Christ is not about *them*, it is about *ourselves*. When you and I choose to look on a stranger, a family member, a member of our community, a church member, a coworker, or a person who serves us in a store as Christ, we don't change them; we change ourselves! We allow God to sanctify our own lives.



- **Create a free space for hospitality.** Instead of viewing the stranger with fear, ambivalence, or hostility, we can “create a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy.”<sup>21</sup> Henri Nouwen says, “To convert hostility into hospitality requires the creation of a friendly empty space where we can reach out to our fellow human beings and invite them to a new relationship.”<sup>22</sup>

The challenge is that usually the space around us is occupied! Our busyness and activity, our concerns and desires, and our self-preoccupation take up this space. We need to be willing *to be silent* and to set these things aside so that we can both provide a free, open, and friendly space for others, and also be free to receive the gifts they bring to us.

Creating this space requires an inner conversion that can't be manipulated. Yet even though this conversion must develop from within, we can still take some steps:

1. Pray for God to create this empty space within you.
2. When you meet a stranger, imagine a friendly, empty space around yourself. Look on the stranger with eyes of hospitality. Be open to them and even curious about the gift they may be ready to give you. Allow them to be themselves and to discover who they are in your presence.

3. Imagine this friendly open space with people you know well, such as family and friends. Carry this space into the workplace, the church, the supermarket, the roadways.

- **When you feel like escaping, remember stability and obedience.** There will be times when you'd rather run than practice hospitality. When this happens, remember the Benedictine vow of stability: *stay put!* Then move into the vow of obedience: *listen* and *respond*. Ask God to help you listen to how you are to be a co-creator through your hospitality.

Recognize, too, that there may be times when you don't have the energy or wherewithal to be hospitable. But before fleeing physically or mentally, give it a try. Remember that when the Lord went off to rest, the crowds followed him. He must have been tired and wanted to be alone, yet he had compassion on the people who followed him and attended to their needs (see Mark 6:30–34).

- **Hospitality need not be a huge event.** If hospitality means making room for another person, even in small ways, what could you do differently to become a more hospitable person?<sup>23</sup>
- **Be hospitable to yourself, too.** Jesus said, “[L]ove your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:31). Take time to care for yourself in body, mind, and spirit.