

Hospitality: A Talk Given to Volunteers at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception

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I've always been fascinated by words and how they came to be. As you might guess, the word "hospitality" comes from a Latin word, *hospes*, which is very interesting inasmuch as it can mean on the one hand "guest, stranger, or foreigner" and, on the other hand, "host," that is, someone who welcomes, receives, and entertains a guest or a stranger. In fact, anyone reading a Latin text containing that word could only determine by context which of the two meanings applied in a given case. For you who are receptionists and tour guides here at the National Shrine, each of you is, of course, a *hospes* in the sense of "host," someone who welcomes the numerous people who come here wanting to learn more of the history of the edifice and to imbibe something of the spirituality that is conveyed by the many statues, mosaics, chapels, and the very architecture. While most visitors are surely Catholics, there are others who are not and who might feel a little strange and ill-at-ease. This may be even more so in the case of visitors who are literally foreigners, perhaps visiting America for the first time ever. Part of your important task is to make all visitors feel truly welcome, to answer their questions as thoroughly as time permits, and to encourage them to spend some time in prayer once the actual tour is over.

To help you be convinced of the importance of hospitality in our Christian tradition, I am going to start, as you might guess, with holy scripture. Perhaps the best-known example of hospitality in the Old Testament is the account in the Book of Genesis, chapter 18, of the three mysterious visitors to Abraham. The passage goes like this:

1 The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. 2 He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. 3 He said, "My lord[s], if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. 4 Let a little water be brought, and

wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. 5 Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.” So they said, “Do as you have said.” 6 And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, “Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.” 7 Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. 8 Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

There is, of course, more to the account, namely, the promise that Abraham and Sarah would have a son in their old age, but for now let’s just focus on these opening verses. They are entirely in accord with the practice of hospitality which one finds regularly in Middle Eastern cultures, where it is actually considered a great privilege to welcome and provide for guests. The original reason for this is that this part of the world was largely nomadic, with people traveling long distances over very arid landscapes. Being able to count on hospitality was often literally a matter of life or death. In such a culture, people were especially willing to offer hospitality to strangers, just as they themselves wanted to receive it when they in turn were traveling across a deserted wilderness. The promptness with which such hospitality was offered is signaled in our text from Genesis, where we read that Abraham doesn’t simply wait for the three visitors to arrive at his tent. No, he runs out to meet them and begs them to stay a while with him and his wife. He then speaks disparagingly about the meal that he gets prepared for them, calling it just “a little bread” (in some translations, “a morsel of bread”), when in fact it is a sumptuous feast: cakes made from choice flour, a tender and good calf, curds (that is, a kind of soft cheese or yoghurt), and milk.

One finds the same assumption of hospitality in the New Testament: Christ’s directions to the apostles to “take nothing for their journey” (Mk 6:8, etc.) presupposes that they were sure of always finding hospitality and would be able to stay at their host’s home as long as they chose. Indeed, one of the most significant signs that one is worthy of being received into the eternal kingdom is the way one treats strangers. In the well-known parable of the sheep and the goats in the 25th chapter of Matthew’s

gospel, the king will say to those on his right: “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for 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....” just as one of the most definite signs of not being worthy of the kingdom is refusal of hospitality, for those placed with the goats on the left include persons to whom the Son of Man will say: “I was a stranger and you did not welcome me.”

In the days of the early Church as described by St. Luke in the Acts of the Apostles, we regularly find Paul on his missionary journeys finding hospitality in many places. For example, at one point Luke writes: “... Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because [the emperor] Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them and, because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and they worked together” (Acts 18:1-3). Or a few chapters later, Luke writes: “When we had finished the voyage from Tyre, we arrived at Ptolemais; we greeted the believers and stayed with them. The next day we left and came to Caesarea, and we went into the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the seven, and stayed with him” (Acts 21:7-8). Finally, after Paul and his companions suffered shipwreck and landed on the island of Malta, Luke writes: “In the neighborhood of that place [where we had come ashore] were lands belonging to the leading man of the island, named Publius, who received us and entertained us hospitably for three days” (Acts 28:7). So throughout his years as a missionary, Paul was regularly able to count on the hospitality of persons he encountered on his travels, even as Jesus at times received hospitality at the home of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus.

After this survey of some of the key passages in Scripture, let me now fast forward five centuries to the time of St. Benedict, who lived in Italy in the sixth century and who wrote the monastic rule according to which I myself live. As you may know, this same emphasis on hospitality is found there. Chapter 53 of the Benedictine rule begins with the well-known words: “All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ, for he himself will say: ‘I was a stranger and you welcomed me.’ ... Once a guest has been announced, the superior and the brothers are to meet him with all the

courtesy of love. First of all, they are to pray together and thus be united in peace.” The emphasis on providing food and drink for the guests that we saw in the account of Abraham is also found here in the Rule, for St. Benedict says that there is even to be a special kitchen for the abbot and guests, and that each year two of the brothers who can do the work competently are to be assigned to this kitchen so that they could prepare a proper meal at whatever time guests might arrive. Note that not just any of the monks are to be assigned to this kitchen, but only those who can prepare the meals in a competent way. And note, too, that it is not just any monk who is to eat with the guests, but rather the abbot himself. There could hardly be a more telling way of noting the importance of hospitality in a monastic setting.

Let me now bring this even closer to home by recounting some things that guests have experienced at my own monastery, St. Anselm’s Abbey, which is only about a mile and half to the northeast of this shrine. As you’d expect, we regularly receive warm “thank you’s” when guests get ready to leave after a few days, but occasionally their stay is much more momentous. A few years ago we received an email from a woman who had been with us a few weeks earlier. Here is what she wrote:

I’d like to express the deepest thanks to all the monks at St. Anselm’s. As a guest a few weeks ago, I came to the abbey deeply troubled by personal problems, unable to sleep well, and an emotional shipwreck. Tears were never far away, and it took only a slight reference to anyone’s sorrow to trigger them. All of that changed the weekend I spent with you. Being able to be among you without an obligation for conversation was a relief all in itself—I didn’t have to guard my words or hold up a front. You trusted me without knowing me, and let me be a part of your lives without any demands. To see men live happily and so simply and to have all of their needs met showed me how little one really needs to be happy. Whereas the focus I had prior to arrival was on external things that could make me happy, I realized that weekend that all material things will eventually decay and bring sorrow—and that true joy can only be found inside, in the love of Christ himself. Your example was more powerful than a million sermons;

just a few days with you showed me the way to peace. I was on tranquilizers before I came, and after I left I didn't need them any more. I could sleep, and I could meet the challenges God had in store for me with faith and courage. I pray for you daily, and I thank you for your dedication to the most honorable way of life I can think of.

Not long after that, we received another very touching letter from a former guest, who wrote the following words: "During the four days I was at St. Anselm's I was able to recover my conscience. For men who had never pushed their conscience too far from them, you may not realize what a feat that recovery was. But it was not my feat. 'I' did not recover anything. It was God—working carefully and quietly through yourselves—who found me and touched my heart—rather rent it into pieces—and reconstructed it in his image." The writer of those lines has since made his Profession of Faith at a parish in the part of the country where he now lives.

My third and final example is one that I could easily have missed, for it appeared in a magazine that I do not normally read, even though we subscribe to it at the monastery. Some of you are no doubt familiar with *America* magazine, published by the Jesuit fathers in New York. Someone brought to my attention an article that appeared in one of the issues back in September of 2011, a remarkable piece titled "The Prosecution Rests." If you have been keeping up with the news of late, you well know that the issue of the remaining detainees at Guantanamo Bay is a lingering problem. Indeed, just about a week ago I was speaking with a lawyer who has been going there a few times each year to represent a few of the prisoners. He said what many others have said, that the way we have held some of those men for years without trial is harming our country's image in many parts of the world, and this troubles him very much. Another person who was troubled by it was Lt. Col. Darrell Vandeveld, who worked there as a prosecutor in the Office of Military Commissions and who was interviewed by Fr. Luke Hansen for that issue of *America*.

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Darrell Vandeveld had served in various dangerous parts of the world, including Bosnia, Iraq, and Afghanistan, and had friends and comrades who were killed in action in Iraq or Afghanistan. This had angered him very much, so he had first gone

to Guantanamo seeking revenge in the only way open to him: through the legal system. But the longer he was there, the more troubled he became by what he saw, such as a boy named Mohammed Jawad, who was only 15 or 16 years old when he was captured for attacking two Americans. At Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan he was hooded and shackled, thrown down a flight of stairs, and threatened with still worse treatment. Later, at Guantanamo, he was treated in a manner that one of our Army generals called cruel and that led the young man to attempt suicide by the crude method of banging his head against the wall. Guards saw this and allowed it to continue for a period of time, and an Army psychologist, instead of seeing that Jawad got mental health treatment, said that since he was now in a vulnerable position, it was a good time to interrogate him further. Lt. Col. Vandeveld tried to convince the chief prosecutor that we should enter into a plea agreement with Jawad that would allow him to serve some additional time, receive rehabilitative services, and ultimately be repatriated to his country of origin, but this suggestion was vehemently rejected. Receiving advice from a priest to leave Guantanamo and the Army, Vandeveld was hesitant to do this since he was 47 at the time, established in his career, and with a family. What he did do I recount in his own words:

I went to St. Anselm's Abbey in Washington, D.C., and stayed there for three days. In addition to praying the Liturgy of the Hours, I read three books: John Dear's *A Persistent Peace*, Nelson Mandela's autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, and a collection of Martin Luther King Jr.'s speeches. I basically spent 72 hours in constant prayer. I barely slept. At the end of it, I felt—and this is the first time I have said this—I felt touched by the hand of God. My path became clear....

Martin Luther King said that we are sometimes faced with great moral questions, and we have the ability to act or to refuse to act. Reading these books and praying intensely worked an inner transformation. I have no idea what led me to St. Anselm's Abbey, but it changed me forever.¹

Darrel Vandeveld had become convinced that if the detainees at Guantanamo are not to be tried

in regular federal courts, then the only acceptable alternative would be to try them before military courts-martial, since their prolonged and indefinite detention is promoting arbitrariness and a denial of human rights. Being unable to effect any real change in the system, he resigned from the Office of Military Commissions and now serves as an assistant public defender for Erie County, Pennsylvania. He concluded his interview with these words:

In my work with the Public Defender's Office, I find hope every time I stand up in court and urge the judge to see the human behind the shackled, prison-clothed person in front of him or her, and to seek to do justice. This is what sustains me. Each day at work, my desire is to see God in everything and to recognize that all of us are better than the worst acts we commit. This is the beginning of my spiritual journey.²

Not nearly everyone will have that kind of life-changing experience when spending a few days at a monastery like ours, but even when such a mammoth change is not needed, I am convinced that the hospitality we offer is a precious gift. It may well be that the relatively limited time you have with visitors here at the National Shrine does not as readily facilitate life-transforming changes in the visitors, but one never knows how much good might come if you do everything in your power to make these visitors feel truly welcome.

I expect that for the most part this welcoming attitude is not difficult, for most of the visitors are surely very congenial and eager to hear whatever you have to tell them. There may, however, be times when you will have visitors whose personalities are more difficult, who may object to certain things they see or who keep asking questions that are totally off the point and annoying to the others in the tour group. There is often no easy way to deal with persons who are really obnoxious, but it's very important that you keep your cool instead of becoming argumentative in turn. Even at my monastery there have at times been guests who were very difficult to deal with. We once hired a person to do some painting and said that as long as the job lasted, he could reside at the monastery. That was fine, but when he finished the job he refused to leave, constantly finding one or another reason to prolong

his stay. We finally had to threaten to call the police and have him charged with trespassing. Only then did he reluctantly depart.

In earlier times the same sort of problem could occur. An ancient document known as the *Didache*, written around the time of the latest books of the New Testament, recognizes the need to set some limits on the duration of a guest's stay, for section 12 of that work begins with these words: "Everyone who comes 'in the name of the Lord' is to be made welcome, though later on you must test him and find out about him. You will be able to distinguish the true from the false. If the newcomer is only passing through, give him all the help you can—though he is not to stay more than a couple of days with you, or three if it is unavoidable. But if he wants to settle down among you and is a skilled worker, let him find employment and earn his bread. If he knows no trade, use your discretion to make sure he does not live in idleness simply on the strength of being a Christian." ³

Since monasteries were not immune to guests who were merely seeking a convenient place to stay for an indefinite period, there is a rather well-known text that pretends to be part of the *Rule* of St. Benedict. Indeed, it begins in a very inspirational tone but then concludes with some frank but humorous realism. We actually have a framed copy of it hanging in the guest corridor of our abbey. Known by its Latin title, *Benedictum, Benedicte* ("Well said, Benedict"), it goes like this:

If any pilgrim monk come from distant parts with the wish to dwell as a guest in the monastery, and if he will be content with the customs which he finds in the place and does not perchance by his lavishness disturb the monastery, but is simply content with what he finds, he shall be received for as long a time as he desires. If indeed he find fault with anything, or expose it reasonably and with the humility of charity, the Abbot shall discuss it prudently, lest perchance God has sent him for this very thing. But if he be found gossipy and contumacious during the time of his sojourn as guest, not only ought he not be joined to the body of the monastery, but also it shall be said to him, honestly, that he must depart. If he does not go, let two stout monks, in the name of God, explain the matter to him.

My final point is that it is very important for you to emphasize to visitors that this basilica is not primarily a tourist attraction but a place of prayer and worship. Visitors should be encouraged to spend some time in prayer once their tour is over, perhaps in one of the side chapels that is in accord with their own ethnicity. When I taught courses in Christian spirituality at Catholic University, I would sometimes have students write personal reflection papers about how they dealt with difficult situations in their own lives, and I was always struck by how often the students would refer to this basilica as a place where they could come for a time of quiet prayer and meditation. This is one of the great attractions of a place like this. Visitors should also be made aware of the possibility of receiving the sacrament of penance, for there are priests hearing confessions on this crypt level for many hours each day. A monk of my own community is one of the regular confessors over here, and he has several times told me how rewarding it is for him to be able to minister in this way to people, many of whom have been away from that sacrament for years. Similarly, make sure you let the visitors know that Mass is celebrated literally morning, noon, and evening here at the basilica. The Eucharist will always be at the very center of our Catholic faith, and you have a great opportunity to promote genuine Eucharistic devotion in your work as receptionists and tour guides.

In sum, there are many ways in which you can touch people's lives in a positive way through your work here. It is something you can rightly take pride in. I hope that my talk and this entire day of recollection have made you more aware than ever of the wonderful opportunity you have each and every time you volunteer your services here.

¹ Luke Hansen, "The Prosecution Rests: Why Darrel J. Vandeveld left Guantánamo," *America*, Sept. 26, 2011, p. 16-17.

² *Ibid.*, 17.

³ *The Didache*, no. 12, in *Early Christian Writings: The Apostolic Fathers*, trans. Maxwell Staniforth (London: Penguin, 1968), 196.