

The Lost Virtue of Christian Hospitality

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Summer is a time we invite family and friends over for dinner often. The sun sets later and evenings are warm. It is an ideal season to entertain guests, to sit down with family and friends and share a meal together.

Hospitality is a Christian virtue. [Pope Francis](#) has mentioned that it runs the risk of being left aside, of being lost. We often define hospitality as offering guests food and drink, caring for their needs. However, true hospitality involves more than simply these actions. True hospitality is making someone feel among family in your home or parish. It is a value that has biblical roots. As summer begins, it is helpful to better understand its meaning.

Hospitality in the Bible

In biblical times, hospitality was far more than simply being friendly or polite, it was both a duty and an act of mercy. Hospitality was often necessary for survival. Travelling in the Holy Land was quite dangerous at the time. Cities were far from one another and available inns were few in number and far apart. People had to travel through deserts, extremely hot temperatures, and lands which were unfriendly to them as they were ruled by their enemies. Roads were unsafe, especially for those who traveled alone. People often put their lives in danger on the road, as did the man who fell victim to thieves in the Parable of the Good Samaritan ([Luke 10:29-37](#)). Travelers who ran out of food or water, or were unable to find safe shelter during their journeys, could even run the risk of dying. They often had to depend on the hospitality of strangers.

In the Mediterranean world, hospitality was a virtue. The Jewish communities knew from experience what it was like to be a stranger in a foreign land. During those difficult moments, God showed them mercy and provided for their needs. God instructed His people to leave some food in the fields at harvest time, enough to feed orphans, widows, and resident aliens. The Lord explained, "For, remember, you were slaves in Egypt, and the Lord, your God, redeemed you from there; that is why I command you to do this" ([Deuteronomy 24:18](#)).

Our own modern Western traditions of hospitality are quite informal. Instead, the customs of the ancient Near East were far more rigid and formal. Hospitality for them was quite different from simply entertaining family and friends. There were specific duties they needed to fulfill. Hosts had a responsibility to provide their guests with food and drink, to provide them with water to wash their feet, and a place for them to spend the night. Guests were required to gratefully accept whatever their hosts offered them. If either of them refused to fulfill their obligations, they committed a significant breach of honor. Dining with someone and then betraying him was one of the most dreadful actions you could commit. This fact

helps us understand another aspect of Judas' betrayal of Jesus, an act which occurred right after Jesus shared His last meal with him.

Jesus as Guest and Host

Jesus lived the life of a traveler. He journeyed from town to town, preaching, performing miracles, and healing his followers. He lived this simple life of humble service. He had no home and depended on the hospitality of others, both friends, such as Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, as well as Pharisees and tax collectors. He was invited into their homes as their guest. On one occasion Jesus spoke of His life as a traveler. He said, "Foxes have dens and birds of the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to rest his head" ([Matthew 8:20](#)).

Jesus often instructed His followers while sharing a meal together. He knew that dinnertime was the best time to teach them, a time when they would listen to Him attentively. An important part of His message was the hospitality and generosity of God. He describes heaven using the language of hospitality. Jesus told Peter:

In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If there were not, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back again and take you to myself, so that where I am you also may be ([John 14:2-3](#)).

Jesus Himself hosted a dinner on the hillside. He had gone up to the mountain and a large crowd had followed Him. Using five loaves of barley bread and two fish, the lunch a little boy's mother had lovingly packed for him, he multiplied it to feed about five thousand people, with twelve baskets of bread fragments left over afterwards. ([John 6:1-15](#)). This simple meal was an example of God's love and generous hospitality.

The story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus ([Luke 24:13-35](#)) provides us with an example of Christian hospitality. The two disciples were leaving Jerusalem, hurt and

broken-hearted over the crucifixion of Jesus. They were abandoning the way of Jesus because He had left them alone without having met their expectations. Along their journey they met a stranger. This stranger revealed to them how Jesus fulfilled God's promises in Scripture. Filled with questions and their own worries, they were unable to recognize him. Towards the end of the day, the disciples offered Him hospitality as was custom. They urged Him to remain with them, saying, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening and the day is almost over" (Luke 24:29). While sharing a meal together, the disciples' eyes were opened. They recognized the stranger as the risen Jesus. The two disciples had strayed, but were now welcomed back again. They returned to walk along the way of Jesus. This all occurred because they showed true hospitality. They received their guest with gentleness, ears that honestly listened to Him, and hearts that were warm and welcoming.

God calls each of us to be hospitable, to help those in need. By helping them we are indeed helping Christ. As Pope St. John Paul II stated:

"Welcoming Christ in the brother and sister tried by need is the condition for meeting him perfectly and 'face to face' at the end of the earthly journey" ([Homily for the Jubilee of Migrants and Itinerant Workers, June 2, 2000](#)).

Living Christian Hospitality

We are all called to see Christ in the faces of those around us. Jesus offers us His Body and Blood in the Eucharist, as He did to His closest disciples at the Last Supper. Jesus, the generous host, invites us to His banquet, where He gives Himself as our bread and wine, our nourishment. Let us receive Him with an open and welcoming heart and respond to His generous hospitality by welcoming others in His name.