

A Spirituality of Hospitality by Arlene Scott OP

"For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me" (Matt 25:35).

I was raised in a home where there was always room for one more. When I was young, my brothers, my sister and I thought that our mother must be a magnet for lonely, elderly people. Our mother would invite people who were alone to come to holiday meals. She would run errands for them and take them to the doctor. She'd see to it that they were cared for and remember them with gifts at Christmas and birthdays. She even invited some of them to stay at our home during hurricanes. She was drawn into their lives in ways she probably never imagined. Helping someone in need is, for our mother, the most natural thing in the world. Our mother has a spirituality of hospitality.

To serve God by serving others, to love God by loving others, that is the heart of a spirituality of hospitality. Joan Chittister, in *Wisdom Distilled From the Daily*, asserts that, "The biblical value of hospitality has been domesticated and is now seen more as one of the social graces than as a spiritual act and a holy event." For much of our society today hospitality has become something reserved for those we want to impress. Hospitality is a business endeavour for those who want to please their customers so to increase their revenue. Wouldn't it be wonderful if hospitality was, rather, a way of showing respect and care for all God's people with no return required or expected. A spirituality of hospitality is lived out of an attitude of care and respect for all creation and a belief in the dignity of the human person. It is why we do something that is often more important than what we do.

In order to offer hospitality in a spiritual context we have to take a look around. Who is in need and what do they need? Who isn't included and how can they be welcomed? Who doesn't seem to have a voice and what will help them to be heard? Most of us prefer to live in our comfort zones. We don't notice the student always eating alone, the homeless man selling newspapers, the woman counting her pennies to buy groceries. Some people seem so different from us that we don't recognise them as our brother or sister.

A spirituality of hospitality calls us to generosity and service, to consider how our words and actions affect others and our environment. It invites us to reflect on how our spending or use of materials effect people on the other side of our world. A spirituality of hospitality invites us to reflect on how life might be made better for those who are in need. It calls us to take that reflection to discussion and then to action.

A preferential option for guests in our home means that they have clean sheets and towels, that coffee will be ready in the morning. They are kind acts that help people to feel comfortable when they are away from home. Hospitality, in its broader meaning, is a way of living that goes beyond a thoughtful gesture. How does a preferential option for the poor invite us to be hospitable? We can give some of our time and resources to soup kitchens, food pantries or homeless shelters. We can insist with our voices and votes that policies do not punish people for being poor. Those, too, are acts of hospitality.

To be hospitable is to be open and receptive to the ideas of another, listening with an open heart.

- **Do we allow people their opinions?**
- **Do we believe that we have been truly heard only if our own ideas prevail?**
- **Are we open to the possibility that others have a piece of the truth?**

Hospitality promotes right relationships. Often, hospitality is a reflection of forgiveness. It isn't easy to extend ourselves when there is a tension between us and the other person. The smallest inclusion or generous action can create space for reconciliation. The openness and invitation to reconciliation can be a most hospitable act.

A spirituality of hospitality is about relating to God through others. Jesus makes it clear, *"Whatever you did for one of these least of mine, you did for me."* Matt 25:40

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