Entertaining Angels

Hospitality and Eastern Christianity
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Introduction

The Eastern Churches have always venerated ascetism as "the angelic life". Monks living in prayer and fasting are glorified in prayer as "angels in the flesh". And of these the greatest, the father of them all is Saint Anthony the Great. Yet, in the fourth century collection, The Sayings of the Fathers, we read the following about the saint:

"It was revealed to Abba Anthony in his desert that there was one who was his equal in the city. He was a doctor by profession and whatever he had beyond his needs he gave to the poor, and every day he sang the Trisagion with the angels."

Even in the midst of the movement towards monasticism we find that looking to the needs of those around us was considered a highpoint of Christian living, equal to the most daring feats of asceticism. If ascetics were the equal of angels, those who gave of themselves to the poor were their companions.

This small collection brings together four previously published articles pointing to the Eastern Christian focus on hospitality. The first three entries are reprinted from Catholic Near East Magazine (Winter, 1988, Vol. 14, No. 4). We are indebted to this journal and its editor, Michael Healy, for focusing on this topic, for particularly highlighting the efforts of Melkites in this regard, and for permission to reprint these articles. The fourth article, by Father David Kirk, director of Emmaus House, first appeared in Diakonia (1981, Vol. XVI, No. 2) and is also reprinted with permission. To them we have added reflection questions which may be used for group discussion or personal consideration as we try to deepen our appreciation of the Christian call to entertain angels.

Fr. Fred Saato
Recognizing the Stranger

by Michael Healy

The Lord appeared to Abraham by the terebinths of Mamre. As Abraham was sitting at the opening of his tent in the heat of the day, he looked up and saw three men standing in front of him. When he saw them, he ran from the opening of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground. "Sirs," he said, "if I have deserved your favor, do not pass by my humble self without a visit. Let me send for some water so that you may wash your feet and rest under a tree; and let me fetch a little food so that you may refresh yourselves. Afterwards you may continue the journey which has brought you my way." They said, "Do by all means as you say."

(Gen 18:1-5)

When Abraham looked up to see three strangers standing in the heat of the day outside his tent, he didn't recognize God.

Still, in the tradition of the East, he ran to greet them and offer full generosity. He accepted them into his home the way we might greet a favorite relative not seen for many years - not unlike the father welcoming home the prodigal son of the parable.

Abraham slaughtered a calf to feed them, fetched water to wash the dust from their feet, roused Sarah to bake fresh bread, and made them welcome in the refreshing shade of a tree. Though he had servants, he waited on these guests himself.

Abraham is strikingly humble in this encounter. "Let me," he says, asking permission to be kind, generous, hospitable. He bows low to the ground before these visitors who are total strangers. He was an old man of 99 years, childless, living in a tent for his home.

But his hospitality reveals his character's nobility and wealth beyond the size of his household and flocks. Abraham recognizes that he is blessed by their arrival, and his words and actions express that most clearly.

His guests revealed to this humble, childless man that he and Sarah would have a son to confirm God's covenant with him. He was destined to be patriarch to the three great monotheistic faiths: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.
His response to the three heavenly visitors is the model for hospitality at the heart of these faiths. It is recognizing God in a stranger.

Recognition underlies all hospitality. It is the affirmation of personhood - and of the Creator of all persons. Martin Buber pointed out that each person's "unacknowledged secret is his desire to be affirmed in his essence and in his existence by his fellow men." Each of us wants, and needs, this recognition and affirmation.

At the same time, we want an opportunity to affirm other people. Buber wrote that through this "mutual sympathy ... each would let the other know that he endorses his presence. It is this endorsement that constitutes the indispensable minimum of man's humanity." Hospitality is the responsibility that goes with recognition.

You don't need to know chapter and verse of Scripture to understand that recognition and hospitality are central to the story of Revelation. Scripture is about recognizing the Messiah. It also reveals the nature of God's relationship with humanity.

Jesus proclaimed the Good News, especially to those rejected, outcast, abandoned, neglected. He revealed Himself as God's Son incarnate, in fulfillment of God's covenant with His people. Yet, He was not always recognized, and He did not receive the hospitality He deserved. During His ministry Jesus asked His disciples, "Who do men say that I am?" Few recognized Him then.

He spoke with stories about hospitality, or the lack of it - Lazarus at the gate (Lk 16:19-31), the prodigal son (Lk 15:11-32), strangers brought in from the byways as guests at the wedding feast (Mt 22:1-14). He would talk about the Son of Man having no place to lay His head (Lk 9:58), and of prophets being rejected in their own country (Mt 13:57; Mk 6:4, Lk 4:24). He spoke of the Last Judgement, when the Father will welcome the righteous into the eternal kingdom with the words, "For ... I was a stranger, and you made me welcome." And the righteous will be told that "in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me" (Mt 25:31-40). We welcome each and all in His name when we say, "Peace be with you".

Offering hospitality is central to acting as a follower of Christ. Early Christians were urged to express their faith in the extent of their hospitality: "Contribute to the needs of God's people, and practice hospitality" (Romans 12:13). "Be hospitable to one another without complaining" (1 Peter 4:9).

Saint John Chrysostom made hospitality to the poor a frequent theme in his sermons. He said that serving the poor is the best way to pray: "Lift up and stretch out your hands, not to heaven, but to the poor; for if you stretch forth your hands to the poor, you have reached the summit of heaven;
but if you lift up your hands in prayer without sharing with the poor, it is worth nothing."

Why is this true for Christians? "When you wait upon the poor and broken, it is far more than if you had fed Jesus Christ in person; for you are serving simply on His word," this Father of the Church explained.

Today there are many living models of hospitality, especially among Eastern Catholics. You will know them in how they recognize and welcome the stranger. Two houses of hospitality - one East, and the other West - profoundly demonstrate this most Christian of virtues with a radical simplicity and clarity. The stories of the House of Grace in Haifa and of Emmaus House in New York are only two examples.

When we entertain, those that we welcome so lavishly tend to be family and friends. This speaks of how our notion of hospitality has changed. Meanwhile God still comes to us in the form of a needy stranger passing outside our door. He comes to bless us.

For Your Reflection

1. What is your reaction to the following statements from page 8 of the above article:

   - "Recognition underlies all hospitality. It is the affirmation of personhood - and of the Creator of all persons."

   - "Offering hospitality is central to acting as a follower of Christ."

2. The article's last paragraph notes how our notion of hospitality has changed. Why might this be so (economic circumstances, less sense of community, etc)?
In the dilapidated neighborhood of lower Haifa in Israel, the Arab community is being reborn. A renovated church building is at the heart of the revival. In this structure of stone, stucco walls, and archways are released prisoners, battered women, unwed mothers, and drug addicts. They are beginning new lives. The change is not easy for any of them. But they are given "not just one chance. We give them ten chances," says Kamil Shehade. After several months in the House of Grace, many of its residents can return to the larger community.

House of Grace is like the home of an extended family. Men, women, and children laugh, sing Arab songs, and talk as they do their chores or relax after returning from factory jobs in industrialized Haifa. Kamil, his wife Agnes, their four children, some 15 residents, and several volunteers eat meals together in the simple kitchen. They take turns saying the blessing.

Many of the residents have been convicted of serious crimes, including murder. They have come to House of Grace afraid, frustrated, with very little self-esteem and no skills. Women residents have been ostracized by
kin and society. Their lives are endangered by husbands or brothers determined to avenge family honor. Here they are welcomed.

Kamil and Agnes Shehade do not dwell on past sins or failures. This husband and wife have given their lives to help "the people without solutions" of Haifa. They are the founders and "parents" of House of Grace. "We start with the belief that these people are not lost cases," Kamil says. "We accept them as they are."

Residents of House of Grace are treated as equals, sharing space, food and clothing with the Shehades. But most importantly, they share in Kamil and Agnes's Christian love. "We are not rehabilitating. Here we just love," Kamil says. "We just want to be the missing family, and that's enough."

Family is central to Arab values. The lack of one is devastating in the traditional Middle Eastern Arab society. The political, economic and social upheaval which followed the Israeli War of Independence in 1948 destroyed the foundation of Haifa's Arab community.

In the beginning of 1948, 80,000 Arabs lived in the city in a close-knit, flourishing, faith-centered society. By the end of the year, 78,000 had fled to the surrounding countries. Those that stayed were the poor, the elderly, the underprivileged - those who couldn't escape. They were joined by displaced villagers from the surrounding rural areas of Galilee. The new Arab population congregated in downtown slums. Now they number more than 20,000.

With neither the dignity of work nor the support of the traditional family network, they were left to live in quiet desperation. The area of lower Haifa became more and more depressed. Drug abuse, alcoholism, crime, and prostitution flourished as families disintegrated and people lost touch with their religious roots.

About ten years ago, Kamil Shehade faced this disintegrated community as a young volunteer social worker. One family presented a shattering archetype of the people of the area. It had no means of support and struggled just to survive. The mother was divorced from an alcoholic husband who had physically abused her. She was caring for eight children alone. Her oldest son was in jail and unable to contribute to the family's care.

Kamil provided food and clothing for them and visited the son behind bars. But the family's sense of failure was so deep that the burdens seemed insurmountable. The mother committed suicide. When the eldest son heard the news, he took his own life. His charred body expired in Kamil's arms.

In his grief Kamil recognized that without community, there was despair. He felt called to help the desperate. His ministry would reach out
colored rolls of paper two years ago. Production moved into full swing after a
government permit was received in April of 1988.

Another project has recently been proposed. It would give financial
aid to top Arab university students studying in Israel and abroad, with the
stipulation that they donate time to visiting inmates and needy families in
Haifa and greater Galilee.

The Shahades have mustered an active network of volunteers who
are eager to build up the Palestinian community in Haifa. Drastic cuts in
funding by some European supporters of House of Grace have made their
efforts more difficult. Yet the work still needs to be done.

When an old man with one leg shows up at House of Grace in crying
need, when a family whose house burned to the ground has no place to stay,
and when an 18-year-old girl who has been tied in a cave for eight months is
brought to House of Grace, the Shehades accept them into their family. "We
cannot refuse. These are our people," Kamil says.

Kamil Shehade sees serving the needy as a privilege, not a sacrifice.
"When you are living like Christ you are becoming an addict to selfishness,"
the Greek Catholic of Haifa says. "When you get to the stage that you are
always giving, you take the happiness of seeing a smile. ... You take a
happiness that no one can give to you."

For Your Reflection

1. What might the following statements (page 12) tell you about the
Shehade's faith-life:

- "Those with no place to go he took into his own apartment until
  they could move on in confidence and hope."

- "Agnes and Kamil began their married life in a three room
  apartment with an ex-prisoner roommate."

2. What do you think Kamil means when he says, "When you are living like
Christ, you are becoming an addict to selfishness" (page 14)?
Called to Do the Truth

Luis Nixon and Fr. David Kirk talk beneath an icon by Joseph Mounsey.

by Thomas Riley
In the neighborhood around 124th Street and Lexington Avenue in New York City, buildings are in decay, drugs continue to lay waste to young lives, and unemployment paralyzes most of the adult population.

The ministry of an Eastern Catholic priest has been generating hope in this troubled place. Emmaus House is a 70-bed center in a whitewashed, five-story building. It used to be an abandoned hotel filled with prostitutes and drug addicts. Now, with the help of a rotating group of volunteers, it offers a fresh start for many of New York's homeless. It provides food and clothing to up to 500 people each day.

But Emmaus House is not a shelter, says its founder and director, Father David Kirk. It is a community of homeless people who live and work together to help themselves and to help those still on the street. Those living in Emmaus House say it is a place of healing.

A Melkite priest might seem out of place in this predominately black neighborhood in upper Manhattan. His work certainly seems a far cry from its Eastern Catholic origins in the Middle East. But Father Kirk knows what he is about. His work in Harlem, he wrote, "is the most Byzantine and Eastern Christian act I can do."

Emmaus House was founded in 1966 as "a house of hospitality". Hospitality, of course, has a long tradition which began in the East and was carried to the West by Christians. In the 20th century the Catholic Worker movement in the United States revived the custom of houses of hospitality. The Catholic origin of these houses can be found in the earliest days of the Church, and they were promoted vigorously by Saint John Chrysostom.

Emmaus House in Harlem was conceived to offer service where hope was desperately needed. But before that was possible, Kirk had to find his home in Catholicism. "When I became a Catholic, I was 19 years old, and I came to Catholicism through the civil rights movement," he recalled. I had never read the gospels before, I had never been to church before. It was all very fresh and revolutionary to me. So, when I read I was hungry and you fed
me; I was homeless and you gave me shelter, I took it very seriously, and have since then. This is the vision of life given to Christians to do.

Father Kirk was ordained in Jerusalem in 1964. At the ordination, Patriarch Maximos IV told him and other new priests that they were being ordained not just for the work of the parishes but for the work of the poor and the unity of Christians.

There has been little resistance to Father Kirk and the Eastern faith tradition he displays in the heart of Western culture. "We come here as brothers. I did not come here to dominate or lead but to support - and in that way I find I'm accepted," he says. "We should be in every culture and with every people," he adds.

In fact, he finds an affinity in this predominately black community. "The Eastern Church has more kinship with the African people than does the Western Church. The Western mentality is very cerebral. In the Eastern Church we pray with our bodies, our hearts, and our minds, which is the way the African people do it. Our prayers are not simply mental prayers, mental exercises. I've found a real relationship between the black experience and the experience of a Church which is primarily in the Middle East, Eastern Africa and Eastern Europe.

Despite the acceptance and support of the surrounding community, the people of Emmaus House face intimidating, sometimes overwhelming conditions. Male unemployment in Harlem has soared to 70 percent. The nearby city shelter usually fills its 1,000 beds each night. 85 percent of the people in the streets around Emmaus House are crack users. It is an uncompromising challenge.

"It really is devastation," remarks the priest from behind his thick, greying beard. Nevertheless, in the face of intense human suffering, his eyes remain clear, resolute. "I believe that if you pray to the Holy Spirit for those gifts - patience, steadfastness, perseverance - you will be given them. Of course, you can just sit by and accept these sorts of things. Or, you can cry out to try to bring about the changes that we need."

The work of Emmaus House has received strong support from Father Kirk's superiors. The eparch of the only Melkite diocese in the United States, Archbishop Joseph Tawil, echoes the work of the community's director. "It goes back to the Gospel - I was hungry and you gave me to eat; I was homeless and you gave me shelter. It is, very simply, the practice of the Gospel, nothing else," the archbishop says. "He is one of our priests, and his work is completely blessed and encouraged by this diocese."

In an article which appeared in the journal Diakonia, Father Kirk defined hospitality as the essence of the Eastern Christian lifestyle. His
understanding of the practice has implications for all Catholics. "In Eastern Christianity, hospitality to the poor is an extension of the Liturgy," he wrote. "The Gospel of Christ must be presented at least in a threefold way: it must be proclaimed (kerygma), communally manifested (koinonia), and spelled out in acts of humble service (diakonia)."

He also wrote, "Truth must not only be proclaimed and celebrated. We are called to the doing of the truth. United with Christ, we cannot refuse to lay down our life for our brother. We must now come to serve, not be served."

There are many kinds of service at Emmaus House, several ways in which residents become more responsible for themselves and others. Besides taking assignments in the community kitchen or business office, those living at the house are employed in Emmaus Works, a construction company that operates in partnership with professionals to rehabilitate abandoned buildings to create housing for the poor. Emmaus Works also has been involved in the renovation of co-ops in midtown Manhattan, as well as suburban homes in the metropolitan area. Many community members receive on-the-job training.

There is also the Emmaus Roadrunners, a moving service created following the donation of a van and a five-ton truck. Besides earning pay for Emmaus House as conventional movers, the Roadrunners use their resources to assist the poor by making pick-ups and deliveries for the House and other social organizations around the city.

Other community members are employed by Emmaus Community Crafts, which opened as a cabinet shop for in-house renovation projects. Now its skills are employed by outside businesses, including a major medical center in New York.

"Here at Emmaus House, we try to empower the poor, not just serve the poor," says Father Kirk. "If you do this institutional kind of service, and remove yourself from the people, that's degrading to them. The big thing is to get people to help themselves while they are helping others."

For Father Kirk and the people of Emmaus House, charity means more than the giving of material goods. The Melkite priest explains, "The thing to get across is that people need more than food and shelter. They need a new life."

The new life offered at Emmaus House is community, which affirms the dignity of each person by sharing hope, love, and faith. The hospitality of the community at the same time transforms its own members as it changes the world it serves.
What Emmaus House does is a basic expression of faith. In his article on the Eastern tradition of hospitality, Father Kirk wrote: "Hospitality becomes for the Christian community a way of being the sacrament of God's love in the world and in human history. It is a way families and the whole Christian community can fulfill their common mission from Christ, through the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit, to love and serve humanity. For the Church's life is healthiest when she is self-forgetful and turns outward to serve the needs of humankind."

For Your Reflection

1. Father Kirk is quoted on page 16 as saying that his work in Harlem "is the most Byzantine and Eastern Christian act I can do". What do you think he means?

2. Have you any personal experience of Father Kirk's statement, "the Church's life is healthiest when she is self-forgetful..."?

The daily community meeting each morning ends with a prayer.
Hospitality
The Essence of Eastern Christian Lifestyle
by Rev. Fr. David Kirk

In the Eastern Churches, truth, liturgy and life are one and they flow together when the Christian community of love celebrates God's redeeming love, which manifests itself in humble service to humanity. Hospitality becomes the heart of every Eastern Christian diocese, parish and family. "Houses of hospitality must be built for the poor in every city and every diocese," demands the Council of Nicaea. Each family too became a microcosm of the hospitality of the Church: "Let every family have a room where Christ is welcomed in the person of the hungry and thirsty stranger" (St. John Chrysostom). Aristides, defending Christians before Hadrian, gave this eyewitness account of early Christians:

Christians love one another. They never fail to help widows and orphans. If a man has something, he gives it freely to the man who has nothing. If they see a stranger, Christians take him home and treat him like a real brother. If someone is poor and there isn't enough food to go around, they fast several days to give him the food he needs. This is really a new kind of person. There is something divine in them.

Liturgical Hospitality

The only criterion Christ gives us for our judgment before God is hospitality. The Lord Jesus tells us in the Gospel of Matthew that those who share their home and possessions and hearts with the poor would enter the Kingdom, even if they did not know that they were serving Him when they served the poor. Those, who refused to feed or house or help the poor, the sick, the imprisoned, were condemned to everlasting punishment. In the midst of the comfort with which we surround ourselves in the Church, this Gospel continues to hit us with its clear, simple truth like a bolt of fire cast at our feet. We Eastern Christians often do not even know the dynamite we sit on. We are members often of deprived churches, too poor in fact to be poor in virtue, too unsure or unknowing to preach the whole Gospel with clarity
and vision, too attached to the bric-a-brac of honors, the double-talk of diplomacy, the degrading favors of the rich, the idolatry of structures, the price of place. We need once more to reclaim the Gospel, rooted in the East, which is the yeast of personal and social revolution.

In Eastern Christianity, hospitality to the poor is an extension of Liturgy. God is welcoming and is hospitable to us (Psalms 26, 64, 72) and asks us to welcome and give hospitality to others. He calls and welcomes humanity to the celebration of its transformations. He shares Himself as the food of life and we become partakers of divine food, divine life. We welcome Christ in the Byzantine Liturgy (and echoed in the prayers of St. Basil and St. Ephraem): "Lord, I am not worthy that you should come under my roof, for there is no place worthy enough for You to lay your head." - Jesus, the Guest (Lk 7:36, Jn 2:12); Jesus, the host, doing abundant good to His guests (Mk 5:41).

For a moment in the Liturgy, we glimpse the Kingdom, like a feast "where many shall come from East and West, and shall sit down with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob." The beggar, Lazarus, reclines against the breast of the Lord. The Liturgy is the Kingdom of love: Christ and His people sitting around a table as brothers and sisters. A banquet of brotherhood where "we who are many become one body, because we share the one Bread: (1 Cor 10:14), saving us from isolation and selfishness. We can be restored in Eucharist to the solidarity and love which the world has lost. Like the Trinity, each of us is fulfilled in the consubstantiality of all humankind; it bears fruit in the "Sacrament of the brother": diakonia.

Eucharist for the Life of the World

The Eucharist is given "for the life of the world," a world which is loved by God. It is the moment of truth when we see the world in Christ, as it really is the will be - a lifting up of our consciousness until we can glimpse the Kingdom. When we "lay aside all earthly care" we are in fact not running away from world reality, but seeing the world in its total reality.

Then in the joy and peace of the Holy Spirit, we are sent forth to serve and celebrate. The Gospel of Jesus Christ must be presented at least in a threefold way: it must be proclaimed (Kerygma), communally manifested (Koinonia) and spelled out in acts of humble service (Diakonia). For this "we have seen the true Light, we have received the heavenly Spirit." Truth must not only be proclaimed and celebrated; we are called to the doing of the truth. United with Christ, we cannot refuse to lay down our life for our brother. We must now "come to serve, not to be served."
At His last supper, Christ told us to break Bread: "Do this in memory of Me." But He also had washed the feet of His disciples, saying: Do this too in memory of Me. This means, serve, be less than others, stay with the most insignificant of humanity as brothers.

The Eucharist lacks an element of its authenticity if love and service do not flow from the Liturgy. Just as the Old Testament prophets attacked the liturgy of Israel because it coexisted with social injustice and oppression, Jesus too demanded that "If you bring your gift to the altar, and there you remember that your brother has anything against you, go first and be reconciled with your brother, then return and offer your gift."

Lift up and stretch out your hands,  
not to heaven, but to the poor;  
for if you stretch forth your hands to the poor,  
you have reached the summit of heaven;  
but if you lift up your hands in prayer  
without sharing with the poor,  
it is worth nothing.  
(St. John Chrysostom)

When we leave the Liturgy and do not continue the Liturgy, we desecrate the Eucharist. We betray Christ. "He who breaks bread and eats with me," Jesus warns, "lifts up his heel against me" (Mark 14:18, Jn 18:18). At the Liturgy we become a brother or sister to every poor man, in fact to every man. We are then asked to multiply the loaves and share our bread with others. For Eucharist is the celebration of community and sharing humanity's redemption from the alienation that is the very core of human sinfulness.

It would be a lie and blasphemy to receive this bread of unity while being unjust or refusing to share your wealth, property and power with the poor.

The poor are a greater temple than the sanctuary;  
this altar, the poor, you can raise up  
any where, any street,  
and offer liturgy at any hour.  
(St. John Chrysostom)
Faith and Love

In the Liturgy, just before we proclaim our faith (the Creed), the deacon says to the people, "Let us love one another so that we may proclaim..." Faith and love walk together. Bonhoeffer said in the midst of the Nazi Holocaust, "Only he who shouts for the Jews can sing monastic chants." Only he who shares his bread can come worthily to the Lord's table. Hunger and Eucharist: a theological treatment of hunger is a political treatment of hunger.

When Christ said at the table that this was His body to be broken and His blood to be shed, He was also setting the example of laying down His blood to be shed, He was also setting the example of laying down His life for people. Our own blood is to be shed, not the blood of others; our own bodies are to be broken, not the bodies of others. And when Jesus said, "Do this in memory of me," He meant that we must not only do so at the holy table but in our daily lives. I have in my mind and heart now the mighty icon of Archbishop Romero, who offered up his own body and blood for Christ crucified in the poor in El Salvador. But there is also a river of blood running through the Middle East, Eastern Europe and Africa, the blood of murdered Eastern Christian bishops, priests and people which has quietly soaked into the earth.

Christ Is Among Us

"Christ is among us," we shout at the Liturgy, "Yes, He is and will always be." Jesus Christ keeps appearing among us in so many ways. We celebrate Him in the breaking of Bread. We find Him alive in the Church, present to reconcile and free us. We find Him living within us, within every human person; inner light, as we grow and are transformed toward becoming God. But especially Christ is among us here and now, hidden in the poor, the broken, the outcast, the oppressed and dispossessed. Icons of God, vicars of Christ. You don't need to look to the sky to wait for His return. You don't need to travel to Jerusalem or the sky to wait for His return. You don't need to travel to Jerusalem or Rome to find Him. He is here because the poor are with us always. "I am with you always." He is here, as near as any person who suffers is to you.

In the Christian East a beggar was never refused, feeling that Christ had come to test them. The Metropolitan of Kiev, Ivan IV, would say to each bishop he consecrated: "My son, turn to sharing; Christ is hidden in the rags of a beggar; stretch out your hand." We find this attitude especially strong in
the Russian Christian family and in monasteries, i.e. an overwhelming experience of welcoming Christ in the poorest.

When you wait upon the poor and broken,  
it is far more than if you had fed  
Jesus Christ in person;  
for you are serving simply on His word.  
(St John Chrysostom)

He who loves his human brother  
fulfills the love he does to God,  
for God accepts this love as shown to Himself.  
(St. Basil)

Catherine DeHueck Doherty, that great modern Eastern Catholic apostle of the poor, recalls how she learned, as a child in Russia, to recognize this suffering Christ. "A beggar came to the door when I was a child, and asked for food," she remembers, "and I closed the door on him. My father overheard me and told me to rush up the road, find the beggar and bring him home, for Christ lives in him." The beggar sat down to a festive table and was welcomed as Christ. Catherine experienced the whole Gospel in that childhood encounter. On this consciousness she would later build Friendship Houses, the pioneer in the American Catholic Church of interracial justice and service to the poor, and Madonna House, the international community serving the poor and the spiritually and materially hungry.

Images of God in the beggar haunt Eastern faith. Christ is seen as the poor Messiah, entering Jerusalem on a donkey rather than as a triumphant Emperor on a white stallion. The beggar often sits in the marketplace until someone takes him home. And Martin Buber perhaps reflects the consciousness of many people of faith when he writes: "I am haunted by one vision: that there is a beggar outside the gates of Jerusalem and He is the Messiah. He waits for us to bring him home." "Go outside the camp to meet Christ."(Heb 13:13).

Welcome the Stranger

"Do not neglect to show hospitality to the strangers, for thereby some have cared for angels unaware" (Heb 13:2). The stranger in Scripture was an outsider, someone who was not a member of the group or tribe, an
alien or foreigner. Still, the Torah (which means not law, but a way of life) says that when a man passes through and needs hospitality, he must be welcome. Our fathers lived and traveled through the desert, where hospitality is necessary for survival. Rich or poor, it does not matter; every sojourner has a right to hospitality. Even if the host and guest were enemies, an act of reconciliation would be made so that hospitality could be accepted. Such daring openness was meant to remind Israelites of their former condition as slaves and as strangers. It was to remind them that they are still sojourners on this earth (Heb 11:13, Ps 39), for this earth was not their real or final home.

One of the first appearances of the Christ after his resurrection was as this stranger, walking with the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Only when they gave hospitality to the Stranger, sharing bread and a meal at an inn, did they fully open their eyes and minds and see that He come again and again as a stranger needing hospitality: "I was a Stranger and you took me in; I was hungry and you fed me."

The attitude of the early Church toward the stranger or foreigner was revolutionary. Eventually the strangers in the Church outnumbered the Jewish community. Opening up the doors of their homes and communities led to the spontaneous expansion of the Church.

We Eastern Christians could well return to our tradition of hospitality to the stranger and the poor. "But what if he would rob me?" many will ask. The Gospel would say: "Do not collect wealth that thieves would steal; and if he does take your coat, give him your shirt as well." Most black people have the bitter memory of being questioned or even arrested for just walking in a white neighborhood; or almost as racist, being asked if they are delivering a package or working as servants. In a similar way, the Lord told Moses to let the temple and even certain "cities of refuge" be places where people could run and be safe from certain injustices. Until modern history, churches were often sanctuary and refuge for people with a claim on justice or conscience. Unfortunately, this tradition no longer exists. A Moses-like figure, Melkite Patriarch Maximos IV, during the Vatican Council II called on the bishops of the world to make their churches into refuges for justice.

We Are Sojourners Too

Like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, we too are sojourners with "no permanent city," with no permanent home. Pilgrimage is our style as a Russian classic, The Way of the Pilgrim, testifies. We Eastern Christians have settled in too much, and have stopped traveling light, no longer a pilgrim
Church, no more an exodus community. We built the great temples of the world, but look at them now: Hagia Sophia in Istanbul is now a museum, after serving as a mosque for centuries; St Basil's in Moscow is a museum for atheism; even the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem is in ruins and shaped by disunity of faiths. Perhaps this is a good sign that we must once more live provisionally, living in "tents" rather than temples. On the road again: meeting God in the Stranger on the road to Emmaus, binding up wounded men on the road to Jericho, walking in co-humanity with the poor and in solidarity of searching with those who hunger for justice and bread and thirst for God and beauty. It is one beggar showing another beggar where to find Bread.

Remember those who are in prison
as though you were in prison with them.
Suffer with them
as though you were with them.
Share the sorrow of those who are mistreated.
(Heb 13:3)

Solidarity and Hospitality

Hospitality is not simply giving food nor putting people up overnight. It is often listening to the expressions of the real inner person, sharing oneself by listening deeply (the "human meeting" of two persons, Buber says, is more important than shared food). Each of us yearns in our secret heart for the welcome of one's true self.

This is the quality of Christian brotherhood and human brotherhood and human brotherhood: solidarity. Service-with-solidarity avoids paternalism and condescending charity. The more the love of God grows in us, the more we share our life with other, just as we would in our own family. We walk the long, hard road with them; we share our home; we speak truth in love and words of hope.

Each one of us, then, is making up for the lack in the other, St Paul says. "He who can walk lends his feet to the person who is lame," blessed Augustine writes. "He who has sight lends his eyes to the blind; he who is young and physically in good shape lends his strength to the old and the sick and carries them. Suffer with those in prison as though you were there." When we visit the prisoner - hospitality turned inside out - we are not just going there to bring Christ. We go there to visit Christ. "When I was in
prison, you visited Me." These people may not have value in the eyes of society, but in the eyes of Christ, we value them enormously. Rejected by their friends and family, stripped of all dignity, vulnerable and powerless, we can offer a one-to-one listening ear, encouragement, friendship, and a spiritual meeting ground, where we find Christ.

Hospitality Is a Call, Not an Option

For the Christian, hospitality is not an option; it is the call for all of us to open ourselves and our homes, and share what we do not need. Hospitality is a gift of the Holy Spirit, for the greatest of all charisms is the service of love, with genuine caring and involvement. It is ministering to people at the point of their greatest need: The essentials of food, clothing, shelter, empathy, affirmation, the sharing of love, hope and faith.

*If you live alone,*
*whose feet will you wash?*

*(St. Basil the Great)*

Hospitality is a way of ministering communally, building up the faith and concerns of the Christian community. Hospitality becomes for the Christian community a way of being the sacrament of God's love in the world and in human history. It is a way families and the whole Christian community can fulfill their common mission from Christ, through the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit, to love and serve humanity. For the Church's life is healthiest when she is self-forgetful and turns outward to serve the needs of humankind.

Hospitality and Private Property

Many who call themselves Eastern Christians have no place in their lives for hospitality. Their reason is often that sharing their homes and money would risk their security; that they came to America and made this wealth and property and no one else has a right to a share. But this is not the way of Scripture: "If anyone has property and sees his brother in need, and closes his heart to him, how can God's love be in him?" (1 John 3:17). Nor is it the way of Eastern Christianity and its Fathers. In our Church there is no exclusive private property. All land, all property belongs to God. We are its stewards only so long as we share it with others. "Private property is theft," says St. Basil, echoing all the Fathers. If you have money, you must share it
with the poor. If you have property, you must share and use it with others. If you have power, you must share it with the powerless. The Christian communism advocated by the Gospel and the Fathers is far more radical than Marxism.

*All things belong to God who is our Father.*
*All humanity is of the same family; all are brothers; and among brothers it is best that all inherit equal portions.*
*(St. Gregory of Nyssa)*

The only way you can give hospitality is to open yourself to the radical message of the Gospel and the Fathers: Share whatever you have, your wealth and property and power; make nobody your victim; be a brother to all, however rejected and despised; live simply, so that others may simply live. You will find that you need so little to welcome others; that when you open your home, your rectory, whatever, too many possessions are a hindrance rather than a help to communion with others.

**The Need of Hospitality**

Whatever city we live in, ours is a fractured society with much need of healing and sharing. The Eastern Churches still largely preach Bad News to the poor by their indifference (and the opposite to love is not hate: it is *indifference*). Here in New York City there are some 50,000 homeless people, sleeping in doorways and abandoned buildings. Mental hospitals are overcrowded and many have been dumped in the street with no one to care for them. Runaway or throwaway youth prowl the street for a safe place. Old people are abandoned to the junk heap or a warehoused nursing home. Social institutions are so full of bureaucracy, paperwork and sheer nonsense that few people are truly cared for personally or humanly.

There is, indeed, an urgent need for our parishes and our people to open their homes and resources and practice hospitality. It has been estimated that if every parish in the United States took care of one poor family, there would be no more poverty here. And what a mighty work to do! "Feeding the hungry is a greater work than raising the dead," says St. John Chrysostom. "The price of the Kingdom," St. Leo adds, "is the food you give to those who need."
Hospitality in Scripture

Abraham has always been the first model of the generous host (Gen. 18) receiving God in "three holy visitors," making a feast for his guests such as he never made for his family. (Rublev's icon, The Hospitality of Abraham, beautifully tells the parable). By the hospitality of one hour, the widow, who received Elijah on the run and fed him from her last meager supply of food, received an undiminishing store of food in the drought. There are, indeed, rewards for hospitality!

The prophets again and again call us to hospitality and sharing:

The kind of fast I want is that you stop oppressing others. Share your food with the hungry; bring into your own homes those who are helpless, poor and destitute. Cloth those who are cold. If you do these things, God will shed light on you, heal you and protect you. (Is 58: 6-9)

The Lord Jesus then told how to give a dinner party in the Christ-style:

When you give a dinner or a banquet do not invite your friends or brothers or the rich, less they invite you in return and you'd be repaid. When you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. You will be repaid in the resurrection of the Just. (Lk 14:12)

The Fathers would continue the tradition:

How great is the power of hospitality! Receive Christ at your tables so that you can be received by Him in the banquet of the Kingdom! (St. Gregory the Great)
Hospitality Today

Emmaus in Harlem, where I serve, is a community of poor people, who are finding new life giving hospitality to others and serving those who suffer more, especially the elderly poor. For many, Emmaus is like an inn by the road: shopping bag ladies, homeless old people kicked out of their dingy "hotels", battered women, the mentally ill and disabled, ex-junkies, ex-cons, marginal men, people on the edge. Here they find home and shelter, not excuses; purpose and work; friendship and community. There are no forms to fill out, no interviews, no compulsory baths or compulsory religious services. Even if a person must leave because of violence or drinking, he can be welcomed back after a while. We do not underestimate the importance of human warmth and personal caring; people "on the road" are starved for love, agape and many of their problems are human and spiritual, not purely medical or psychiatric or physical.

Here at Emmaus, this Byzantine priest has the chance to "practice" the Gospel. It is presence, just being a brother to all; availability, just being here, day in and day out, permanently available to human need; personal, each of us caring personally for two or three others who suffer; serving with solidarity, taking the side of the poor, my community. It is the most Byzantine and Eastern Christian act I can do.

Another contemporary example of hospitality is a rectory (there are probably enough vacant rooms and spaces in American rectories to house many homeless). The rectory of Fr. Richard Lee at St. Andrew's Byzantine Catholic Church in Westbury, New York, for example, is an open house, always filled to the brim with people, always a space for overnight guests, always food for the hungry. It is a marvelous example of hospitality for priests in suburban situations.

Let Us Reclaim the Gospel

Today the risen Christ is preparing His people to become one and at the same time, a contemplative people thirsting for God; a people of justice, taking part in the struggles of people exploited. We in the Eastern Churches have an experience of living for centuries in oppressive or interfering societies - whether capitalist, Communist, Islamic or Zionist - and we can show that, without power and without wealth, the Church can experience a new birth under these tensions, radiating God and becoming a force for liberation of humanity.
To do that we must reclaim the Gospel, reclaim that apostolic Eastern Christian tradition which housed the homeless, fed the hungry and stood with the poor. The Church must once more exist for others, not for itself, becoming again a people of the beatitudes, having no security other than Christ, ready to give up all privileges, ready to be persecuted for justice sake, creating peace and bearing joy. It is not enough that we have words for the poor. Modern man, like Thomas, must touch the wounds of Christ before he can believe. He must see the Church as a community of love binding up humanity's wounds, the Church which belongs to the poor first.

Yes, hospitality is the way of the Eastern Christian. We must once more see the one knocking at the door as God come to dwell with us. If we do He will reverse the roles and manifest the mystery of hospitality by serving at the table and sharing His meal (Lk 12:37). "Look, I am standing at the door," says the Lord, "I am constantly knocking. If anyone hears me and opens the door, I will come in and fellowship with him and he with Me."

To Christ in the poor, knocking at the door, let us say: Come, Lord Jesus! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!

For Your Reflection

What is your response to the following statements of Father Kirk:

- "We Eastern Christians ... are members often of deprived churches, too poor in fact to be poor in virtue ..." (page 21);
- "The Liturgy lacks an element of its authenticity if love and service do not flow from the Liturgy." (page 23);
- "Live simply, so that others may simply live" (page 28)