

Human Hospitality. The Ministry of Hospitality

Henri Caffarel

*Extracts from The Golden Ring, Marriage, that great Sacrament.
Special edition, 111-112, May-August 1963, pages 273-287)*

“Knock and the door will be opened to you.” Hospitality is a very important thing and I am taking this term of duty in its strongest sense. Thus, couples in practising hospitality contribute to the life and growth of the Mystical Body of Christ. And this is an essential, specific and irreplaceable aspect of the couple’s apostolic mission.

The practice of hospitality, so often neglected, is nonetheless terribly important. Along with the priestly ministry, the ministry of the word, the ministry of charity...there is the ‘ministry of hospitality’ in the Church. And by whom should it be practised, if not first and foremost by the Christian couple?

Come to my House

We do not offer hospitality in the neighbour’s house, nor do we offer it beneath an oak in a forest or at the edge of a motorway, but **we say to our friend, “Come to my house.”** Have you ever taken the time to think about this expression, which itself is quite surprising. Come to *my house*? It implies that the welcome is firstly of a spiritual order, that I will open up my ‘me,’ my own heart to my guest. Because my house is I, my me is enlarged. My house is to me as the body is to the soul. It is mine like my body is mine. And if we are talking about a couple, a family, we must describe the house as the body itself of the family. The house is linked to the family, just as the body is to the soul. The family ‘makes’ its home, like the snail secretes its shell.

The house plays a large role when talking about hospitality. It introduces the visitor into the heart of the family and gives them a glimpse of the deep soul of the family.

A Short Philosophy on the House

Think about the hundreds of thousands of ‘displaced people,’ and perhaps the deep sense of the house will emerge more fully for us. First of all, it *concentrates* and situates a man physically and morally. Someone who has no roof, a vagabond, a homeless person, is scarcely a man. The house does more than localise, it *ennobles*. In the sharing of the land, we had the right to a plot, a portion of the planet. The primary function of this house, besides

situating and ennobling us, is to *protect*, against bad weather undoubtedly, but so much more so against the dehumanising crowd. It promotes intimacy. Thanks to the house, we know where to get together and gather. The family community is formed there and it is where the family accomplishes its essential tasks of loving, giving life, regaining one's physical and moral strength, looking after the sick, resting, relaxing, worshipping the Lord and welcoming travellers and friends.

The house's function is to protect, but it must guard against isolation and that is why its walls are pierced with windows and doors. Thus, it reflects the two basic and complementary aspirations of humans: the need for contemplation, intimacy, and the desire for communion with others. Secret and open, the house should be both. It should defend the family from two opposite threats: individualism, which makes one turn in on one's self and be self-sufficient and communitarianism, where the individual is lost in the mass.

This **short philosophy on the house** helps us realise what a tremendous privilege a home, a dwelling is. May it lead you to think about an aspect of the social question: the situation of all those families, who do not have housing or at least do not possess sufficient space to live.

Hospitality is therefore going to consist of letting others enjoy the house's resources: shelter, protection, food, rest. And yet, this is not the best of what it can offer. More important than opening up the house, it is important to open up the family community. The open door should always mean the openness of hearts. For spouses, true hospitality is offering the radiance of their love.

The laws of hospitality with Bedouin tribes in the desert stipulate that the guest must never leave empty-handed. I would add that a guest should never leave empty-hearted. They must take away from their stay memories that remain and comfort them, whenever they feel lonely or distressed.

The Way of Giving

But you should never forget that the way of giving is so much more important than what is given. People from the Orient take great care to show the guest that he is the master of the house and that the person who is receiving him is in his debt.

Do the people who come into our homes not have much more to give than we have to offer? They know other skies, other environments, other mentalities, other activities, and other experiences. But it is true that it is an art form in itself to make a guest feel comfortable, to guess at what they might have to

say and confide, to encourage them to express themselves, to awaken in them the joy of being listened to with interest, to be understood.

I believe that we must open ourselves up to acquaintances, to the riches of others. But the main richness that they bring is their very selves. The guest is a sacred being. An admirable illustration of this way of thinking is the page in Genesis, which describes the welcome Abraham reserves for the three mysterious visitors, who appear at the entrance to his tent, at the Oak of Mamre.

How therefore is the sacred character of guests in so many civilisations to be explained? Is it not that in the heart of every man lies dormant the intuition that one day God will visit with the face of a traveller and that he must not be sent away?

Whoever has such esteem for the guest will not wait until his door is knocked upon, he will know to invite. This is the first manifestation of the virtue of hospitality. The heart's intuition easily discovers who should be invited.

Also read the article entitled 'Christian Hospitality.'