

The Symbolism of Hospitality

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

The family that opens their door to the passer-by, the pilgrim, to the hunted man and offers him some of their bread, peace, security, rest, affection is a reflection of the Church, the great family of God, whose door is open to everyone, where every man is always expected, sure of finding the remedy to his solitude and anxiety, where the vagrant knows that at last he will be redeemed. (I regret that today's Ritual no longer carries the rites, which, in previous times, supplemented the christening ceremony! They were rites of hospitality: the newly baptised person had their feet washed, their head was anointed with oil and they were given milk and honey).

This earthly and landed Church that hospitality evokes is a people who walk in the desert, who live beneath the tent. We are all nomads and our houses are merely relays on the road. The more we advance, the stronger the expectation and hope for the Eternal Dwelling are.

Heaven is not so much a place as three divine Persons, united in love, who receive us not just beside them, but at the very heart of their intimacy.

The hospitality of the family, who share with the vagrant and stranger not only their bread but also their love and happiness is a reflection of the mystery of the Trinity.

I hope that I have managed to make you understand the greatness of what I called at the beginning 'the ministry of hospitality.' And that you and the couples with whom you are in contact will be committed to practising it with even more generosity.

I will leave you with the example of this couple who ought to be the patron saints of Christian hospitality, Aquila and Priscilla. These Jewish textile workers, who lived in Corinth, one day received the visit of one of their fellow countrymen, who was looking for work. His name was Paul. When Paul went to Ephesus and then later to Rome, Aquila & Priscilla went with him. And they always performed the same service of having an open house where new converts could feel at home, where the Eucharist could be celebrated. I like to think that Paul's deep intuition about the greatness of marriage slowly matured over the years that he spent with these two spouses, who were his friends and colleagues. Surely it was in the mirror of their mutual love that he saw the reflection of the espousal of Christ and the Church!

Today, just like twenty centuries ago, priests cannot do with the help of couples. The priest is Christ who goes out to meet men in order to announce the Lord's message to them, while the couple is the Church, who welcomes within its heart those whom the missionary word has won for God in order to protect, nourish and delight them.