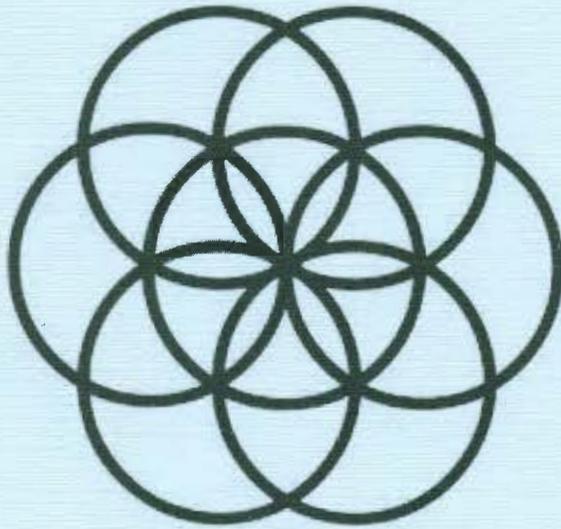


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Welcomed as Christ: Immigration through the Lens of Benedictine Hospitality

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For Anthony Maranise, Benedictine hospitality is the best way to consider the immigration issue. In the Holy Rule, every person is a “unique, created gift of God,” and should be welcomed as Christ. He encourages us to develop “an attitude of general inclusivity toward all migrant persons, regardless of national origin, and without fear.”

Within the Catholic tradition there are other numerous spiritual traditions. For readers of this essay this is no surprise. Most people probably associate one particular behavior, action, or quality with each of the various traditions within the faith. For example, Jesuits are known to be great intellectual contributors and missionaries while Franciscans are respected for their devotion to helping those in poverty as well as for embracing such a lifestyle themselves.

Whether known to us or not, these sorts of “spiritual labels” are not mere identifiers to distinguish between one religious order and spiritual tradition from another. Instead, they are known as *charisms*. According to the *Concise Catholic Dictionary*, a charism is defined as “the extraordinary graces or gifts given to certain Christians for the benefit of others rather than for the spiritual welfare of their recipients.”¹

Taking the aforementioned examples along with this definition, it becomes clear that each tradition gains its particular notoriety from the use of its particular spiritual gifts to help others. Apropos of present circumstances, one of many marginalized groups who could benefit from the active utilization of spiritual gifts are migrants, especially those seeking admittance to the United States via the Southern border.

In this essay, I will explore one of the key Benedictine charisms – *hospitality* – and offer a suggestion

toward the development of a practical spirituality centered in it, particularly as it relates to immigration and the welfare of the migrant.

Industry & Spirituality

Nearly all United States citizens are likely familiar with the reference to “Southern hospitality” while maybe fewer are with the phrase “service with a smile.” Although, throughout the world, *hospitality* is not a term first and foremost associated with spirituality, but rather with the hotel, tourism, and commerce industry.

Stated more simply, hospitality as an industry is service-oriented. A customer pays for particular services, such as lodging, concierge, dining, or butlery, and as a result of their having paid, they anticipate quality performance of the expected services. Though this view of hospitality as an industry is perhaps most pervasive in contemporary thought related to the word itself, even the aims, philosophy, and very workings of the industry itself echo the sacred scriptural foundations of hospitality having first been a charism. At the heart of hospitality – whether as industry or spirituality – is the reality of three similar traits: interaction, transformation, and selflessness.

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Both industrially and spiritually, the successful demonstration of hospitality requires the meeting and collaboration of two or more parties. Herein lies interaction. When the interaction is – as it should be – a pleasant one, both guest and server provide “affirmation of the dignity of each person, a dignity based in their creation as God’s image and likeness as well as their efforts to listen, communicate and interact through ways and means consistent with that uniqueness and dignity.”² In this affirmation, a transformation takes place wherein the outsider becomes an insider – no longer feeling like a



visitor, but more “at home.” Finally, the server is ever expected, in either hospitable realm (industry or spirituality), to place the needs and desires of the guest ahead of his/her own.

Thus, “because hospitality always involves giving something of ourselves to others, it is a spiritual practice and spirituality is about relationship.”³ Without doubt, this

selflessness is one of the clearest expressions of “other-centeredness”⁴ based in a key Benedictine ideal that when one stands before a guest, he ultimately “is standing before Christ with humble transparency.”⁵

Jesus’ own words became foundation for St. Benedict’s Rule and the cornerstone of the Benedictine charism of hospitality.



Having then drawn parallels between hospitality as industry and as spirituality, it is necessary for us to arrive at an appropriate spiritual understanding for hospitality – something that separates it from its sister-realm in industry. Elaborating on the words, “Open wide the doors to Christ,” spoken by St. John Paul II, his successor, Pope Benedict XVI, at his installation Mass in the Vatican (April 2005) offered what is potentially the most inclusive and poignant definition of Christian hospitality to date. He said in his

homily, “Each one of us is the fruit of a thought of God. Each one is wanted, each one is loved, each one is necessary.”⁶ So, I contend that authentic Christian – especially Benedictine – hospitality consists in making others feel wanted, loved, and necessary.

Hospitality & the Rule

St. Benedict, in his Rule, writes very bluntly: “We believe that the divine presence is everywhere.”⁷ For him and his confreres, “all creation is sacred...” and therefore “Benedict saw every person as a unique, created gift of God”⁸ in whom the divine presence dwelt.

He arrived at this understanding, after a careful reading of the scriptures, particularly the gospels. Jesus’ own words became foundation for St. Benedict’s Rule and the cornerstone of the Benedictine charism of hospitality. In St. Matthew’s gospel, Jesus says, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me”⁹ indicating those who would be blessed by God for their righteousness in life at the final judgment.

For the sake of framing a context, it would be prudent to examine further this chapter of St. Matthew’s gospel for though in this one scriptural reference – included by St. Benedict in the Rule – mention is made of welcoming the stranger, other actions which might rightly be named hospitable are among the righteous acts Jesus indicates his Father will bless.



Throughout the years of Christian history, as theology has been further developed, at least six of these actions have come to be known as the seven Corporal Works of Mercy. Among the six that Jesus lauds in this chapter from St. Matthew, at least three are common actions of the hospitality industry – feeding, giving drink, and welcoming or sheltering those who come seeking it.

That said, St. Benedict includes in the Rule guidance as to the treatment of guests that are also based in the Scriptures. It is not enough for Benedictines to simply welcome their guests warmly, but also to invite them to pray with the community, to feed them, to be indiscriminate on the basis of status or wealth, to offer them spiritual counsel if they so desire, and to provide suitable lodging for them complete with a bed and clean linens.¹⁰ In these ways, “monastic hospitality is always surprising, unlike commercial hospitality which provides a comforting sameness, in

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that it liberates guests and allows them to discern their own interior needs.”¹¹

A common question in today’s secularized culture is: What good is a Rule written for monastics for people living in the world? Admittedly, it is a valuable question, but it seems as if it generally misses the mark. Better one should ask: How might the wisdom of that Rule assist us in the struggles of today’s world?



Though given no author attribution, a popular phrase is often used in the advertising of day spas throughout the United States that cleverly reads: “Sometimes in order to move forward, you must retreat.” This can be aptly attached to the need for contemporary society to embrace a more balanced and simplified pace and attitude in the

treatment of the world, work, and other persons. St. Benedict would have argued that we never have to search hard to find or to experience God because “God is already here, in and among us, if only we can learn to see Christ and hear his voice in those we encounter.”¹²

This brings into the discussion the unifying *creatio imago Dei* of all human persons. If, according to Benedictine spirituality, one is capable of encountering the divine presence living and dwelling in other persons in the physical and outward expressions of hospitality, then it could be reasonably argued that hospitality shown toward other human persons is hospitality shown toward the Trinity. True to St. Benedict’s Christocentric approach in the Rule, this inference also draws from the direct words of Jesus in the gospels who said, “Whatever you did for one of the least of my brothers and sisters, you did for me.”¹³

Sacramental & Liturgical Aspects

Previously, I examined the quality of transformation in terms of the similarity in hospitality as industry and as spirituality. Though seemingly paradoxical, this same facet of similarity between both realms of hospitality can also separate one form of hospitality – the spiritual – from the secular.

Catholics throughout the world are familiar with the sacraments. However, people are less familiar with the notion of *sacramental*

character which I have elsewhere defined as “the nature of an action in which is outwardly expressed a deeper, though unseen, spiritual, ultimate, or interior reality.”¹⁴

Many elements of the spiritual life can be argued to contain sacramental characteristics and to that end, I would argue that the expressions of hospitality toward

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others – which are usually outwardly visible actions – are sacramental in nature and character in that “monastic hospitality is devoted to the vision of unity among God’s children.”¹⁵



In other words, our outward actions such as feeding someone, welcoming them, etc., necessitate some form of unity – a coming together in relationship even if superficial – between two or more people. Transformation occurs in that meeting, in that coming together. The words of Scripture

again resound: “For wherever two or

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more have gathered in my name, there I am in their midst.”¹⁶

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Therefore, something unseen, though very real, occurs in the meeting of persons; in their welcoming. On the surface, it appears that hosts are merely greeting or feeding a guest, when in reality, they are making welcome the person of Christ that dwells within the person with whom they are interacting.

In his book, *Living the Sacraments*, David Knight writes of this idea saying, “He [God] is with us in everything we are involved in; and whether we act in a way that is pleasing or (at times) displeasing to him, we never experience doing anything that he is not a part of.”¹⁷ If what Knight writes here is true then, in our expressions of hospitality toward those who seek it, a dramatic transformation takes place.

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risen Christ. In that same vein, “old rabbis used to say that hospitality is a form of worship”¹⁸ and so, not only do hospitable actions contain within them a certain *sacramental character*, but also a liturgical one. It is worship in the sense that by greeting the other “as Christ,” the host greets Christ himself. By no means should this idea reduce the importance of the liturgy of the Eucharist, but, “liturgy takes more than tasteful expression and well-planned ceremony; it is an expression of faith.”¹⁹

The host, subscribing to this Benedictine spirituality of hospitality, of course, believes by faith, confidently, that Christ is in his or her midst. And while faith in this sense is surely a reference to belief in God, what of the guest who does not share belief in the same God, or God at all? Is this guest to be turned

away; shunned from welcome or the outward expressions of hospitality?

Xenodochial Spirituality

Key to developing what I will call a *xenodochial* – the act of being friendly to strangers – *spirituality* in response to the contemporary social issue of immigration is an accurate framing of the issue itself, and an assessment of where the problem lies, if there is one.

By now, everyone knows there is a “humanitarian crisis” at the southern border of the United States. Daily, hundreds of migrant persons, many of them young unaccompanied children from El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and Mexico arrive at the US-Mexico border after an often long and exhausting journey, seeking peace from lives tormented by violence or economic instability.²⁰

This news, having reached the ears of Pope Francis himself, compelled him to make a statement, first reported by the Vatican newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*, on July 15, 2014. He said, “This humanitarian emergency requires, as a first urgent measure, that these [persons] be welcomed and protected.” The pope’s own words use the same phrasing as St. Benedict’s guidance regarding hospitality in the Rule.

He encourages that they “be welcomed.” One would think that

protection is a given characteristic of welcome since in the act of welcoming someone, “we are called to be like the Good Samaritan; we are called to be kind to the stranger.”²¹ However, the majority of the United States’ political landscape remains sorely divided in its response to this call.

For some, the opening of the U.S. southern border is a concern relating to national security and thus, their negativity and/or animosity toward migrant persons is one motivated by fear.

St. Benedict would likely agree that when Jesus said, “Love one another,” he did not mean the glamorous, the understood, the popular, or the wealthy; rather, he intended that all persons created in his image be loved without condition for that is how he loves each member of his creation.

Whether differing religious beliefs, political convictions, or preconceived prejudices be the cause, the reality remains that there are individuals in the United States who claim a Christian identity, but simultaneously have no interest or desire to work toward the welcoming, protecting, and loving of migrant persons; who are, as Christian theology teaches, “the image of Christ in our brothers and sisters – whose face, looking unlike ours may be difficult to recognize.”²²

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relating to national security and thus, their negativity and/or animosity toward migrant persons is one motivated by fear. Of course, the scriptures hold a solution for fear which rests in striving to experience more intimately the “perfect love which casts out fear.”²³

Fear captivates human persons in a most negative sense. It restricts and leads to isolation such that it can rightly be asserted that “people who fear the stranger have drained the life juices out of hospitality.”²⁴ For Benedictines, who admittedly because of their primarily contemplative spirituality, “are not always as engaged with the work of justice as they should be,”²⁵ ignoring the pleas and the needs of migrant persons is to “close ourselves to the sacred; to forbid God from coming to us.”²⁶

Open Wide the Borders

I suggest that in order to truly live a *xenodochial spirituality*, Christians must adopt an attitude of general inclusivity toward all migrant persons, regardless of national origin, and without fear. Taking a lesson from Jesus’ own incarnation, Christians are apt to have a more polite disposition toward migrant persons. Consider that, after all, “God who migrated from heaven to be born to a refugee family... would ask us to look for his presence among migrants because he was, himself, a migrant.”²⁷

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Chief among the primary tenets of Catholic social teaching is that of the preferential option for the marginalized. Within this arm of the teaching is a clearly articulated point that God, in his boundless compassion, has a special concern

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for the *anawim* – Hebrew, for the marginalized who depend on God for their deliverance. There can be no question that the plight of migrant persons has gained them from God a place of special regard.

Christians must respond generously and unashamedly – regardless of political affiliation – to the cry of these persons with the understanding that “when Jesus said to love your neighbor, hospitality is how”²⁸ to do so. While it is not the scope or competency of this essay to suggest practical means of resolving the immigration and humanitarian emergency at the U.S. southern border in geopolitical terms, it is to suggest that the pervasive attitudes of Christians in the United States and throughout the world need to undergo a sort of compassionate reorientation. This process begins in actively and deliberately living out a *xenodochial spirituality* by embracing migrant persons in ways that will make them feel “wanted,”

“loved,” and “necessary” to all members of the human family.

The best advice for the practical implementation of such a spirituality is offered by the famed Benedictine scholar and spiritual writer, Joan Chittister, from her book, *Essential Monastic Wisdom*. She writes:

“We cannot be too busy, too professional, too removed from the world of the poor to receive the poor and sustain them... To practice hospitality in our world, it may be necessary to evaluate all the laws and all the promotions and all the invitation lists of corporate and political society from the view of the persons who never make those lists. Then hospitality may demand that we work to change things.”²⁹

To echo the now immortal words of St. John Paul II, with only a slight modification, “Open wide the borders to Christ” not only in our land, but in our hearts.

ENDNOTES

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⁴ cf. Spillane, 13.

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⁷ The Rule of St. Benedict, 19:1.

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¹⁰ cf. The Rule of St. Benedict, 53.

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¹⁴ Maranise, Anthony. *Sport & the Spiritual Life: The Integration of Playing & Praying*. Charleston, SC; Amazon Affiliate Publishing, 2013, 104.

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¹⁶ Matthew 18:20.

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¹⁹ Knight, 20.

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²² Cornell, Deirdre. "Migrants Matter." *Jesus Was a Migrant*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 2014, 12.

²³ 1 John 4:18.

²⁴ Homan & Pratt, 9.

²⁵ Stewart, 121.

²⁶ Homan & Pratt, xxii.

²⁷ Cornell, 14.

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²⁹ Chittister, Joan. "Hospitality." *Essential Monastic Wisdom*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1999, 59.

