

ITINERANT MISSIONARIES OF THE CHURCH OF THE ORIGIN AND EVANGELIZATION: THE CHALLENGE OF WELCOME AND HOSPITALITY*

Missionários itinerantes da igreja primitiva e evangelização: o desafio da acolhida e da hospitalidade

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The analysis, although partially incomplete, of Old Testament and New Testament occurrences concerning the topics of hospitality and welcome, in the wider context of the experience of being foreigners far from the homeland, gives way to some relevant considerations on the biblical stress of establishing human relationships. These are based not only on philanthropic assistance but, moreover, on the evangelic value of *agapē*, a new dynamic emphasizing the human person's "being" more than his/her "doing". The christological-ecclesiological dimension of Christian welcome, which properly belongs to the New Testament writings, genuinely marked human relationships, inspiring itineraries of dialogue and communion that may enlighten also our present history, particularly in the field of migrations and human mobility.

Keywords: Hospitality; Welcome; Evangelization; Migration

A análise, embora parcialmente incompleta, de ocorrências relativas à acolhida e à hospitalidade no Antigo e no Novo Testamento no amplo contexto da experiência de ser um estrangeiro, longe de casa, abre caminho para considerações relevantes referentes à visão bíblica sobre as relações humanas. Isto é baseado não somente no amparo filantrópico, mas também, no valor evangélico do agapé, uma nova dinâmica que

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ênfatiza o ser humano como “ser”, mais do que o seu “fazer”. A dimensão cristológico-ecclesial da acolhida cristã, que pertence propriamente às escrituras do Novo Testamento, marcou genuinamente as relações humanas, inspirando rotas de diálogo e comunhão que podem aclarar também a história atual, particularmente no campo das migrações e da mobilidade humana.

Palavras-chave: Hospitalidade; Acolhida; Evangelização; Migração

Evangelization and missionaries

In the Gospels, the semitic notion of the *šaliyah* (*B^erâkôt* 5,5), without interruption of continuity, applies to the apostles in Jesus' saying "Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me" (Mt 10:40).¹ Due to this cultural background, the itinerant missionary was allowed to interact with a community and offer his/her teaching. He/she might be an apostle or a prophet. Actually, besides the apostles, at the very beginning of the early Church, there were also other itinerant and preaching ministers.² The first direct witness of it, comes from the *Didaché*:

Whosoever, therefore, comes and teaches you all these things that have been said before, receive him – *dexasthe* –. But if the teacher himself turn and teach another doctrine to the destruction of this, hear him not; but if he teach so as to increase righteousness and the knowledge of the Lord, receive him – *dexasthe* – as the Lord (11,1-2).³

Thus, in the life of the Church, the role of the apostle rapidly overcame the circle of the Twelve, assuming also that, besides Paul and Barnabas (cf. Acts 14:4-14; 1Cor 9:5-6), this title was given also to others (cf. Rom 16:17; 1Thes 2,6). In addition to this, Galatians 1:1 seems to deal also with some preachers who have become apostles by a process of education. Finally,

¹ All biblical quotations are from the *New Jerusalem Bible*, Doubleday; Darton, Longman & Todd, London 1985.

² The topic, within the context of NT social world scholarship, has been studied by THEISSEN, Gerd. *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978, and, on Corinth, the same Author published *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth*. Trans. by John H. Schutz. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982. Useful are also the followings: MEEKS, Wayne. *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983; HARRINGTON, Daniel. "Sociological Concepts and the Early Church: A Decade of Research", in *Theological Studies* 41, 1980, p. 181-190; BEST, Thomas. "The Sociological Study of the New Testament: Promise and Peril of a New Discipline", in *SJT* 36, 1983, p. 181-194.

³ HOLMES, Michael (ed.). *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007. The second Letter of John states: "If anyone comes to you bringing a different doctrine, you must not receive him into your house – *me lambanete auton eis oikian* – or even give him a greeting. Whoever greets him has a share in his wicked activities" (2Jn 10-11); again, in a positive vision, the third Letter of the "Elder" says that those who offer hospitality to the authentic preachers of the *kerygma* "contribute their share to their work for the truth" (3Jn 8).

the passage of 2 Cor 11:13 regards to false apostles who disguise themselves as apostles of Christ, and this suggests that, in some way, there might have been a procedure to prove the authentic apostolic ministry of those who entered a community as itinerant missionaries (also 2Jn 7).

Indeed this is one of the topics of the following passage of the *Didaché*:

Concerning the apostles and prophets, according to the decree of the Gospel, thus do. Let every apostle that comes to you be received – *dechth[et]* – as the Lord. But he shall not remain except one day; but if there be need, also the next; but if he remain three days, he is a false prophet. And when the apostle goes away, let him take nothing but bread until he lodges; but if he ask money, he is a false prophet (11,3-6).

The first criterion of authenticity is the faithfulness to the *kerygma* proclaimed and received – actually, those who claim to act according to the institution of the *šaliah* should behave in the name of the one who sent them – and the second criterion is working for free. Every preacher who tries to settle down in a community in order to be supported by it, is considered as a false prophet, exactly because of his intention to exploit it instead of serving it (*Didaché* 11,6). On the contrary, the true prophet may be recognised by his behaviour, that is by his sober lifestyle and its coherence with the message delivered to the community (*Didaché* 11,8-10).⁴

However, the itinerant preacher who comes in the name of the Lord should be helped. The itinerant ministers, then, were allowed to settle down in a community, where they would have benefits, receiving the first fruits, once reserved to the priests.

Every true prophet that wills to abide among you is worthy of his support. So also a true teacher is himself worthy, as the workman, of his support. Every first-fruit, therefore, of the products of wine-press and threshing-floor, of oxen and of sheep, you shall take and give to the prophets, for they are your high priests (*Didaché* 13,1-3).⁵

⁴ There is a witness to the phenomenon of charismatic itinerants, at the beginning of the 2nd century, in these words of Eusebius of Cesarea: “most of the disciples of that time, animated by the divine word with a more ardent love for philosophy, had already fulfilled the command of the Saviour, and had distributed their goods to the needy. Then starting out upon long journeys they performed the office of evangelists, being filled with the desire to preach Christ to those who had not yet heard the word of faith, and to deliver to them the divine Gospels. And when they had only laid the foundations of the faith in foreign places, they appointed others as pastors, and entrusted them with the nurture of those that had recently been brought in, while they themselves went on again to other countries and nations, with the grace and the co-operation of God” (*Church History* III, 37,2-3).

⁵ Cf. MANNIS, Frédéric. “Il giudeo-cristianesimo e il fenomeno della mobilità”, in AA. VV. *L'epoca patristica e la pastorale della mobilità umana*. Padova: Edizioni Messaggero, 1989, p. 15-53.

Welcome and hospitality

Behaviour and deeds, however, do reveal inner thoughts and attitudes. This suggests that the biblical world, and especially the early Church, considered hospitality and welcome according to their proper and diverse domain. It seems that nowadays people use the two words without any difference: in our daily language they seem to be synonyms. In fact, this is not correct.

Very often those who welcome are also hospitable persons; but not always those who offer hospitality are willing to welcome. Particularly the big cities of our societies have developed into a melting pot of races and cultures, and people care for “doing hospitality”. What people mean is no longer a value, though it may be human or religious. The expression points to something to be practiced, an activity, a business very often in connection with its economic dimension. In this case, it would be better to talk about a “guests hospitality”, which does not require a personal involvement, rather the offer of a specific service. It is something strictly dependent on retribution and, usually, the only human relationship required is the buying and selling activity.

Welcome, on the other hand, shows an open mind and a practical willingness. In other words, welcome comes first and it is the very root of hospitality, because it requires the inner person, such as feelings, emotions and thoughts. Thus, an “indifferent welcome” does not exist. Love, solidarity, sharing are the very elements of welcoming. Then, in practice, welcoming develops into a generous and free service, it does not tolerate compromise and hypocrisy.⁶

Biblical teaching elements

Hospitality to foreigners was highly considered by the ancient peoples of the Near Eastern countries.⁷ Hospitality was a sacred duty and therefore it was extremely wrong to refuse to welcome those in need of it, and it was even worse to be disloyal towards the guests (cf. Gen 19:5-7; Judg 19:22.23.30; 1 Sam 25:25; Job 31:31-32). But it seems that it was also an offence to refuse the offer of hospitality (cf. Gn 19:2-3).⁸

⁶ Cf. BYRNE, Brendan. *The Hospitality of God. A Reading of Luke's Gospel*.

⁷ Among several contributions on this theme, see GLASSNER, Jean-Jacques. “Women, Hospitality and the Honor of the Family”, in LESKO, Barbara (ed.). *Women's Earliest Records from Ancient Egypt and Western Asia*. Atlanta, Georgia: Scholar Press, 1989, p. 71-79; CARDELLINI, Innocenzo. “Stranieri ed ‘emigrati-residenti’ in una sintesi di teologia storico-biblica”, in *Rivista Biblica*, 40, 1992, p. 129-181; FORNARI-CARBONELL, Isabel. *La escucha del huésped (Lc 10,38-42)*. La hospitalidad en el horizonte de la comunicación. Estella: Editorial Verbo Divino, 1995, especially p. 111-159.

⁸ Regarding the alien status and the themes of hospitality/hostility see KELLERMANN, Diether, “Gur”, in

The reason comes from the personal history and the experience of the people: the law calls to mind the past life of the patriarchs, who have been travellers and pilgrims themselves, in foreign countries, such as Abraham in Hebron (Gen 23:4), and Moses in the land of Midian (Ex 2:22; 18:3; see also Acts 7:29), and all those others who lived in Egypt waiting for a promised holy land. This idea comes in several passages of the *Torah*. For instance: "You will not molest or oppress aliens, for you yourselves were once aliens in Egypt" (Ex 22:20 and Ex 23:9). "If you have resident aliens in your country, you will not molest them. You will treat resident aliens as though they were native-born and love them as yourself - for you yourselves were once aliens in Egypt. I am Yahweh your God" (Lev 19:33-34 and Lev 23:22). The book of Deuteronomy stresses the historical and theological reason: "You must not infringe the rights of the foreigner or the orphan; you must not take a widow's clothes in pledge. Remember that you were once a slave in Egypt and that Yahweh your God redeemed you from that. That is why I am giving you this order" (Deut 24:17-18; also 10:18-19; 16:12; 23:8; 24:19-22; 26:12-13; 27:19).⁹

Another reason given by the law in order to stimulate respect, mercy, and even love to the foreigner is that God loves them as well as orphans and widows: he takes care of them, protecting them and defending their rights, while he condemns and takes vengeance on those who oppress them. In Deut 10:18-19 it is written of God that "He it is who sees justice done for the orphan and the widow, who loves the stranger and gives him food and clothing. Love the stranger then, for you were once strangers in Egypt" (also Ps 146:9; Mal 3:5). Therefore the law pays attention to the foreigner and recognizes for them some rights (cf. Lev 25:6; Deut 14:28-29); it recommends them to the loving care of the native citizens (cf. Lev 19:33; 22:22; Deut 24:19-22). At this same level, the prophets strongly condemn all those who are regardless of the law and exploit the poor, such as foreigners and widows (cf. Jer 7:6; 22:3; Ez 22:7; Zech 7:10 and also Ps 94:6).

On the other hand, we understand that between ideals and practice there is always an enormous gulf. It is also well known that many legal prescriptions come from the necessity to stop some negative behaviour;

BOTTERWECK, Johannes; RINGGREN, Johannes (eds.). *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, p. 447; VAN HOUTEN, Christiana. *The Alien in Israelite Law*. Sheffield: JSOT SS 107, 1991.

⁹ The dialectic of landedness and landlessness stays at the very roots of the discussion concerning Israel's identity as chosen-yet-alien according to BRUEGGEMANN, Walter. *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*; cf. also SCHÖKEL, Luis Alonso. *Salvezza e liberazione: l'Esodo*. Bologna: EDB, 1996, especially p.115-149; BOORER, Suzanne. "The Earth/Land in the Priestly Material: The Preservation of the 'Good' Earth and the Promised Land of Canaan Throughout the Generations", in *Australian Biblical Review*, 49, 2001, p. 19-33.

sometimes the good words of a preacher may be considered as a reaction to a genuinely bad situation. Therefore, it is not surprising that the Bible deals very often with the topics of hospitality/refusal towards foreigners. It marks the fact that the virtue of openness and willingness towards others, due to its proper definition as a virtue, was practiced by few people, and therefore foreign travellers were not positively supported, as the law and the prophets would have wished. It is doubtless that those who are forced to live away from their own native environment do experience a sense of inferiority and powerless (cf. Pro 27:8).¹⁰

The Gospels

Reading the Old Testament and the ancient non-biblical writings we realize that openness to foreigners was recommended to both private citizens and communities, but there was no public organization at all. The growing of relationships between peoples and travels promoted the institution of public buildings for people coming from different countries, especially in the big trade centres. The Roman Empire provided many *hospitia*, *diversoria* and *cauponae* throughout the area under its control: they were buildings where foreigners could get food, lodging and whatever was needed for animals. There would have been such buildings in the Palestine of the New Testament era: indeed, written sources and archeological discoveries tell us about the existence of either public hostels, where people could be accommodated free of charge, or private lodgings in return for paying rent. Eventually it was a *khan*, a lodging place which was free of charge, the *katalyma* where Joseph took Mary on Christmas night in Bethlehem (Lk 2:7). And it seems to be likely that it was a paying hostel the *pandokeion* where the Samaritan merciful man took the poor man who fell among thieves on his way down from Jerusalem to Jericho (Lk 10:34-35). However, these kind of inns for guests were run by inconsiderate hosts; they did not offer any comfort, and they were far from being safe places; it seems that drunkards and prostitutes gathered there, and therefore honest people would likely avoid entering them, unless when they were extremely in need.¹¹

¹⁰ Regarding gleaning laws and triennial tithe, prohibitions against mistreatment, impartiality in courts and other relative matters, see CERVANTES GABARRÓN, José. "Legsilación Bíblica sobre el Inmigrante", in *Estudios Bíblicos*, 61, 2003, p. 319-349; BENNETT, Harold. *Injustice Made Legal. Deuteronomic Law and the Plight of Widows, Strangers and Orphans in Ancient Israel*. Grand Rapids/Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Company, 2002. See also MATTHEWS, Victor. "Hospitality and Hostility in Judges 4", in *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, 21, 1991, p. 13-15; *Idem*. "Hospitality and Hostility in Genesis 19 and Judges 19", in *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, 22, 1991, p. 3-11.

¹¹ Tremendously helpful is the entry on "Hospitality" by Chistine POHL in ALEXANDER, Desmond; ROSNER, Brian (eds.). *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, p. 561-563. Also helpful is STÄHLIN,

Archeological discoveries proved that the marginal group of the Essenes, a sectarian movement active at the time of Jesus, arranged it through the promotion in each town of a “guests’ agent”, who was in charge of welcoming all the members of the movement and in assisting them in all their needs. But all other travellers would have had to rely only on the goodwill of relatives, friends and generous individuals. Eventually, this is the type of hospitality to which the Gospels point, especially when referring to Jesus being either welcomed and received in some private houses, or when he himself was teaching and acting as one who welcomes people with openness and willingness of heart. Indeed, the Gospels tell us only very rarely how Jesus and his disciples provided for their own needs on their ways through villages and towns all over Palestine. There is only one passage properly dealing with this matter, when Jesus replies to a young man who offered to follow him wherever he would go: “Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head” (Mt 8:20; Lk 9:58). Therefore, we can assume that most of the time Jesus and his group of followers went into caves during the night and provided for their food buying whatever they could with offerings and donations (cf. Jn 4:8; 13:29). On the whole we know that Jesus taught that people should not be worried about food and clothes, although, when he was offered the opportunity, he was happy with the generous and friendly hospitality of those who invited him to their houses, regardless of their social or religious status. He benefited from the willingness of friends as well as of Pharisees, tax collectors, sinners marginalized by public opinion and took the opportunity for delivering the Good News of reconciliation and peace.¹²

Jesus and his disciples willingly welcomed

There should have been many occasions for Jesus and the small group of his close friends to be received into the private houses of their friends, but the Gospels tell us only about few of them, on specific occasions: for instance, a wedding feast in Cana of Galilee (cf. Jn 2:1-11), the last supper in the house of a friend of Jesus (cf. Mt 26:18-19; Mk 14:14; Lk 22:21); the frequent visits of Jesus to the house of Peter (cf. Mt 8:14; Mk 1:29; Lk 4:38 and also Mk 3:20; 7:17; 9:28.33 where the same place seems to be mentioned) and finally, after Jesus’ resurrection, when two of his disciples went from Jerusalem to Emmaus and at evening

Gustav “xenos”, in G. KITTEL et al. (eds.). *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964, p. 1-36. See also POHL, Christine. “Biblical Issues in Mission and Migration”, in *Missiology*, 31, 1, 2003, p. 3-15.

¹² Cf. KÖNIG, John. *New Testament Hospitality*; LAFFEY, Alice. “Strangers and Sojourners”, in *The Bible Today*, Nov., 1991, p. 330-335.

they pressed him to stay with them saying, 'It is nearly evening, and the day is almost over'. So he went in to stay with them. Now while he was with them at table, he took the bread and said the blessing; then he broke it and handed it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognised him; but he had vanished from their sight (Lk 24:29-31).

On the other hand, Jesus did not dislike the hospitality of tax collectors, although they were considered sinful people who should be avoided and marginalized. It seems that the disciples were impressed by the extraordinary banquet offered to Jesus in Capernaum by Matthew, after his calling when he was sitting at the receipt of custom: all the evangelists remember that particular event and mark that many people shared the table on that occasion, among whom there were "a number of tax collectors and sinners" (Mt 9:10; Mc 2:15; Lc 5:20). And a special dinner also took place in Jericho at Zacchaeus' house: actually Luke writes that it was not Zacchaeus who invited Jesus to his house, but it was Jesus who invited himself, and Zacchaeus, "one of the senior tax collectors... hurried down and welcomed him joyfully" (Lk 19:6).

As for the group of the Pharisees, Luke reports a banquet in the house of a man called Simon (Lk 7:36), another by an unknown Pharisee (Lk 11:37) and a third in the house of one of the chiefs of the religious party (Lk 14:1). The second episode includes some elements which are very relevant. While Jesus is sitting down to eat, an unknown woman

who had a bad name in the town... waited behind him at his feet, weeping, and her tears fell on his feet, and she wiped them away with her hair; then she covered his feet with kisses and anointed them with the ointment (Lk 7:38).

Then, from the words of Jesus in answer to Simon's reaction, we realize that some traditional elements of hospitality were still in use at that time: especially verses 44-46 point to the washing of feet, the welcome kiss and the oil for the ointment of the guest's head. There are two more cases, but the identity of the hosts are uncertain. The first episode takes place in a non-jewish environment, because Mark tells us that Jesus was travelling in the area of Tyre in Phoenicia, and entered a private house and "did not want anyone to know he was there; but he could not pass unrecognised" (Mk 7:24). The second narrative is about a meal at Simon's house, a person whose nickname seems to point to "a man who had suffered from a virulent skin-disease" (Mt 26:6; Mk 14:3). The banquet happens on the day after Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and amongst those who have been invited to the meal is also Lazarus, the friend of Jesus, together with his sisters Martha

and Mary (cf. Jn 12:1-3). Therefore, the scene has now turned into the familiar environment of Bethany, where Jesus on several occasions enjoyed the friendly hospitality of the family of Lazarus (cf. Lk 10:38-42) and would become the safe and comfortable night refuge during his last stressful days on the temple area of Jerusalem (cf. Mt 21:17; Mk 11:11-12).

The refusal of hospitality

There is also at least one episode, recorded by Luke, of Jesus being refused. He was travelling from Galilee to Jerusalem and the shortest way crosses the central region of Palestine, Samaria. On other occasions he chose the longest route, through the Jordan valley. But in Lk 9:51-56 Jesus wants to go directly to Jerusalem and “he resolutely turned his face towards Jerusalem” (Lk 9:51). While he is on the way, he sends some of his disciples before him to look for lodging in a Samaritan village. Surprisingly, “the people would not receive him because he was making for Jerusalem” (Lk 9:53), and therefore Jesus and his disciples had to go to another village.

Jesus experiences himself how good hospitality can be, a generous and friendly welcome; on the other hand, he also experiences the sadness of refusal and intimacy. On his part, although he is unable to offer any material refuge because he himself has nowhere to lay his head (cf. Mt 8:20; Lk 9:58), nevertheless he is always merciful, patient and welcoming towards everybody: to the numerous people who gather to listen to his preaching as well as to sick persons who ask for recovery, and to children whose mothers bring them to him so that he may bless them (cf. Mt 19:13-15; Mk 10:13-16; Lk 18:15-17). It seems that openness and willingness towards others are the typical elements of Jesus’ preaching and his preferential method of evangelization. His programme of life may be summed up in his own words: “Come to me, all you who labour and are overburdened, and I will give you rest” (Mt 11:28).

Actually, according to the four Gospels, Jesus never talked about hospitality, unless indirectly in some of his parables. For instance, when he wants his followers to understand who is the neighbour to be served and loved, he tells the story of the Good Samaritan (cf. Lk 10:34-35). Some other useful remarks may be found also in the parable of the “inconsiderate friend”, who knocks at his friend’s door at midnight because he wants to borrow some bread to offer to a friend who suddenly came from afar (cf. Lk 11:5-8), or the story of the dishonest administrator who carefully provides friends for himself so that in the future, when he will be sent away by his master, they may give him lodging in their houses (cf. Lk 16:9).

Jesus' words concerning sensitivity to others

There is a special relevance in Jesus' words about the generosity of openness to others at the closure of a parable that pointed to the choice of places at meals. When you give a lunch or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relations or rich neighbours, in case they invite you back and so repay you. No; when you have a party, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind; then you will be blessed, for they have no means to repay you and so you will be repaid when the upright rise again (Lk 14:12-14).

The third Gospel gives particular attention to this topic, and not only through the parables. There are also at least two "private" discourses, where Jesus talks about this. The first appears both in Mark (very shortly) and also in Matthew (much more longer). It is a talk given by Jesus to his twelve apostles, before sending them to preach the Kingdom of God (cf. Lk 9:2-5; Mk 6:8-11; Mt 10:5-15). The second is a talk proper to Luke only, but the situation is the same as the above mentioned and the content is similar to that; the difference stands in those whom Jesus addresses, that now are some seventy-two disciples sent to be missionaries (cf. Lk 10:4-12). Fundamentally, the content of Jesus' message is a lesson concerning the abandonment of safety measures and the experience of apostolic freedom as means to a fruitful evangelization. If they wish to accomplish their mission of witnessing, the followers of Christ should have no worries about daily concrete needs, but rather they should rely on God's assistance and on the generous and kind hospitality of those whom they are about to meet. How do they have to behave?

Whatever town or village you go into, seek out someone worthy and stay with him until you leave. As you enter his house, salute it, and if the house deserves it, may your peace come upon it; if it does not, may your peace come back to you. And if anyone does not welcome you or listen to what you have to say, as you walk out of the house or town shake the dust from your feet (Mt 10:11-14; cf. also Acts 13:51).¹³

The recommendations of Jesus to his twelve apostles end with some very meaningful words:

¹³ GABRIEL, Ingeborg. "When I was a Stranger You Took Me into Your Home (Matt 25:35). Some Elements of a Theology of Migration and Its Consequences for the Pastoral and Social Care of Foreigners", in *People on the Move*, 65, 1994, p. 9-23; see also GRILLI, Massimo. *Comunità e Missione: le direttive di Matteo. Indagine esegetica su Mt 9,35-11,1*. Frankfurt/Main: Peter Lang 1992; ROGERS, Terence. "Shaking the Dust Off, the Markan Mission Discourse", in *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 27, 2004, p.169-192.

Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me; and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Anyone who welcomes a prophet because he is a prophet will have a prophet's reward; and anyone who welcomes an upright person because he is upright will have the reward of an upright person. If anyone gives so much as a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is a disciple, then in truth I tell you, he will most certainly not go without his reward (Mt 10:40-42).

The same words, with few irrelevant differences, may be read also in Mk 9:41 and Lk 10:16 (also Jn 13:20), although in a different context. Perhaps Jesus repeated the same recommendations several times, applying them to the different assemblies gathered to listen to him. However, the words of Jesus stress two relevant topics, that in future times will mark the idea of hospitality as a mean to evangelization, in a christian perspective: 1) an open welcome offered to an apostle, a prophet, a righteous person, whoever is a disciple of Jesus, is to be considered a service of love offered to Christ himself, and in him to God the Father; 2) such a merciful deed, if it was more than a mere philanthropic activity, will be certainly rewarded. Therefore, christian hospitality finds its place on a divine level, which is the proper horizon in order to understand the final words of Jesus about the subject of willingness and openness to others, while delivering to them the *kerygma*:

Come, you whom my Father has blessed, take as your heritage the kingdom prepared for you since the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you made me welcome... In truth I tell you, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me (Mt 25:34-35.40, and the whole passage about the last judgement: vv.31-46).

The early Christian communities

The life of the early Church repeats, on a wider measure, the above mentioned elements of the life of Jesus. Obedient to the master's command (cf. Mt 28:19; Mk 16:15), the apostles went throughout the world to announce the *kerygma* to all peoples. Following them, and imitating their examples, there was a multitude of "ministers of the word" (Lk 1:2), an infinite number of co-workers, prophets, doctors, evangelists, disciples who were stimulated by the apostolic enthusiasm to share the gift of faith with all those they could meet on their way.

The book of the Acts of the Apostles is the only historic source for the apostolic period. Unfortunately, it deals very briefly with this first massive missionary movement, and it rarely mentions welcome and hospitality.

However, if one gathers the elements spread throughout the book as well as the news given by the other apostolic writings of the New Testament, it is possible to have a surprisingly wide and complete picture, that shows how there was a magnificent practice of openness and solidarity among the early Christians, especially towards missionaries and itinerant preachers, although they were foreigners and unknown to each other.

At first it may be useful to call to mind the episodes mainly concerned with our theme. After that, it will be easier to understand how hospitality was practiced (or should have been practiced) and the reasons supporting the tradition of welcome in the early Christian Communities.¹⁴

The narratives

As for Peter, the Acts of the Apostles tells that he lodged for quite a long period at Joppa, with Simon, a man who is said to be a tanner (cf. Acts 9:43; 10:18.32), whose house was beside the sea (Acts 10:6). When Peter went from Joppa to Cesarea, he was strongly invited to stay on for some days by the centurion Cornelius and his family (cf. Acts 10:48). Finally, after his miraculous liberation from prison, Peter went to the welcoming home of Mary, mother of Mark, in Jerusalem (cf. Acts 12:12).

As for Paul, an interesting episode happened at Philippi in Macedonia, while the apostle was on his second missionary journey. Paul was preaching, and

one of these women was called Lydia, a woman from the town of Thyatira who was in the purple-dye trade, and who revered God. She listened to us, and the Lord opened her heart to accept what Paul was saying. After she and her household had been baptised she kept urging us, 'If you judge me a true believer in the Lord,' she said, 'come and stay with us'. And she would take no refusal (Acts 16:14-15).¹⁵

It was in that same city of Philippi that Paul was imprisoned. During the night he was miraculously delivered, and the keeper of the prison converted and was baptized. After this, he brought Paul and Silas into his home, and "he took them into his house and gave them a meal, and the whole household celebrated their conversion to belief in God" (Acts 16:34). Then, Paul went to Thessalonica and stayed in Jason's house (cf. Acts 17:5-7); in

¹⁴ Several recent contributions are helpful in understanding early Christian hospitality, for example see ARTERBURY, Andrew. "The Ancient Custom of Hospitality, the Greek Novels, and Acts 10:1-11:18", in *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, 29, 2002, p. 53-72; ODEN, Amy (ed.), *And You Welcomed Me: A Sourcebook on Hospitality in Early Christianity*.

¹⁵ Cf. GILLMAN, John. "Hospitality in Acts 16", in *Louvain Studies*, 17, 1992, p. 181-196.

Corinth he abode in Aquila and Priscilla's house (cf. Acts 18:2-3); in Cesarea he dwelt in Philip's house (cf. Acts 21:8). Finally, Luke, who experienced the shipwreck with Paul at Malta, tells that the native people of the island "treated us with unusual kindness. They made us all welcome by lighting a huge fire because it had started to rain and the weather was cold"; Luke continues telling that the chief man of the island, Publius, "received us and entertained us hospitably for three days"; everyone in the island "honoured us with many marks of respect, and when we sailed they put on board the provisions we needed" (Acts 28:2.7.10).

Paul travelled an enormous amount, due to his apostolic care. Therefore, he himself experienced the necessity of warm hospitality. He never desired to be a burden for anybody (cf. 1 Cor 9:15.18; 2 Cor 11:9; 2 Thess 3:8); nevertheless, he often had to rely on the good services offered by those who were kind and generous, who welcomed him willingly and spontaneously, confirming that this already was a success for his apostolic ministry. For this reason, when he writes to the churches, he invites them to be willing to practice the virtue of hospitality (cf. Rom 12:13; also Heb 13:2; 1 Pt 4:9); moreover, he supported and recommended to all those who were in need of hospitality, either disciples such as Mark (cf. Col 4:10) and Epaphroditus (cf. Phil 2:29), or very deserving women, such as the deacon Phoebe who appears at the end of the letter to the Romans:

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deaconess of the church at Cenchreae; give her, in the Lord, a welcome worthy of God's holy people, and help her with whatever she needs from you - she herself has come to the help of many people, including myself (Rom 16:1-2).

Sometimes he was very discrete to mention to the communities that in the future he himself may be in need of their help and assistance, provided that he would be able to travel to the places where they live (cf. Rom 1:10-13; 15:22-24; 1 Cor 16:6; 2 Cor 1:16; Fm 22).

Principally, the apostolic writings order the Christian communities to avoid all those who do not behave righteously (cf. 1 Cor 5:11; 2 Jn 9-11; also Tt 3:10; Jude 23); yet on the other hand, they encourage to offer a kind and willing assistance to the missionaries of the Gospel. That is the reason why the third letter of John praises and encourages Gaius, the person to whom John is sending the letter:

My dear friend, you have done loyal work in helping these brothers, even though they were strangers to you. They are a proof to the whole Church of your love and it would be a kindness if you could help them on their journey as God would approve. It was entirely for the sake of the name that they set

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out, without depending on the non-believers for anything: it is our duty to welcome people of this sort and contribute our share to their work for the truth (3 Jn 5-8).

The reason for such duty is easy to understand if we realize that the missionaries, who were strongly involved in preaching, could not provide themselves for their food and lodging. Paul stresses several times that, as a worker deserves his salary (cf. Lk 10:7), on the same level the worker of the Gospel deserves to receive whatever he needs for his material well-being, in exchange for the spiritual goods he freely gives (cf. 1 Cor 9:1-18; 1 Tm 5:18; also 2 Cor 8:3-4; Gal 6:6).

Among those who are mentioned because they have willingly practiced hospitality towards the apostles and the preachers of the Gospel there are baptized Christians, Christian sympathizers, men and women. Indeed, the NT writings encourage all the faithful to be welcoming and hospitable to foreigners. However, there are some people who, due to their office and status, should be eminently suitable for this virtue. The pastoral letters, which care the most about the organization of each christian community, clearly state that they should be extremely generous in hospitality those who want to become bishops and priests (cf. 1 Tim 3:2; Tt 1:8) and the women who want to become members of the group of the devoted widows (cf. 1Tm 5:10). In fact, we do not know exactly which were the specific duties of bishops-priests and widows at the time of the composition of these letters. However, it is meaningful that Paul recommends that the virtue of a welcoming hospitality, among all other virtues is required for those who want to be in charge of the early communities, and that it is considered as a privileged channel towards evangelization.

The practice of hospitality is the best fruit of welcoming

What we understand about hospitality from the NT writings certainly corresponds to the typical practice of the time. Besides the welcoming greeting, openness to foreigners involves the washing of feet (cf. 1Tm 5:10), lodging, food and whatever the guest needs (cf. Rom 16:2). But there is a strong emphasis on the assistance needed on the journey, and this means particularly to give to the guest all the necessary news about the direction, food, money, and letters of recommendation and introduction to other communities. In this respect, Paul recommends two unknown disciples when he writes to Titus:

Help eagerly on their way Zenas the lawyer and Apollos, and make sure they have everything they need. All our people must also learn to occupy themselves in doing good works for their practical needs, and not to be unproductive (Tt 3:13-14).

In other words, the faithful should not be happy only with greetings and wishes offered to the foreigners, but they should also provide clearly to their needs.

On a more spiritual level, we may assume that the early Church would practice friendly and generous hospitality because of Christian motivations of love and “communion” between brothers and sisters, which became specific elements of the early communities and actually the very channel for the proclamation of the *kerygma*. For these reasons, Paul recommends to welcome those he is about to introduce in a manner “worthy of God’s holy people” (Rom 16:2; Phil 2:29); John, after rejoicing because of the wonderful welcoming behaviour of Gaius towards foreigners, strongly invites him to provide for their journey “as God would approve” (3Jn 6). Both of them mark the right practice of Christian faithful, according to the most authentic evangelical spirit, that involves sensitivity, friendship, care, kindness and generosity. Indeed, these are the virtues that should excel in a welcoming hospitality, when it reaches its height and becomes “worthy of God’s holy people”.¹⁶

The supernatural value of welcome and hospitality

Therefore, we can now sum up the biblical message concerning welcome and hospitality in the following elements, which point to the authentic way towards evangelization.

1. Care and willingness: When a guest comes, according to the example of Lot (cf. Gen 19:3; also Judg 19:8), it is necessary not only to welcome him/her or to be willing to lodge him/her, but it is also important to be insistent, almost forcing the guest to accept the best hospitality available. That is what the two disciples of Emmaus did to Jesus (cf. Lk 24:29) and Lydia to Paul when he was at Philippi (cf. Acts 16:15). Titus 3:13 shows such a behaviour, that is to be extended until the departure of the guest, using the word *spoudaios*, that means “willingly urging, caring, with careful attention” (also Rom 12:13). It is obvious that this is the very root of welcoming, where the possibility to announce the Gospel is favourably prepared.
2. Without grudging: That is clearly stated by Peter: “Welcome each other into your houses without grumbling” (1 Pt 4:9), meaning that offering a good hospitality involves the positive acceptance of its burden, without grumbling that it has caused a disturbance. It means that people should be willing to renounce something

¹⁶Cf. B. LEONHARD, “Hospitality in Third John”, in *The Bible Today*, 25, 1987, p. 11-18; MALHERBE, Abraham. “Hospitality and Inhospitality in the Church”, p. 92-112.

- in order to provide a good welcome through which the guest feels at home. In this case the first element is certainly dialogue, which begins with listening to each other leading finally to the proclamation of the Word of God, which is generously delivered.
3. Joy: It is Luke who cares the most when he describes the very inner feelings of people, for instance when he writes that Zacchaeus “hurried down and welcomed Jesus joyfully” (Lk 19:6), as well as Paul when he met the faithful of Jerusalem, at the end of his third missionary journey (cf. Acts 21:17) and the keeper of the prison at Philippi brought Paul and his companions into his house, “he gave them a meal, and the whole household celebrated their conversion to belief in God” (Acts 16:34). In this respect, it is confirmed that between Luke and his master Paul there is a very deep communion of thoughts. Indeed, there are many examples in Paul’s letters dealing with the topic of joy. It is worth to calling to mind that, when Paul sends his disciple Epaphroditus to Philippi, he writes to the Christian community that they should “welcome him in the Lord with all joy” (Phil 2:29). On the whole, it is well known that Paul recommends that all merciful deeds should be accomplished joyfully (cf. Rom 12:8), and the reason is that “God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor 9:7) and in this context evangelization may be fully accomplished.

The *Didaché*, however, affirms that a charitable concern, one which includes all the elements above mentioned, should not be refused to anyone, provided that they abide by those conditions that protect faith, serenity and security of the community:

Let every one that comes in the name of the Lord be received, and afterward you shall prove and know him; for you shall have understanding right and left. If he who comes is a wayfarer, assist him as far as you are able; but he shall not remain with you, except for two or three days, if need be. But if he wills to abide with you, being an artisan, let him work and eat; but if he has no trade, according to your understanding see to it that, as a Christian, he shall not live with you idle. But if he wills not to do, he is a Christ-monger. Watch that you keep aloof from such (*Didaché* 12,1-5).

The martyr Justin also witnesses to the generosity of charity, and says that

they who are well to do, and willing, give what each thinks fit; and what is collected is deposited with the president, who succours the orphans and widows and those who, through sickness or any other cause, are in want, and those who are in bonds and the strangers sojourning among us, and in a word takes care of all who are in need (*Apology* 1, 67.6).¹⁷

¹⁷JUSTIN MARTYR. *First Apology of Justin, The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Vol. 1, New York: Charles Scribner’s

This same concern, thus, involves also the foreigner, as we understand reading the wider perspective of the ancient Apology of Aristides: “when they (the Christians) see a stranger, they take him in to their homes and rejoice over him as a very brother; for they do not call them brethren after the flesh, but brethren after the spirit and in God” (XV).¹⁸ It is comparative to listening to the recommendation of Paul, who was in sadness considering the discriminations that took place in the community of Corinth, where divisions and social climbing overcame the Christian criterion of reciprocity: “When you meet together, it is not the Lord’s Supper that you eat... my brothers, when you meet for the Meal, wait (but it might be translated *welcome*, because the verb used is *ekdechomai*) for each other” (1 Cor 11:20.33).

Therefore, the practice of hospitality, mentioned as the best fruit of welcoming and regarded as the privileged channel for evangelization, was highly considered in the early Church.¹⁹

Theological hints

Some scholars believe that the reasons for the insistence of NT writers on the duties of hospitality come from the inadequate practice of them: the early Church would have tried to avoid the troubles of hospitality. In fact, it is better to consider that such insistence was due to the fact that the itinerant Christian preachers would have been forced to look for hospitality in public institutions or to rely on the generosity of non-Christians, if they would not have been welcomed into the communities they met on their journeys. If that had to be the case their faith as well as their customs would have been in danger. Perhaps the recommendation to be welcoming without grumbling, points to the persecutions that Christians were facing. However, besides these superficial reasons, which are never directly mentioned in the NT writings, it seems that there are some theological reasons, which are more relevant and give to hospitality a proper Christian value and also a vital importance for evangelization.

Sons, 1925.

¹⁸ ARISTIDES. *Apology*, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* Vol. 9, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1925.

¹⁹ Eusebius of Cesarea witnesses that Melito of Sardis would have even written a whole treatise about hospitality to foreigners, which unfortunately has been lost, whose title was: “*Peri philoxenias*”: cfr. *Church History* IV, 26.2. Cf. also HERMAS. *The Shepherd*, Commandment VIII, 9-10. PEÑA, Ignacio. “Hospedarias Sirias de los siglos IV, V, VI”, in *Liber Annuus*, 32, 1982, p. 327-334; DANESI, Giacomo. “Per una teologia delle migrazioni”, in AA. VV., *Per una pastorale dei migranti. Contributi in occasione del 75° della morte di mons. G.B. Scalabrini*. Roma: Direzione Generale dei Missionari Scalabriniani, 1980, p. 113-114.

First, hospitality is a gift, a *charisma*, coming from the Holy Spirit, akin to prophecy, the power of healing, the gift of teaching... (cf. Rom 12:6-8; 1Pt 4:10).

Then, the third letter of John states that "it is our duty to welcome people of this sort and contribute our share to their work for the truth" (v. 8). The writer stresses the idea that welcome and hospitality, openness and willingness are the best way of cooperation for the spreading of the Christian truth and faith. When people offer a generous hospitality to missionaries, they support their minister of preaching the truth, and they let the truth be easily and suddenly spread and communicated all over the world. Both the missionary, who asks for a friendly welcome, and those who offer their kind willingness to them, work together for the same ideal, so that their activities improve and give completeness/comprehensiveness to one another. In this sense they are fellowhelpers to each other and to the truth, and both deserve the reward promised by Jesus in Mt 10:41.

Third, besides being an activity of truth and faith, hospitality is also, and moreover, an activity of charity and love. There may no be true love without a generous welcome; on the other hand, there may no be a sincere welcome, in the above mentioned Christian spirit, without love. Otherwise it may be a mere philanthropic and humanitarian activity. Paul, in his well known hymn to charity says that "love is always patient and kind" (1 Cor 13:4), which means that love is full of goodness, sensitivity, delicacy (cf. Mt 11:30; Lk 5:39), which are virtues typical of an open and welcoming spirit. That is why Paul, who keen to encourage the faithful to imitate Jesus' mercy dealing with one another, says that God and Christ, the sources and the models of love, proved to love humankind by "welcoming" all the peoples into their love, in spite of their sins and crimes (cf. Rom 14:3; 15:7). It is therefore easy to understand that love and welcome come together: "Continue to love each other like brothers, and remember always to welcome strangers" (Heb 13:2); "And above all preserve an intense love for each other, since love covers over many a sin. Welcome each other into your houses without grumbling" (1Pt 4:8-9);

Let love be without any pretence. Avoid what is evil; stick to what is good. In brotherly love let your feelings of deep affection for one another come to expression and regard others as more important than yourself. In the service of the Lord, work not halfheartedly but with conscientiousness and an eager spirit. Be joyful in hope, persevere in hardship; keep praying regularly; share with any of God's holy people who are in need; look for opportunities to be hospitable (Rom 12:9-13).

Conclusion

At the end of this investigation, we realize that it has been easy to discover that there are many passages in the Bible dealing with people on the move, who ask for openness and willingness from those they meet on their journey. The topics of welcome and hospitality are familiar to the Biblical writers: it seems to me that they were considered like important challenges for the renewal of ancient societies and, moreover, for the purpose of evangelization. They still challenge us, particularly those who care for people on the move. In fact, they question us, showing a very demanding reality: how do we think that our pastoral care to migrants may improve and promote human dignity, unless through a vital and strong action of love, truth and faith, guided by the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ?

In other words, Christians and their faith communities do make efforts so that nobody may feel a stranger in the family of God. On the contrary, everybody should be willing to share the same condition of pilgrimage, taking part – so to say – in the same ontological status: “They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers” (*Epistle to Diognetus* V,5).²⁰ In this context, the proclamation of the Christian *kerygma* reaches its height and the welcoming behaviour becomes its specific sign, chiefly because it reminds us that we are all guests, since “our homeland is in heaven” (Phil 3:20) and “there is no permanent city for us here; we are looking for the one which is yet to be” (Heb 13:14; cf. also 2 Cor 7:29-31), that one “designed and built by God” (Heb 11:10).²¹ Welcome and hospitality, therefore, show the true face of the *agapē* of the Church, the very channels for the evangelization, because there is no distinction between the members of the Christian community. It is indeed the family that walks, with Christ, towards the eternal homeland.²² However, during its pilgrimage along the ways of the world, it cannot forget having received a special vocation, that of being the soul of the world. And this happens when it accepts, as a challenge, the status of the stranger and, like

²⁰ Cf. BURINI, Clara. “Dall’amore reciproco all’amore verso l’altro. Spunti di riflessione sullo scritto *A Diogneto*”, in *Parola Spirito e Vita*, 27, 1993, p. 265-277; *Idem*. “Ma come pellegrini” (*A Diogneto* 5,5), in *Parola Spirito e Vita*, 28, 1993, p. 269-281.

²¹ Cf. MASINI, Mario. “Una città per il futuro”, in *Parola Spirito e Vita*, 28, 1993, p. 213-229.

²² *The Epistle to Diognetus, The Apostolic Fathers*. Vol. 2, Loeb Classical Library, William Heinemann, London 1912. The themes of the salvation of the pagans and the role of the Hellenistic culture are two pillars of the thoughts of Clemens of Alexandria: cf. NOCE, Celestino. “La sapienza delle genti in Clemente Alessandrino”, in *Parola Spirito e Vita*, 26, 1992, p. 201-214.

an adventure, the opportunity of becoming welcoming and hospitable: “The immortal soul dwells in a mortal tabernacle; Christians dwell as sojourners in corruptible [bodies], looking for an incorruptible dwelling in the heavens” (*Epistle to Diognetus* VI,8).²³

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²³ A collection of early Christian documents concerning hospitality, including letters, reports, instructions and homilies, may be found in ODEN, Amy (ed.). *And You Welcomed Me: A Sourcebook on Hospitality in Early Christianity*.