

(Compiled and summarized by Francis Dombrowski. All credits are due to the authors cited)

INTRODUCTION

“Relationship is at the heart of the life of Francis and Clare. Francis did not set out to found a religious order, but simply to live a life in accord with the Gospel...Through knowing Brother Jesus Francis came to recognize himself and all creation as belonging in God’s family. Franciscan life is about discovering for oneself and then sharing with others this relationship of brothers and sisters in Christ. Franciscan community is the primary place where this relationship is experienced and expressed. Franciscan hospitality is about welcoming others – young and old, rich and poor, believer and non-believer – as brothers and sisters.” (Franciscans.org. UK)

In this essay we want to reflect on our present situation that calls for hospitality and consider what is hospitality, how does it work and what are the skills needed to make it work in light of faith.

In our contemporary, global world hospitality means welcoming the stranger. The stranger is not just the person who is unknown to us and different from us, but the person who arrives asking questions that cause us to question ourselves and so challenge our order and our identity. There are more and more immigrants, guest workers and other strangers who come to share our country, city, neighborhood, spaces, associations and churches. Strangers of all sorts constantly engage with one another.

Therefore, hospitality is called for but it is not only a generous and cordial welcome. Hospitality is about opening our boundaries without abolishing them and giving space to the stranger. This implies a humble and hopefully mutual recognition, a relation with the other who is not simply different from us but whose differences can trouble our own identity, freedom and established ways. The other is a stranger in language, family, nationality, culture and personality. The hospitable person is willing to put aside his or her own preconceived notions and be open to knowing the other as different without judgment.

This way of hospitality emphasizes recognition on both sides, and not simply tolerance because tolerance does not necessarily mean acceptance or approval. Recognition is more affirmative toward people who one finds different from oneself in their values, ways of living or social situation. Tolerance means you leave us alone and we will leave you alone. Hospitality means crossing a border without abolishing it; not only approaching it but entering it and being engaged with the other as different. It is to see the possibility of a relationship and involves a sensitivity and reverence for the stranger. This can create a tension between the two but it is necessary in order to avoid oppression, domination or exclusion of the other. However, this tension in a relationship can be the spark to create a working relation, where both sides win or gain. The real challenge posed by the other is not whether or how to convert, tolerate, protect or reject those who are not the same as us, but how to deal with difference without subjection or conquering on either side. We must learn from each other and in this engagement there is always the risk of mutual transformation. (Source: M. Dikec, Longings for spaces of hospitality, Theory Culture Society 19 (2002)224-247)

To experience this level of hospitality we need to encounter the other and engage in dialogue. Dialogue is communication through language. Each one tries to meet the other with shared language, human words in human contexts that always need clarification. E. g. the word “God” has many meanings. Time in one culture is money; in another is relationship.

Hospitality consists in letting the other in, and ourselves entering the other’s space. We can offer our home, our food, our time, our attention, our heart. No matter how strange another may seem to us, he is received as a brother, she is received as a sister. Today we often meet people of other religions and cultures. Their religion and culture must be respected. It can be an occasion to stimulate our own faith and also it may be a moment when God has something to say to us through the people of other religions and cultures. “Welcome one another just as Christ has welcomed you.” (Rom. 15:7) Meeting with the other can be a visit from the Other. To realize this we must make an inner space for our guest. We empty our mind and heart to let the other in; we share our mind and heart to the one who is open and this

mutual hollowing out can bring a mutual revelation. (P.F. De Bethune, By faith and Hospitality, 2002, pp. 1-18)

From a faith perspective hospitality can be understood as the practice of God's welcome embodied in our actions as we reach across difference to participate with God in bringing justice and healing to our world. Even in a marginalized community genuine hospitality discovers that in God's sight no one is a misfit and that it is our call to join God in practicing hospitality for all persons. As we gather in a group we need to ask ourselves who is missing? Whose voice is not being heard? What gifts are hidden behind the differences? Who among the people need to be encouraged to find their own identity and self-worth and to value their own way of thinking.

In our fractured world and church, the problems of difference are not absent. Economic globalization forces people to migrate from one place to another to escape war, poverty and more. We are often strangers to one another, but the problem that we face is not that we are different, but that we often fear that difference and reject those outside our church, our community our nation. This fear of difference can be an excuse to oppress those who are of a different nationality, race, gender, sexual orientation or ability. Our churches or communities can become safe havens from difference, welcoming only certain people and excluding those who do not fit.

So difference can be a tool or weapon against understanding one another. It is a weapon when it is used as a reason to downgrade, exclude, silence or oppress. The other then is looked down upon as inferior simply because of characteristics that do not meet the universal norm of whiteness, maleness, health or affluence. A dominant group may fear losing their privilege or even identity as superior. We must learn to respect another's culture's claim that what makes them different has a positive value and meaning for them. Can this rainbow of diversity in God's creation bring us together? We need to begin this process by critically examining our assumptions lest we inadvertently reinforce our thinking as correct or better. If we are called to service then we must listen to those on the margin who will define their need

and share their gifts and teach us the meaning of God's welcome and hospitality. This kind of hospitality is an invitation to us all to join together in imagining a different world, to work together to find the many ways we can keep faith with our sisters and brothers as well as with a God who knows no partiality. The give and take of hospitality makes it possible for power to be shared rather than used to dominate. In God's new creation the margins will no longer exist for we are called to join across differences in our common work of sharing in God's creation. In this context hospitality is the practice of God's welcome by reaching out across difference to participate in God's action bringing justice and healing and brotherhood/sisterhood in our world.

The differences among peoples are a gift from God's creative evolution. Differences of race, gender, sexual orientation, language or culture are not problems to be resolved and controlled by a dominant group. Rather they are important ways of assuring that God's gift of diversity in all creation will continue. These differences are gifts in themselves. God's gift lets new voices be heard and languages and cultures flourish so that all are enriched.

God makes a form of unity possible by the gift of the Spirit that enables people of all nations to understand one another and this is done not by one dominating or by all becoming uniform but through communication. All voices are to be listened to and respected. This requires a dialogue in which we cross over from one world into another for the sake of sharing ideas, experience, mutual understanding, and build mutual trust. It is a meeting that enables one to return to one's own world with a deepened understanding, insight and meaning. The Spirit transforms the lives of people by breaking open structures that confine and separate people so that they can welcome difference and the challenges and opportunities for new understanding and action that difference brings. In honest and caring dialogue between races the pain of the other can be heard and the structures, like white privilege, can be seen as oppressive and new structures can be formed. (Letty M. Russell, Just Hospitality, Westminster, Knox, 2009)

In this process we need to move from tolerance to empathy. Tolerance is merely putting up with differences of culture and viewpoint, ignoring

the confusion and discomfort with others who are different. To agree to disagree and walk away stops the process. Empathy reaches out to others to discover and understand what life is like for others. One tries to look at the other from the other's perspective and try to feel what they feel. We seek new information about the person and their experience of life. This means we must take the risk of getting involved with real people and not just read books, even empathize with people we don't like. Empathy takes us to the outer limits of ourselves and our relationships. It means the risk of transforming yourself except when danger and violence may require you to seek safety. But in ordinary dialogue honest and sincere interaction will change you. We cannot determine when and how the Spirit will open our hearts and speak to us in such dialogue.

What are the skills needed for dialogue? First, we need to engage in reflective listening, that is, learn to reflect back to the person what you understood the person to say or mean. E.g. what I heard you say was.... This brings about understanding. Secondly, we need to ask honest and open-ended questions. An honest question is one whose answer you really do not know. The question offers a moment when you see something in another that you never saw or understood before. And open-ended question does not ask for a yes or no. It is a question that leads to further explanation. E.g. What was it like for you to do this or go through this? How have you come to that decision or point of view? Thirdly, we need to take a risk and ask a question about something you want to now more about but feel uncomfortable in asking. This may lead to a disagreement and we may need to agree to disagree and go our ways but still with an open mind and heart. We cannot be closed but must keep loving and caring and keep challenging oneself. Fourthly, if we cannot integrate into our own ways of thinking and living the way of the other, then we are called to go beyond differences and seek a level where we both have a common interest, value, mission, and be willing to focus on that and work together for the same goal. (Summary of the talk given by Drs. Sam Richards and Laurie Mulvey at the Islamic Center in Milwaukee, Sept. 11, 2011)

Dialogue, then, is a communication that goes to the heart. If the word comes from the heart it has a chance of going to the heart of the other. Dialogue with other faiths consists in reaching out from our own

religious experience to the religious experience of the other, in some measure making it our own. We must not be afraid of letting our hearts be affected, wounded even. By being true to ourselves, we take the risk of exposure, with the danger of being knocked off balance, our own convictions bruised. In this kind of loving dialogue we are always vulnerable, but we are always open to a new gift.

Respectful dialogue welcomes the other as he or she is, integrally unique. It is simply the desire to let the other be himself or herself. So we must not try to wipe out differences. We must try to understand the other as best we can with humility before the truth. One person does not have the answer to everything. There are many ways of being human and our way is not the only way. (De Bethune, *By Faith and Hospitality*, 2002, pp. 1-24)

Differences are not a problem. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences and to examine the distortions which result from our misunderstanding them and their effects upon human behavior and expectations. E.g. persons of different sexual orientations from their own are often named sexual perverts and persons of color who have difficulty finding jobs are called lazy. We cannot build unity our community out of differences through hospitality if we separate by either/or, right/wrong, win/lose. When we welcome those who come from different contexts and life experiences, we do learn from them that there are many different ways to understand and live our humanity and our unity in Christ. And we can be united by sharing together in mission and service. We can work through our differences by searching for a common agenda of justice making and transformation. This is a vision of every human community including the church where the participation of each and everyone is valued, where no one is excluded on the basis of race, sex, age, religion or cultural practice, where diversity is celebrated as God's gift to the world.

To work toward such a community we must not use difference as a reason for exclusion. Just because someone is different in race, sex, culture is not a reason for exclusion. Then to build relationships beyond difference we must form coalitions and networks that can sustain groups in their struggles. We need partnerships in the work of justice,

systems change and preserving creation. Such partnerships create care, provide resources and leadership plus power for change.

While this idea of hospitality sounds good, it is difficult to practice. Hospitality in this sense is much more than having friends over for dinner or serving coffee after church. It cannot be practiced as a way of caring for so called ‘inferior people’ by those who are more advantaged and show their superiority by being generous. We must meet others as they are, not as objects of our charity, but persons in their own right, persons with gifts and ideas, capable of making choices about their destiny. We cannot reform others to match our expectations. We often want to see the others through our own eyes. The path to understanding is to see others the way they see themselves, not the way we want to see them. Rather than focusing only on ourselves and our own individual actions, we must also look at hospitality in terms of social structures of justice and of partnership across barriers of difference. As people of faith, God’s welcome –hospitality—has four overlapping central aspects: unexpected divine presence, advocacy for the marginalized, mutual welcome and creation of community.

This level of hospitality invites us to hear what God might be saying to us not only in the conversations of our own hearts and minds but also through listening to views different from our own, especially those we have not heard before, the perspectives of people who have been marginalized in society and who have suffered violence and oppression. Hospitality begins when we seek to welcome one another by taking very seriously the social situation of our lives and those of other persons. To welcome another person or group is to look beneath the source of what they say and do, to understand where they are coming from and to address the social context out of which the conversation comes. This allows space for the Spirit, something new that God might reveal through the dialogue.

One of the biggest obstacles to this hospitality is fear. There are reasons to be afraid to offer hospitality to the other or those on the margins; to fear the stranger knocking at our door, the person with a different religion or life experience. Some of these fears are valid but often we combine these with our own insecurity and so avoid the stranger. But this hospitality assumes the best, not the worst, in the stranger. If we are

insecure by living in fear of those who are different, we cut ourselves off from our neighbors and their reality and their gift. The building of a trusting, sharing, loving community is the future God intends.

In conclusion, Christian hospitality that overcomes the fear of difference and breaks down the walls that keep us apart is more than a cheery smile, more than providing food, clothing and shelter. It also includes actions of genuine solidarity with those who are different from us. It goes beyond caring for the other to enabling them to care for themselves and others. If there is to be healing and reconciliation between peoples, religions, nations, women and men, we cannot call people to conform to the pattern of the most dominant group. There is no way to heal from violence, terror or brokenness if the injustice that caused the problem is not also addressed. E.g. If a nation such as the US wants to eliminate terrorism, it needs to do more than use military force, for terrorism at its base is a response to political, economic and religious injustice and will disappear only when communities demonstrate respect for human rights and the right relationship among peoples. If we want the church to matter in the twenty-first century, we must become a community that practices God's welcome and hospitality in a world of difference and danger. (Source: Letty M. Russell, *Just Hospitality*, Westminster, John Knox Press, 2009)

The goal of Christian hospitality is mutual communion, reconciliation and transformation into a new humanity and a new world community, diverse but being and working together for the good and development of all. Today Christian love is called to respect, celebrate and integrate the precious difference of the stranger and in so doing meet the God of all.