

On Hospitality
Paul J. Contino
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President's Briefing

Last week we began the new academic year with many welcomes: we met and greeted new students, their parents, and new colleagues; we greeted and re-connected with students we know from past classes, and with colleagues we've known for years. In a sense, each time we greet another, each time we commence a class, or hold a meeting, we're engaged in a practice integral to the Christian tradition: the practice of hospitality. As a teacher, administrator, or staff person, we're continually called to greet and serve others – to serve as hosts to those seeking guidance, direction, knowledge -- even wisdom.

Given the many occasions for hospitality that this new semester presents, I thought it appropriate in this devotional to reflect briefly on two stories from Scripture, both stories of hospitality, both marked by a similar pattern: of readiness, attentiveness, and surprise.

The first story is from Genesis 18: (read)

Elsewhere in Genesis, Abraham also laughs – and it's apt that their son is named Isaac, a form of the Hebrew word for “laughed,” “yishaq.” According to Matthew's genealogy, Isaac and his hospitable parents become the ancestors of Jesus.

In the gospels, Jesus often comes as guest, especially in the many meals portrayed by Luke. Here is one such story, from Luke 10: (read)

What do these two stories teach us about hospitality, the practice of which engages each of us?

First, in each the host is actively prepared and ready: Abraham runs to greet the three strangers, bows to them, offers them respite from the heat, water for their feet. With the help of Sarah and the servant, he serves them food. So too Martha in the second story: she welcomes Jesus and his friends -- but, apparently, shoulders by herself the burdens of serving, even though her sister Mary is also a host.

Mary, who sits and listens, brings us to a second aspect of hospitality: it's attentive, receptive, willing to stand still, wait, and listen. Sarah, “listen[s] at the entrance of the tent,” and Abraham *waits* on his guests. Abraham listens, answering his guests when they have questions. Mary simply sits at Jesus' feet and listens. Hospitality requires active preparation. But it also requires stillness and attentiveness to the guest, to the words and wishes of the guest.

Such receptivity implies that as hosts we are not solely in control. Our guests can surprise, even unsettle us; they may challenge us to let go of our fear, our anxiety that we remain in control. They can bring something new and unexpected and liberating – and openness to this possibility is a third aspect of hospitality. Abraham and Sarah's guests bring a gift of news to their elderly, childless hosts: “You're going to have a baby!” But they also confront Sarah with her fear that she be perceived as laughing, letting go of control. They thus grant Sarah the possibility of understanding herself better. And Christ gives this gift to Martha. When she complains that she is doing all the work, Jesus tells

Martha, his host and friend, “You are anxious. But you need not always do; you can also listen and receive. If we read the gospels whole, they suggest that Martha received this gift from her guest with gratitude. When she welcomes Jesus again, in John’s gospel, at the sad scene of her brother’s death, she articulates an insight into Jesus that few in the gospels receive or declare: “I have come to believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God” (Jn. 11:27).

So much of what we do as hosts requires effort: the active work of preparation that Martha and Abraham ably exemplify. And yet, to be fully hospitable, we must also be receptive, open to the surprise our guest might bring. We must be willing to cease bustling, to put aside our pre-conceived scripts. If we pay attention, our guest may offer unexpected gifts.

And so let us continue to serve as hosts in the coming year, welcoming both friends and strangers. The author of Hebrews writes: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares” (13.2). And, in Matthew 25 our Lord tells us that when we offer hospitality to the least among us, we offer it to Him.

Let us pray:

Lord, thank you for this new school year.

Throughout this year, help us to be good hosts, to energetically prepare for our guests – be they students, colleagues, or strangers –,

to peacefully attend to them,

and to gratefully receive the gifts that they may bring.

We ask this in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.