

The Virtue of Hospitality

XXVI Conference of the Hospitallers of the Sovereign Order of St. John of Jerusalem

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Excellences, dear confrères, dear consœurs,

Despite the great joy I have in seeing you again and addressing you during this new international meeting of the Hospitallers, how can I not feel solemn and awed? Because it is from each of you that I have to learn the general sense of the virtue of hospitality, insofar as it defines your specific mission in our family. Fortunately, like every year, an opportunity for sharing has been created in which the Order's works are displayed in all their richness and diversity. When our Grand Hospitaller asked me to talk about hospitality, I saw it as a complement to the two previous papers I had given on related topics in Malta, on the generous heart, and in Paris on voluntary service.

Hospitality is a virtue that is entrenched in the oldest biblical tradition and is also the foundation of our Order, established to welcome and care for pilgrims in the Holy Land. From its very beginning, the Order of St. John of Jerusalem, faithful to Blessed Gerard, gave birth to a true spirituality in the hospital.

The first question that comes to mind regarding our Order's works is that of the motivation of each of our members: knights and dames, young people and volunteers. In all of them we find the profound desire to give themselves, to be useful. These two aspirations refer to what St. John Paul II liked to call the fundamental questions that exist deep within the human spirit; the desire to love and to be loved, to be useful, the decease of loved ones, reminding us inevitably of the prospect of our own death, suffering and illness. The desire to love and the desire to be useful are often united,

expressing everyone's aspiration to give of themselves. People find in this gift of themselves the truth of their being.

If we consider our feelings when we commit ourselves, we realise we are gradually discovering certain capacities as we serve others. For example, forms of empathy that become true sympathy and genuine compassion – that is active compassion – for those we encounter. The sentiment we feel is not an end in itself and in our sensibility, however rich it might be, but becomes service. There is a great difference between a heart that pities and the process that leads one to wear a uniform, since service involves interaction with the people to whom it is addressed. These people become the centre of our attention: we are asked to see them, to consider them, to meet them, to start to love them, to put ourselves at their service, to help them and to nourish them. It has to be admitted that our aid will always be limited, but the love with which we do our work, *a priori*, has no predefined limit. It is good to meditate on these truths that are not theoretical but the fruit of our different personal experiences. Moreover, when we are called to perform organizational tasks in the Order of Malta – this is the case of every Hospitaller and of anyone who has responsibilities, including the Prelate – we must never lose sight of the essential aspect of our activity. Hospitality is not only an ability, however useful, it is at the same time a regard and an inner disposition. We had already spoken about the disposition of the heart two years ago in Malta when we asked ourselves about the deep significance of a *generous heart*; we first approach the poor or the sick by eye contact. It is the basis of every true welcome. I think that each of you here has had, at one time or another, this basic experience. And starting from that day, we learnt that hospitality is not a service to the poor *in general*, and not even that moral commitment that enables us to become closer to the St. John of Jerusalem family. First of all, hospitality is not a necessity for us but it is for the others, those who suffer, who are hungry, who are alone and need help. Our service is not prompted by the logic of utilitarianism, it is useful because it is free.

The young people who ask to participate in our hospitaller activities must be encouraged to discover this dimension. At first, they want to be involved, to participate

in solidarity and aid patrols, in youth camps or camps for the disabled. In time, this service becomes an integral part of their life, of their daily activities. This service, already important, would be incomplete if the young were not educated to pay attention to the persons they serve, to have a fraternal gaze, to treat them with dignity and respect. Often the discovery of the humanity of the poor, met and served, becomes a memorable formative experience for young people. We can always help them to improve it. For example, when volunteers speak of a more personal contact established with the people assisted, we can ask them if they know their names, if they've said goodbye when they left, if they've asked them if they came a long way (we know that in the big cities some people walk many miles to receive comfort and relief). Young people gradually discover that these persons are not *the poor* in general, but rather *persons* who find themselves in a situation of poverty. Those we assist cherish the fact of being treated with dignity. I once heard someone serving at table greet a guest by simply saying "thank you for coming".

Last year I had the opportunity to make various visits to the Associations. I remember two small episodes, situations you certainly often experience, but which illustrate very well the personal side of the relationship that our service creates with people. The first episode involves a hearty breakfast, served at table, organized every Saturday by the Los Angeles Delegation (Western Association USA). The destitute are already at the door at 7 in the morning and are immediately offered a large mug of hot coffee. That morning 240 people arrived, some of whom were living in a state of extreme poverty. A few minutes later they were invited to come into a room where tables had been laid for six to eight people. The guests entered one by one, taking the places of those who had already eaten; after breakfast those who wanted could take a shower. That morning the service was offered by a large number of volunteers and young people at their first experience. As usual, all the tasks were assigned before the first guest entered. And that day, at the end of the assignments, the coordinator turned to the new entries and said: "*Don't forget to serve our guests as if they were in a restaurant, just as you would like to be served*". I think that these words, that at first

sight could seem commonplace, certainly impressed more than one volunteer that day. In brief: in the Order we don't just carry out a service, we serve people.

The other episode concerns a supper offered in San Diego. There are those who prepare the dishes, those who accompany the people to the table and those who serve them. That day, among the first, that is those preparing - a service that also the most humble because practically anonymous - there was a woman, not very tall, who stood out for the joy and happiness she radiated. I was lucky enough to exchange a few words with her during a short break and I learnt she had been coming there every Tuesday for twelve years, always doing the same service. She told me that she was 91 but she looked twenty years younger. Her name was Louise. Her presence seemed very precious to me, because the witness she offered was that of simple, anonymous, faithful and joyful service.

These testimonies demonstrate that hospitality is a great school of humanity. It is part of the most ancient traditions in all cultures. It is a virtue that existed in all the nomadic civilizations for the very simple reason that it was a vital element in the desert. Travellers who were not taken in, given water, food and assistance, could die. Gradually this duty became sacred and hospitality was symbolized by gestures, such as the pinch of salt or glass of water that we give to those who seek our help. These rites of welcome still exist in Middle East countries and also in India. Some gestures can be immediately useful, such as washing the feet of those who have walked a long way. One of the oldest texts shows how Abraham received the three men dressed in white outside his tent: *"Let some water be brought, that you may bathe your feet, and then rest yourselves under the tree. Now that you have come this close to your servant, let me bring you a little food, that you may refresh yourselves; and afterward you may go on your way because it is for this that you have passed by your servant."* "Very well," they replied, "do as you have said." Abraham hastened into the tent and told Sarah, "Quick, three seahs of fine flour! Knead it and make rolls." He ran to the herd, picked out a tender, choice steer, and gave it to a servant, who quickly prepared it. Then he got some curds and milk, as well as the steer that had been prepared, and set

these before them; and he waited on them under the tree while they ate (Gen 18:4-8). We know this text has a meaning that goes far beyond Abraham's welcoming behaviour. The three men represent a divine presence since Abraham bows before them and addresses them as if they were one. It was during this encounter that Sarah received the promise she would give birth despite her advanced age. The washing of the feet gesture has taken on a special significance in Christian liturgy, where Christ washes the feet of his disciples. It is the service that the Master performs.

The Abraham episode suggests that the gestures of hospitality go beyond the immediate needs of those received. In the respectful and loving service to the needy person a dimension of the absolute is involved. This is why the worst offence is indifference to the misfortunes of others, what is commonly (and in the Scriptures) called a *heart of stone* or a *hard heart* (sklerocardia).

In the Order of St. John of Jerusalem, the dimension of the absolute present in everyone is clearly identified: it is the person of Christ who, in his simplicity and poverty, offers the face of the dignity of every person created in God's image and likeness. Hence non-Christians can equally develop their potential for active compassion and service; it can also refer to a quality of dignity perceivable in everyone, irrespective of their financial means.

However, in the Order of Malta's family, the Knights and Dames find the source of service to the poor and sick in their relationship with Christ, through prayer, the sacraments and inspiration from the scriptures. It is in the name of Christ that the works are performed, insofar as they are truly the expression of the Order's religious identity. We know that the Order of Malta is a religious and lay order. For this reason, the Church is attentive to the religious quality of our family and encourages its members who, within it, should give the example of a radical attachment to Christ through the choice of the religious life.

In this regard, of the three vows, poverty, chastity and obedience, that constitute the state of life of the religious, the first has a particular significance that it is interesting to analyse. For a religious, the poverty desired and truly accepted is a slow and arduous

journey that expresses, through a detachment from one's personal goods, a radical attachment to the kingdom of God and thus the choice of a total dependence on God's gifts. It assumes the acknowledgement and acceptance of one's personal poverty, an inner attitude that lets God act strongly in all activities. What applies to all of us, whatever our state of life and place in the Order might be, is the truth of our relationship with Christ in the works we try to achieve. A needy person will always be profoundly grateful to have been fed, accepted and helped. But if we are united to the Lord in carrying out our mission, then the persons we help will receive much more. They will, in a certain way, experience meeting with Christ who, through our poor service, will receive them.

Let us think about that episode in the Acts of the Apostles in which the two apostles Peter and John encounter a beggar at the temple gate. The man crippled from birth asks them for alms. The text says that Peter looks intensely at him, as does John, and says: *"Look at us"*. *He paid attention to them, expecting to receive something from them. Peter said, "I have neither silver nor gold, but what I do have I give you: in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazorean, (rise and) walk"*. *Then Peter took him by the right hand and raised him up, and immediately his feet and ankles grew strong.* (Acts 3:4-7). Let us be clear: this does not mean that the alms that Peter and John could have given the man (if they had had them) were worthless but, since they were united with God, they could give more. The action they performed, certainly miraculously, was not the result of a random gift of healing, but was connected to the specific witness they bore at that moment to the person of Christ: *"In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazorean, walk!"*.

Let us also observe how Peter and John looked at the man. On that occasion the two apostles performed the highest level of the virtue of hospitality; they both demonstrated they were true *hospes* or, according to Latin etymology and if we give credit to St. Antony of Padua, *"those who place a foot in the door to keep it open"* (*infert ostio pedem*) or again, *"those who keep the door open"* (*ostium patens*) (cf. "Sermon for the Sixth Sunday after Easter"). In fact, in this passage, the infirm man

cannot enter the temple but, once he has been cured, he can enter leaping in joy and praising God. This is nothing else but the door of the temple that has been opened for him.

This text reminds me of another well-known passage from the Gospels in which there is a scene which perfectly illustrates hospitality. This is the visit that Jesus made to his friends Lazarus, Martha and Mary. We see Jesus warmly welcomed and invited to take a seat. The two sisters then hasten to receive him in the best possible way. We see Mary sit at Jesus' feet to listen to him while Martha is busy cooking and laying the table. This episode always reminds me of the reaction of a friend of mine, a dame, who always tends to defend Martha, who does all the preparations whilst her sister just takes advantage of Jesus' presence. This woman, who moreover has an extraordinary capacity for hospitality, cannot understand Jesus' praise for Mary. We often have a very nice discussion about this. Reflecting on this text before our meeting this morning, I told myself that actually the two sisters are practising the two dimensions of hospitality: listening to the guest and serving the guest. When we are alone we do one or other of these things. But in this episode we see that Jesus is both received, heard and served. These three dimensions of welcoming, listening and serving are the pillars of hospitality.

For the Christian faith, hospitality has a value that takes it to the level of prayer when it is done *in Christ's name*. St. Vincent de Paul, wanting to protect the nuns in his care from the spiritual danger of scrupulosity, taught them that they should not fear to be disturbed during daily prayer by a beggar knocking at the convent door. Because, he said, it would simply mean leaving Jesus in prayer to find him again in the person in need.

As for the Fathers of the Church, they have constantly taught that giving alms ensures that prayers addressed to God will be answered. Almsgiving accompanies prayer.

Permit me, at the end of these brief reflections, to quote the magnificent text of one of the Church Fathers of eastern tradition, St. Gregory of Nazianzus, that insists on

the necessary disposition of a heart full of compassion to make God an offering that pleases Him: *“If you are willing to listen to me, then, servants of Christ, his brothers and co-heirs, I say that we should visit Christ while there is opportunity, take care of him and feed him. We should clothe Christ and welcome him. We should honour him, not only at our table, like some, not only with ointments, like Mary Magdalene, not only with a sepulchre, like Joseph of Arimathea, nor with things which have to do with his burial, like Nicodemus... nor finally with gold, incense and myrrh, like the Magi.”* It is mercy, not sacrifice (Mt. 9:13) that the Lord of all desires, compassion instead of thousands of fatted lambs. Let us offer him this mercy through those who are in need, and the day in which we leave this world they may receive us into everlasting dwellings (Lk 16:9), in the same Christ our Lord to whom be glory for eternity”.

Thank you for your kind attention.

+ Jean Laffitte