

“All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ” (RB 53.1)

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Second Part

Hospitality

Of traditions and of the tradition

Many people quickly associate "Benedictine Life" with hospitality. We can be pleased about this for hospitality is not one of the traditions of Benedictine life, but it is essential to the tradition of our vocation. When we give up hospitality, we abandon our charism.

I was very pleased that, as a topic for this symposium, you did not choose one of the traditions of monastic life, but something that is essential to the living tradition. And the very tradition is always alive and current– or it is not the tradition, but one of the many traditions which are obsolete.

In some respects, the Zeitgeist today is pretty similar to Benedict's time; more than we realize. This also true for the theme of hospitality. As in the 6th century, there is migration also in the 21st century: People move for work across state borders; people are fleeing and looking for a home in other countries; people travel for recreation or education to other nations. At a time of migration, xenophobia is spreading. Xenophobia is a challenge for everyone having political responsibility. Xenophobia is a challenge for all the baptized. At this time, we are called to live our Benedictine vocation and hospitality is part of it.

In the context of what we have said so far, we want to take a look at the Christian stance of hospitality.

The stranger (*xenos*) can turn into a threatening enemy (*hostis*), but through love can also become a guest (*hostes*). Philoxenia is the movement to approach the stranger and take him in, so that he becomes a friend through our love and kindness.

According to Henri Nouwen, Philoxenia is a model for all human encounters:

1. Inviting the other person and letting him in. That requires that I am at home with myself. It calls for openness for the unexpected and risk-taking.
2. Sharing, serving, providing guidance.

We encounter philoxenia throughout the Scriptures. In the awareness of the believing Israelite, life is synonymous with wandering and sojourning in foreign lands (cf. Ps 38:13; 1 Chr 29:15 etc.). The baptized are also addressed as foreigners and pilgrims (cf. 1 Pt 2:11) whose homeland is in heaven (cf. Phil 3:20).

The God who reveals himself in the Bible is a God who loves the stranger. Accordingly, the image of hospitality is used repeatedly to portray the final salvation (cf. Is 25:6; Mt 8:11). Jesus understands himself as the messenger of this invitation of God, "Come, the meal is ready!" (cf. Mt 22:4; Lk 14:15-24). Jesus himself acts like God: he receives the sinners and eats with them; he serves his guests and washes their feet; he gives himself as food.

In Jesus, God Himself becomes a stranger who is not received by his people (Jn 1:11). He finally dies as somebody cast out, "outside the camp" (Heb 13:13), abandoned even by God. In this way, he reconciled the world, that had drifted from God, with God (cf. 2 Cor 5:19). Ever since, Christ is present in every stranger, outsider, in every guest: "I was a stranger (peregrinus), and you welcomed me" (Mt 25:35).

There are two excellent examples of philoxenia and hospitality in the Old Testament. Gen 18:1-16 reports of the philoxenia of Abraham and 1 Kgs 17:8-24 of the hospitality of the widow of Zarephath.

In the New Testament, we read of many situations in which people invite Jesus to their home. As soon as Jesus is in the house, he acts as the host. "...if you open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me." (Rv 3:20). As baptized people, we practice philoxenia towards Christ and take him in, but basically Christ is the one who gifts us. In many passages of the New Testament, the commandment of hospitality is brought to the attention of the baptized, for example in 1 Pt 4:8-10 ("be hospitable to each other"-philoxenoi) and in Rom 12:12-13 ("Always grant hospitality"- Philoxenia).

The philoxenia of the Christians of the first centuries has contributed significantly to the spread of the gospel. Thus, in the 4th century, the emperor Julian laments that it is mainly the "friendliness towards foreigners" that has promoted the "bad teachings of Christianity".

All the baptized are obliged to offer hospitality, but the bishop's house was regarded as an excellent hostel. Thus, in the rite of the episcopal consecration, it is still stated: "Are you ready, for the sake of the Lord, to meet the poor and the homeless and all those in need and to be merciful to them?"

In the 4th century, Christian hospitality (*hospitalitas*) is more and more institutionalized. Hospices, homes and hostels are mainly run by nuns and monks. They serve pilgrims, missionaries, strangers and the poor. Basil built a whole city of charitable institutions. However, despite the overall esteem of foreigners in monasticism, there was also a rather negative stance. The Rule of the Master seems to be influenced by this negative tradition. The visiting brothers are to be received reverently, with prayer and foot washing (RM 71-72), but the stranger should be met with mistrust (RM 78-79). After two days, they should either contribute or leave. They are monitored day and night so that they do not steal. The terms "observing" and "guarding" appear nine times in RM 79. In general, however, monasticism was distinguished by generous hospitality. Motives for love of strangers are: We are all pilgrims and strangers; Christ took in the strangers and we imitate him; Christ himself is received in the

stranger. Experience teaches: Those who practice hospitality receive much more in exchange than what they give.

The hospitality also caused difficulties. The reception and presence of guests could lead to a conflict with the monastic way of life (i.e. prayer, fasting). It was also necessary to "distinguish the spirits" so that the guests did not suddenly turn out to be thieves and offenders.

Let us now step into the Rule of Benedict. Chapter 53 is clearly impacted by the spirit of Scripture. The chapter is based above all on the example of the Philoxenia of Abraham (Gn 18:1-16), but his hospitality shows a Christological motivation: Christ comes in the stranger. In Scriptures and in the Rule of Benedict, pastoral and social service are seen as a unity.

The chapter consists of two large parts. Verses 1-15 deal with the reception of guests, in verses 16-24 measures to protect the community are presented. The first part is characterized by liturgical vocabulary (Philoxenia as a spiritual concern, as a kind of liturgy). The second part contains more practical instructions (protection of the community as a practical necessity). A development seems to have taken place between the first and second part. In the second part, the community appears to have grown, the offices and premises have multiplied, the kitchens have been separated, guests arrive at all times and are never absent. When speaking about Benedictine hospitality, it must be noted that the two parts form a unit.

Part 1: Verses 1-15

Reading the first part could give the impression that Benedict's instructions are not spiritual. At first glance, the text appears very practical but on closer look one will discover instructions that are not very practical at all. To enter into the text, an action model (German: "Aktionsmodell") can be a helpful tool. Action models are concrete, descriptive instructions aimed at demonstrating the quality (radical approach to something) and direction of our actions. An example of an action model is Jesus' instruction, that if you were slapped on the right cheek to also offer the other cheek. If this were to be understood as a literal instruction, it would be a very narrow view on what Jesus meant. Circumstances in which we are beaten on the right cheek are rather rare, but not the situations to which this action model can be applied. The same is true for the washing of the feet at the Last Supper. The first part of chapter 53 is an action model of hospitality. What is required here is not a literal observance, but that same quality and way of dealing with guests.

From what has been said so far we can deduce the following: our task –hospitality included – is not to carry on with traditions, but to live the tradition today. To be able to do that, we need to know our charism well. We also need to know today's world; that is the Zeitgeist. In order to deepen the tradition of hospitality continuously, we will take a look at the 53rd chapter of Benedict's Rule. May this inspire some reflection.

1 All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ, for he himself will say: I was a stranger and you welcomed me.

The radical stance of this chapter appears right in the first verse and in the first word in the original Latin text: **All** are received as Christ. Four times "all" comes up: in verses 1, 2, 6 and 13.

This is the first mention in the Rule that Christ comes to the community from the outside. So far Christ's presence was mentioned in the abbot, in the sick, in Sacred Scriptures, in liturgy, in every monk. Christ among us - Christ who comes unexpectedly.

2 Proper honor must be shown to all, especially to those who share our faith and to pilgrims.

Scriptures also speak of special honor for sisters and brothers in faith and for weaker members.

3 Once a guest has been announced, the superior and the brothers are to meet him with all the courtesy of love.

The Latin "occuratur" means a rush or a race. This is a clear allusion to Gen 18. Here old Abraham runs toward the visitors. The Israelite must already laugh at this point; that is, long before Sara laughs. Where God appears, the impossible occurs. Where God appears, even the hundred-year-old man runs.

4 First of all, they are to pray together and thus be united in peace,

Compare with Prologue 4: "First of all, every time you begin a good work, you must pray to him most earnestly to bring it to perfection." Human encounters should also be grounded in prayer.

5 but prayer must always precede the kiss of peace because of the delusions of the devil.

Prayer is the basis for all distinction of spirits.

6 All humility should be shown in addressing a guest on arrival or departure.

In addition to reverence, humility is the basic attitude of Philoxenia. Humility arises from faith in the presence of Christ and from the awareness that we are strangers ourselves.

7 By a bow of the head or by a complete prostration of the body, Christ is to be adored because he is indeed welcomed in them.

The bowing of the head is an expression of humility (cf. RB 7.63). The monk is not on the same level as the stranger, but places himself under him (cf. RB 7.49).

This is the only place in the whole Rule where the word "worship" (Adoretur) appears. It is not in the liturgical chapters, but here in the chapter on hospitality. Here we are touching on the tradition of our faith, even though we have, unfortunately, become accustomed to other attitudes in our traditions. It is alarming if we, who perceive ourselves as Catholics, do not discover Christ in the suffering. The words of John Chrysostom (347 – 407), the great preacher, must still appeal to our hearts today: "Do you want to honor the body of the Lord? Don't neglect him if he's unclothed. Do not honor him here in the sanctuary with silk fabrics, and then to neglect him outside, where he suffers cold and nakedness. The one who said, ' This is my body ', is the same who said: ' You have seen me hungry and have not given me anything to eat ', and ' what you have done to the least of my brethren, you have done me. ' [...] What good is it if the Eucharistic table is overabundant with golden chalices while my brother suffers from hunger? Start with satisfying the hungry then decorate the altar with what is left "(Commentary on Matthew 50.3).

8 After the guests have been received, they should be invited to pray; then the superior or an appointed brother will sit with them.

The first goal of the Philoxenia is to invite to prayer, to personal encounter with God. The community should share their fundamentals with others. Often, experience comes before instruction in RB (cf. RB 58). "Sitting down" is an expression of "taking time". In many old commentaries, attention is drawn to the following tension: on the one hand, to help the guest on the way to salvation; on the other hand, to avoid chatter, which is detrimental to both sides (guest and monk).

9 The divine law is read to the guest for his instruction, and after that every kindness is shown to him.

Sharing with the guest what the community is about: The Word of God. So it makes sense to put a copy of the Bible in every guest room. Through human interaction with the guest, Christ is to be proclaimed and the guest is led to an encounter with God.

10 The superior may break his fast for the sake of a guest, unless it is a day of special fast which cannot be broken.

If you know what fasting meant to the old monks, you may guess how much the guest means to St. Benedict. "Can the wedding guests grieve as long as the groom is with them?" (Mt 9:15).

11 The brothers, however, observe the usual fast.

The community should stick with its normal routine.

12 The abbot shall pour water on the hands of the guests,

Sulpicius Severus reports with great admiration that the great Bishop Martin of Tours poured water over his hands (Vita Martini 25.3). Maybe that impressed Benedict too. John Chrysostom admonishes: "Do not be ashamed to service the poor with your own hand, for through such a service your hands are sanctified" (Ep 66,11.3-4).

13 and the abbot with the entire community shall wash their feet.

The washing of feet originally had a practical meaning. For those who accept a guest who walked barefoot on the dusty roads and in great heat, foot washing and philoxenia are inseparable (cf. Lk 7:44; 1 Tm 5:10). In subsequent times, this practical meaning is forgotten, especially in cooler countries. Nevertheless, other meanings evolve, which are already indicated in RB 53: The washing of feet is separated from the meal and does not take place at the time of welcome but after the meal. The washing of feet is understood as imitation of Christ: serving as Christ has served and giving himself. The foot washing actually is done to Christ. It is considered a "sacrament" by many Fathers. A Father's saying states: "Three things have to be honored: The reception of the sacred mysteries, the table of the brethren, the basin of the foot washing."

The RB forms the basis for later development of the foot washing in the west. From the foot washing of guest developed the foot washing of novices on the eve of their profession (14th/15th century), for example at Monte Cassino. The brothers Wolter experienced this custom in St. Paul Outside the Walls in Rome and brought it to Beuron (an archabbey in Germany). Foot washing of guests turned into washing the feet of the poor with Benedict of Aniane. Since the 9th/10th century, foot washing of the poor has entered the liturgy at the Bishops' churches and has finally become part of the roman liturgy on Holy Thursday. Until Pope Francis, the Bishop of Rome washed the feet of priests.

We will not often have the opportunity to wash the feet of people. However, the meaning of the foot washing can be expressed in different ways: in selfless service and courage to do even menial services.

14 After the washing they will recite this verse: God, we have received your mercy in the midst of your temple.

The opportunity to do service is a reason for gratitude to God. Xenophilia is above all a receiving. When exercising Philoxenia, we are the ones being gifted.

15 Great care and concern are to be shown in receiving poor people and pilgrims, because in them more particularly Christ is received; our very awe of the rich guarantees them special respect.

Benedict emphasizes that the poor and strangers are the favored ones. Since the 4th century, the pair of terms "the poor and the stranger" often means the same people. This attitude corresponds with God's standards, who lifts up the lowly and humbles the high (cf. Lk 1:51-53). "The utmost care and concern" or "concern is shown conscientiously" is particularly true in RB (cf. RB 36.1-7; RB 27, 1.5-6). John Chrysostom writes: "The poorer the brother, the more Christ comes in him" (Acts H. 45.3). We clearly have a preference for the poor here. Benedict does not speak very kindly of the rich, "our very awe of the rich guarantees them special respect." The rich are not dismissed, but the preference clearly belongs to the poor.

II. PART: Verse 16-24

In the second part concern for the community prevails. Twice we find clear objectives: "That they do not disturb the brothers" (v. 16) and "that they serve without grumbling" (v. 18). Both objectives relate to peace in the community. The combination of the two parts of the chapter shows the distinctive character of Benedictine hospitality.

16 The kitchen for the abbot and guests ought to be separate, so that guests—and monasteries are never without them—need not disturb the brothers when they present themselves at unpredictable hours.

Benedict is realistic enough to see that guests can also disturb, cause discord and chaos.

17 Each year, two brothers who can do the work competently are to be assigned to this kitchen.

Basil already mentions the special service for the guests in his Rule: "Service to the poor is done by the one who is assigned, but not by restless and undisciplined brethren" (58). In contrast to the rotation of the brothers in the kitchen, this is not the weekly assignment of all brothers, but only for two who can cook well and they do the service for a year.

18 Additional help should be available when needed, so that they can perform this service without grumbling. On the other hand, when the work slackens, they are to go wherever other duties are assigned them.

19 This consideration is not for them alone, but applies to all duties in the monastery;

20 the brothers are to be given help when it is needed, and whenever they are free, they work wherever they are assigned.

Circumstances (for example a multitude of guests) or human limitations of the kitchen brothers may cause them to need help. Everyone should be able to do their service without grumbling. The Abbot should endeavor to dispel the reasons for justifiable grumbling (cf. RB 41.5). Even in the New Testament already, grumbling is mentioned in connection with hospitality: "Be hospitable to one another without complaining." (1 Pt 4:9). Grumbling can express a lack of faith: jealously calculating and comparing, instead of seeing things from God's perspective. But grumbling does not always have to come from human malice. A person can actually be totally overwhelmed. Benedict seeks to avoid agitation and overwhelm, but also idleness and gossip.

The Rule does not seem to know shortage of staff. Our limitations are not in the heart and in prayer, but in concrete assistance. We can only take on tasks to the extent that the members of the community can do the service without confusion, without justified grumbling, in spiritual calm, without sadness. As we reduce our ministries and tasks, we need to consider whom or what we give priority. We must not lose sight of Benedict's priorities in connection with Philoxenia, which are the faithful, strangers, pilgrims, the poor.

21 The guest quarters are to be entrusted to a God-fearing brother.

The assigned brother is a representative of the community. He exemplifies what the whole community wants to be: "gripped" by the Fear of God. According to RB 7, Fear of God means being in God's presence.

22 Adequate bedding should be available there. The house of God should be in the care of wise men who will manage it wisely.

The "House of God" belongs to God, God reigns in it. The monks are only stewards, they themselves are guests of God. John Chrysostom says: "Through practicing Philoxenia, the house becomes a church" (Mt. H. 48.6). Wisdom is an excellent quality for all who hold an office (cf. RB 31.1; RB 21.4; RB 64.2).

The two final verses seem to be obsolete at first sight. But here we want to focus especially on Benedict's intentions. These two verses are probably a later addition, prompted by experience. Verse 22 would have been a nice conclusion of the chapter.

23 No one is to speak or associate with guests unless he is bidden;

After Benedict first opened the door generously, he seems to close it again firmly. For a better understanding of the sentence, a positive formulation might help: There are special brothers who are assigned to join and talk to the guests. This is the guest brother, the superior or the one who was assigned by him.

The monks and the guests are companions on the journey to God, but certainly not in every regard. The guests will leave again. Their bond with the community can never be as close as that among the brothers. The actual message of this verse could be that solidarity belongs primarily to one's own community. Where this foremost solidarity is lacking, the relationship with the guest becomes an escape. It is therefore a matter of protecting the community from the guests, but also of protecting the guests from intrusive brothers. The guest should encounter an atmosphere of silence.

24 however, if a brother meets or sees a guest, he is to greet him humbly, as we have said. He asks for a blessing and continues on his way, explaining that he is not allowed to speak with a guest.

The guests are obviously not separated in everything; an encounter is possible. If the separation of place is absent, proper distance is maintained by silence. "Greet him humbly" literally means showing humility as Benedict already said in verses 6 and 7. The ancient rules know the evil of brothers wanting to join chatter and needless talking with the guests.

Benedict is serious about meeting Christ in the guest. That is why the monk asks for the blessing and not the guest. It is the same belief that also surfaces in verse 14. The monks are the recipients.

In its literal wording, this directive may be outdated, but it is based on two principles which are still valid today: 1. Certain regulations for the protection of the community and the guest are necessary. 2. Silence is a value that must be protected. "In silence we recognize the others in a deeper way. We are not likely to use them to promote ourselves, but rather consider how useful it is to them "(Böckmann).

How do we live the tradition of hospitality today? A poem by Little Brother Andreas Knapp can provoke us to face the tradition and the Zeitgeist:

*our neighborhood
is our monastery
and the busy crossroads
are our cloister
our monastery workshops
are the factories
and our prayer times
are dictated by the time clock*

*our intercessions
are in the newspapers
the problems of the neighbors
we hear as table reading
and their life stories
are our library
the faces of the people
are our icons that we worship
and in the countenance marked by suffering
we look at the crucified*

What does this mean for us monks and nuns? Wouldn't we have to go out into the world instead of staying inside the convent? One thing is certain: like all baptized, we also must move. And quite properly. Otherwise we keep cultivating traditions as long as we can, and forget the tradition. Those who remain in the past or the present are not in the right place.

As with many other chapters, Saint Benedict begins chapter 53 with a cornerstone that cannot be shaken: Mt 25. Could the judgment discourse of Matthew 25 help us today as well to keep the tradition of hospitality alive?

At the conclusion of my thoughts, I would like to pose a few questions that can show us how we have to challenge the tradition and Zeitgeist concretely:

- Who do we receive as guests?
- What kind of people does the tradition recommend to us?
- Who are these people today?
- How do we reach these people?
- How do they learn about the possibility of being a guest in the monastery?
- How can we live hospitality in a way that the guests and the community meet God?

If we think that a flyer at the entrance of the monastery suffices to invite the people in whom Christ wants to come to us today, we have remained in the Zeitgeist of bygone decades. Today, when we hear his voice, we do not want to harden our hearts! Let's dare! It's going to be exciting! God is knocking on our doors!