

LET US PRAY - REFLECTIONS ON THE EUCHARIST

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Article #5 - Eucharist and Hospitality.

Hospitality is an important element of eucharistic spirituality.

To begin with, it helps to remember the Jewish tradition. In Jewish law, hospitality is not just a pleasant social nicety, but a serious legal obligation. Inhospitality, on the other hand, is viewed not simply as ungracious behavior but as vile and forbidden. (Read Genesis 19 to see how Lot's inhospitable townsfolk were treated by his guests, who turned out to be two angels!)

For the devout Jew, hospitality is one of the most pleasant commandments to perform. It is considered an extension of the commandment of charity, and it carries with it its own blessings. The Talmud records how before beginning a meal, Rabbi Huna would stand outside his door and announce: "Let all who are hungry come in and eat" (*Ta'anit*, 20b) – an invitation still echoed by Jews during the Seder.

Jesus was a Jew. He brought his Jewish sense of gracious and grateful hospitality to the table companionship he exercised in his life. Indeed, that hospitality shaped the meals he shared, including the last one with his disciples before he died, which echoed and recapitulated all the prior meals of his ministry.

We Christians remember that Jesus, who was denied hospitality at his birth in Bethlehem, extended his arms in universal hospitality on the cross at his death in Jerusalem. We cherish a memorial of his supreme expression of hospitality in the gift of the eucharist.

Each week, on the Lord's Day, we gather to celebrate this memorial, and to find sustenance for our journey into the fullness of the God's kingdom as we transform our world. In the eucharist, we are touched by God's hospitality. We are gifted with a profound communion with the Holy One, and with one another. We are also empowered to be 'with and for' one another in hospitable love.

In doing this eucharistic memorial, it's important that we exercise hospitality. Let me, then, make some remarks about hospitality in doing eucharist as a liturgical minister. Then, some comments about hospitality in doing eucharist.. Whether as liturgical minister or as member of the assembly, an insight of the late Eugene Walsh serves us well, who defined hospitality in these words: "*I have space for you in my life, and I welcome you in.*"

His contention was that at liturgy we are never neutral about this. Either we make space and are hospitable, or we don't make space and are inhospitable. I think he was on to something.

Hospitality for those of us who preside means looking the assembly square in their eyes when greeting them at the start of Mass; inviting them into the Opening Prayer, the Prayer over the Gifts, the Prayer after Communion.

Hospitality for a reader means having honest eye contact with the assembly (not avoiding that out of self-conscious fear), while proclaiming the word of life. Hospitality for the greeter means offering more than a perfunctory hand shake to those who enter.

Ed Foley has said that “there can be no real communion with Jesus without our unambiguous hospitality to the unknown other.” And he comments that the disciples on the road to Emmaus would never have experienced Jesus in the breaking of the bread, if they had not first invited him to stay with them! “Stay with us, for it is evening.”

For a cantor, hospitality means giving clear gestures to the assembly, and, with a smiling face, inviting them to join in the psalm response, the Memorial Acclamation, the Lamb of God, the song for the communion procession. As if to say: “I have space for you. We music ministers have space for you. This entire assembly has space for you. We welcome you in.”

Hospitality means all of us ministers go out of our way to say this as we serve the prayer of the assembly. It also means this for the assembly. It means way more than the exchange of peace. It has to do with simple things like making eye contact or smiling or saying hello to a greeter at the church door, and to the person or persons in the pew when you arrive.

When I’m seated in a pew, waiting for Mass to begin, and someone comes into that pew, I try to acknowledge that person. Eye contact. A smile. A word of greeting. It’s really hard, though, because universally they look away.

Liturgy can’t happen when we avoid making human contact with each other. Hospitality has to do with where we sit in a pew on arriving. Often we sit at the end, effectively blocking passage, but what it says is: Stay out. This is my space! I don’t have space for you.

We can ask how hospitably we listen to God’s word. Is our attitude: “I have space for this word of God in my life, and welcome it in”? The scripture at Mass is significant first of all because it makes Jesus present to us. Jesus explains to us the passages that are about himself. Whether we read the book of Exodus, the Psalms, the Prophets, or the Gospels, they are all there to make our hearts burn.

The eucharistic presence is first of all a presence through the word. Without that we won’t be able to recognize Jesus’ presence in the breaking of the bread.

Henri Nouwen underlines the healing power of God’s word at liturgy, when received hospitably. He poses questions for us: How does God come to me as I listen to the word? Where do I discern the healing hand of God touching me through the word? How are my sadness, my grief, and my mourning being transformed at this very moment? Do I sense the fire of God’s love purifying my heart and giving me new life? These questions lead me to the sacrament of the word, the sacred place of God’s real presence.

A hospitable listening at liturgy engenders a healthy spirituality. Then there’s hospitable singing. That can be something of an occupational hazard for most of the assembly. Look around on a given Sunday and see how few are singing robustly the entry song or acclamations. They have gotten used to be sung *at*.

Do we leave the assembly hospitably – taking time to smile or chat with those around us, acknowledge them...or do we just plow out, avoiding further contact?

Even the space where we do eucharist is consummately about *christian* hospitality. It's about a "we" inviting everyone – 'come on in and dine with us. Come on in and get over yourself, and be born into a new life.' It's about more than coffee and donuts.

Our dining in the kingdom cannot be real without such hospitality. Yet our cultural dining gets in the way of our sacramental dining. Our church's tradition of eucharistic hospitality stands in stark contrast to the inhospitable table tradition of restaurants here in North America. Sit down at a Denny's or a Black Angus, and you'll be barraged with advertising on the table tops. Charts, folders, big cards – which aren't just an obstacle to getting seated. They're obstacles to any meaningful encounter with who you came to dine with...most of whom are preoccupied with their smart phones!

Tables, in fact, in our public meal culture have become just one more site for commercials: special ads, drink specials, desert specials. We may be accustomed to that in our consumer ridden society, but its impact is disastrous for eucharistic dining. Its net effect is to render a meal unsacred, to reduce it simply to digesting food. If you transfer this approach to eucharistic dining, any hospitable enjoyment of God's gifts in the presence of those you love is rendered impossible.



Finally, genuine hospitality is always inconveniencing, but it is also important. Hospitality is messy. It involves upsetting life as usual.

A weekend guest at your home means getting a room ready, assuring food, adjusting your schedule, making time to visit...and, worst of all, cleaning up afterwards! A rabbinic Midrash says: "On the day a guest arrives, a calf is slaughtered in the guest's honor; the next day, a sheep, the third day, a fowl, and on the fourth day the guest is served just beans." (*Midrash Tehillim* 23:3)

Eucharistic hospitality works this way. We need to stretch ourselves to engage in it, whether as liturgical ministers, as members of the assembly, or as christians serious about hospitable eucharistic living.

Good liturgy cannot happen apart from hospitality. And we cannot experience God's hospitable love as we gather, unless we choose to dine hospitably with Jesus and one another at the table of the Lord.

Further, without such dining, we cannot engage in hospitable living beyond worship. The meal tradition in the gospel of Luke is one of being at table with a heterogeneous crowd. "When you give a banquet," Jesus himself commands, "invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind." " (Lk. 14:13,)

The hospitable celebration of eucharist leads to such compassionate, egalitarian, inclusive sharing in our lives. Whether that be with those in need or on those the margins. Or with those with whom we live. Or with those with whom we work. Or with the other members of our church community. It leads to our saying to all: "I have space for you. I welcome you in."

Eucharistic hospitality also presents us with the option, not of resentment for all of life's problems, but of gratitude for life's goodness and blessings. It prompts us "to cry out to God for mercy," as Henri Nouwen has said, "to listen to the words of Jesus, to invite him into our home, to enter into communion with him, and proclaim good news to the world; it opens the possibility of gradually letting go of our many resentments and choosing to be grateful. In our daily lives we have countless opportunities to be grateful instead of resentful."

Eucharistic hospitality leads us to pattern our sharing of ourselves on the world -embracing love revealed to us in Jesus, the companion on our journey. It challenges us to be transformed by his death and resurrection and, in living that, to transform our world. That occurs "whenever we remain faithful to a commitment, despite what it costs us; whenever we forgive someone who has broken our heart; whenever we love and accept a child for who she is, rather than for what we want her to be; whenever we ladle lentils in a soup kitchen instead of complaining about the high cost of welfare programs; whenever we confront death advancing in the body of one we love; whenever our confusion, pain, and anger force us, finally, to make a change." (Nathan Mitchell, *Eucharist as Sacrament of Initiation*, p. 118)

Transforming our world is what hospitable eucharistic living leads to. And we are called to be servants, not czars, of this new creation. Dining at the table of Jesus leads us to the wider hospitality, where, as Nathan Mitchell notes, we are "the kitchen help, the table waiters. It is our job to gather up whatever needs gathering, to feed whatever needs feeding, to hold whatever needs holding, to love whatever needs loving, to heal whatever needs healing – so that all may experience the world as a wedding."

We long to advance the wedding feast of God's love. May we embrace the challenge of hospitality in doing eucharist, and the challenge of living the eucharist in hospitable lives.

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