



De Sales

SPIRITUALITY SERVICES

"practical paths to holiness"

"Divine Hospitality"



Our doorbell rang one day. I peered out and saw that it was a man who had lied to us in the past: I found it very difficult to deal with him. I did not want to answer the door because I didn't know what to say to him. Sister Mary Margaret suggested that I say, "Hello, Jesus."

I knew she was right. I prayed for the faith that would enable me to welcome Jesus incarnated in that person. Perhaps that man was unaware of his union with Jesus and so he did not act accordingly, but someone had to recognize that for him. If I do not see Jesus there, who would?

There was a Visitation sister in St. Louis who had a nursemaid when she was a child: the nursemaid's name was Lulu. Years later, while visiting Lulu in a nursing home, the sister recalled how difficult she had been while growing up. Old Lulu declared, "Oh yes, but I loved you just as if you were good."

Our natural liking makes hospitality easier, but we must learn to love and welcome all "just as if they was good." Jesus' hospitality is our model: "Come to me all you who hunger and you will find rest." Jesus is offering not necessarily food but much more: the bread that is Himself. Jesus offers hospitality when it convenient and inconvenient. Jesus offers hospitality to those who are sinners as well as to saints, to his friends and his foes.

Jesus' table fellowship was one of the hallmarks of his ministry and it scandalized many, for he ate with publicans and sinners. He was IN-

CLUSIVE. After all, God makes it rain on the good and the bad alike.

"If anyone says, 'I love God' while hating one's brother or sister, that person is a liar. If one does not love one's brother or sister whom one sees, it cannot be that that person loves God whom one has not seen." (1 Jn. 4:24). We could add, "If one does not welcome the neighbor seen, how can we claim to welcome the God unseen?"

"Make your home in me as I make mine in you" is an amazing statement of Jesus about the MUTUALITY of being hospitable to God and God to us. Jesus calls us to the same kind of mutual hospitality by telling us that in welcoming others we are welcoming him. "Whatsoever you do to the least of these you do to me." (Mt. 25:40)

The mystery of the Visitation is a model of what each of us can be, and a symbol of what the church should be. Mary, having just heard and accepted the angel's message in faith, made space within herself for this unexpected person to whom she would give her flesh and blood as nourishment. She pondered (contemplative hospitality) as she made her way to visit her cousin Elizabeth. That blessed meeting of receiving and being received, of ministering and being ministered to, seems so mutual. In this same way the mystery of the Visitation is a symbol of the Church and its ministry in the Reign of God. It is about making space for everyone, nourishing them with the Body and the

Blood of Jesus.

As with all the "little virtues" hospitality begins inside. We must be gentle, accepting and loving towards ourselves, befriending those parts of ourselves that we do not like and learning to respect ourselves for who we are: beloved children of God. To the extent that we focus on embodying this welcoming spirit of the living God in relation to ourselves and others, we are living at what is known in the Salesian tradition as the "high point of the soul." We are called to live at the fine point of our soul and spirit, loving and welcoming despite what we may feel.

Hospitality is participating in the work of God, often unseen and unfelt. The inconstancy of our souls is blown about by the winds of passion and therefore always unsteady. But we always have the freedom and power, available through God's grace, to welcome others graciously and openly, regardless of how we may feel about them: this is part of what "Living Jesus" is all about. Hence, hospitality isn't about doing something nice or extra for others: it is, in truth, a concrete way of practicing the peace and justice of the Triune God, of being Divine welcome ourselves.

At his resurrection he clothed himself in several guises: a gardener, a pilgrim, a fisherman. Today we see his resurrection presence extended a billion fold. In whom will we be challenged to recognize — and welcome — Jesus today?

