

A dark wooden table with a fork, a knife, and a glass of water. The word "HOSPITALITY" is written in large, white, sans-serif capital letters across the top of the image, with the fork and knife positioned below the letters 'S' and 'A' respectively. The glass is partially filled with water and is positioned to the right of the knife.

# HOSPITALITY

*welcoming the stranger*

Br. Luke Ditewig, SSJE

TRAVELING IN THE DESERT IS DANGEROUS. One may faint from heat or be blinded by light. Caves provide safe shadows. Fellow travelers also provide essential help. In the desert cultures of Abraham, Jesus, and today, when meeting someone you share provisions. *"For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me"* (Matt 25:35). Generosity may save a stranger's life.

In our moment in western culture, we assume self-sufficiency. Doing so obscures our need and our past. Remember the children of Abraham spent 400 years as resident alien slaves in Egypt. After our ancestors were rescued and had received land, God instructed them, *"The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt"* (Lev 19:33-4). Ancient Israel was an agrarian society where land was essential and usually inherited. Those who did not own land – foreigners, strangers, aliens, or tenant farmers – were powerless and vulnerable. Being a stranger should shape behavior. We know what it feels like. God said: *"You know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt"* (Ex 23:9). Having been strangers, we are to welcome strangers.

Hospitality, welcoming the stranger, is essential in the desert. We are all in the desert, bearing the challenges and difficulties of our journey. None of us can survive on our own. God welcomes us, offering sustenance and companionship. The Psalmist prays, *"Hear my prayer, O Lord, and give ear to my cry...For I am but a sojourner with you, a wayfarer, as all my forebears were"* (Ps 39:13-4). Another translation reads: *"For I am your guest, a traveler passing through"* (NLT). Once our ancestors had received land, God reminded them: *"...the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants"* (Lev 25:23). No matter what appears to be ours, what we claim to possess, all is a gift. We are God's guests.

As Brothers, we welcome many on retreat alongside us five nights a week most weeks of the year, and many come to worship with us. Welcoming and caring for guests is a big part of our ministry. That's part of what drew me here, and I much enjoy offering welcome. Monastic life keeps teaching the harder truth that we Brothers are God's guests, even in what appears to be our own home. We are not self-sufficient. We need divine sustenance.

All, including Brothers, come to the monastery not for what we can give, but for what we receive. In silence and solitude, in prayer and community, we are being healed by encountering Jesus. Like he did at the Last Supper, Jesus keeps coming round to wash our feet, and then he tells us to wash others'. Letting ourselves be washed, be seen, is saving generosity, as we are welcomed into God's heart. Blessed, we bless. Loved, we love. As guests ourselves, as wayward children welcomed home, we reach out as hosts to share welcome.

Hospitality is about inviting people into our hearts. The most difficult "guests" we have to welcome might be those closest to us: family, housemates, coworkers, friends. How would it change your experience with others to admit that you are a guest here, as much as they are? To receive your own identity as a wayfarer and to perceive others as fellow travelers, who may barely be making it through the desert?

On life's challenging journey, we need companions. God is in the fellow strangers on the road. Who is with you on the road? God invites them and you to a banquet where there is a place for everyone at the table. Will you exclude or welcome? God has welcomed us, and we in turn welcome others. Hospitality is not restricted to place, person, or provision. Each of us can offer welcome. We can do it on the street, in a coffee shop, in a studio apartment, or in a house. We do it with whatever we have, wherever we are.

Hospitality is not about entertaining, not about impressing others with our stuff, nor is it only expressed in sharing meals and shelter. It is about saving lives, for our journeys are challenging and we need one another. The word hospitality has the same root as hospital, hospice, and hotel, places of safe lodging and healing. Before there were such, monasteries were some of the first shelters along dangerous roads, where anyone would be welcomed for safe, healing lodging.

Hospitality becomes healing when I am so present to another that they are able to be fully themselves. *Who are you? How are you?* Hospitality means my attentive response to you, making space for you to show up as you are. Henri Nouwen describes hospitality as *"the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place."*

We are all longing to be seen, heard, and known; to be vulnerable with someone who will accept us and give a loving response. True hosts are those with whom we can be honest, who give us the safety to share the story of our journey. Beware of words getting in the way. Be present and open. Silence honors the mystery of the other. Hospitality is the shelter offered in an open heart. Its sustenance is the nourishment of being respected, listened to, and seen.

Serving much at a remote island camp shaped **Br. Luke Ditewig**, and he loves to be on a beach or a boat. He finds the monastery like an adult silent camp, where he enjoys cooking and creating welcoming spaces with simple beauty.

## QUOTES *to ponder*

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

– *Rule of St. Benedict, 53:1*

"Our society seems to be increasingly full of fearful, defensive, aggressive people anxiously clinging to their property and inclined to look at their surrounding world with suspicion, always expecting an enemy to suddenly appear, intrude and do harm. But still—that is our vocation: to convert...the enemy into a guest and to create the free and fearless space where brotherhood and sisterhood can be formed and fully experienced."

– Henri J. M. Nouwen,  
*Reaching Out*

"The best kind of hospitality seeps into your soul and shapes your identity. We can give this kind of hospitality to each other only if we take the time to prepare sheltering places around us and inside of us."

– Daniel Homan, OSB & Lonni Collins Pratt,  
*Radical Hospitality: Benedict's Way of Love*

"Just as we enrich our guests' lives, so they enrich ours. We welcome men and women of every race and culture, rejoicing in the breadth and diversity of human experience that they bring to us. Their lives enlarge our vision of God's world. The stories of their sufferings and achievements and their experience of God stir and challenge us. If we are attentive, each guest will be a word and gift of God to us."

– *SSJE Rule of Life, "Hospitality"*

"At its best, a restaurant should not let guests leave without feeling satisfyingly hugged."

– Danny Meyer,  
*Setting the Table: The Transforming Power of Hospitality in Business*

## PRACTICES *to try*

As it did for Jesus, prayer grounds and empowers our practice of hospitality. In prayer we receive God's welcome, which we share with others. Pay attention to how God welcomes you. You might pray with the Genesis story where Abraham welcomes the three strangers (Gen 18:1-16). Imagine your life and its challenges as traveling in a hot, bright desert. Go to the distant tent. Hear an invitation to stop and rest in the shade. Eat and drink. Breathe in the sanctuary, stillness, and sustenance. What does your host ask? Share your story. Remain a while. Say thank you and continue your journey. This may be an image for daily prayer.

Sharing meals is basic to community. Companion means one with whom we break bread. Jesus ate with everyone, particularly those on the margins. Jesus tells parables about great banquets: about invitation and acceptance, about preferential treatment versus humility. In what ways do you try to impress others with your stuff? What might it look like to do something simple, to show up as yourself and focus more on the other person? How could you be vulnerable by inviting others into the ordinary? Allowing another to see a part of my life that's not all-put-together means accepting and sharing with the other that *I'm* not all-put-together.

## QUESTIONS *to consider*

Hospitality is a way of being and seeing in the world such that strangers become friends instead of enemies. Each person is God's guest; each person is God's friend. What "strangers" in your world are waiting to become friends? Who in your world is feeling alienated, excluded, displaced? How might you extend hospitality to them?

God is both host and guest. Jesus breaks bread with thousands, hosting others who come to him for healing. He also takes meals in the homes of tax collectors and sinners, offering those on the margins the honor of claiming him as their guest. Are you more comfortable in the role of guest or host? Why so? Might claiming your identity in the other role offer healing and wholeness?

## RESOURCES *to explore*

Henri J. M. Nouwen. *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1975.

Daniel Homan, OSB & Lonni Collins. *Radical Hospitality: Benedict's Way of Love*, Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2002.

Danny Meyer. *Setting the Table: The Transforming Power of Hospitality in Business*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2006.

## A PRAYER *for hospitality*

*Heavenly Father,  
from whom every family on earth derives its name,  
have mercy on all those who sojourn in this world.  
As you sheltered your Son Jesus  
who fled from the tyranny of Herod,  
so now provide new homes for all those who flee the violence of this age  
that they may know the peace of Christ.  
Grace your people with hearts of welcome and lives of courage  
through Jesus Christ who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,  
one God, forever and ever. Amen.*

– a Collect for Refugees and Immigrants

**The Brothers of SSJE** are a community of men giving our whole selves over to living the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Rooted in the ancient monastic traditions of prayer and community life, and critically engaged with contemporary culture, we seek to know and share an authentic experience of God's love and mercy. We live a common life shaped by worship, prayer, and our Rule of Life.

We invite you to learn more at [www.SSJE.org](http://www.SSJE.org)

