

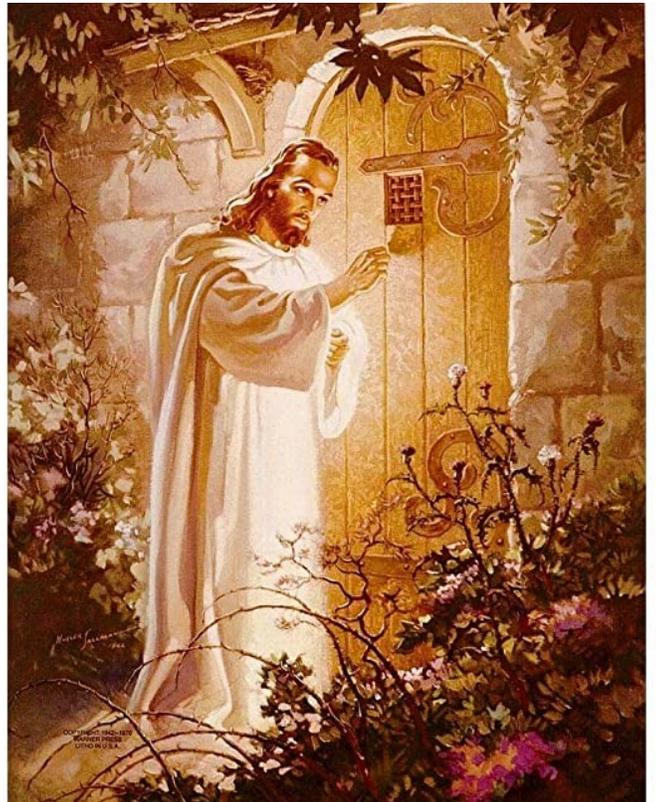
Hospitality and Christ

St. Benedict advised his monks that "All guests are to be welcomed as Christ." The word "hospitality" traces its roots to the Latin *hospes* and *hospit*, meaning host and guest, respectively. The Oxford Dictionary defines it as "the friendly and generous reception and entertainment of guests, visitors, or strangers."

Hospitality in ancient times was a matter of survival. There was no infrastructure of stores, inns, and facilities that could supply the needs of those who were on the move. If travelers found themselves in dire straits, they had to rely on the kindness of strangers in order to survive. The Old Testament is full of warnings to treat well the foreigner, the widow, and the stranger because the Israelites themselves experienced those conditions. Hospitality or welcoming a stranger was also fraught with danger, so, frequently, a letter of introduction smoothed the way. The introductions to St. Paul's letters were often meant to lend credibility to the bearer of the letter to the community being addressed.

Our life in Christ is very much a life lived with and for others. Our love for God must find expression in our love for human beings close and far: to notice and to give weight to our deep connection to people who are so different from us. To recognize in the face of the stranger our own reflection – as a child of God, someone who is beloved, someone whose innate dignity demands respect regardless of the circumstances – is what Jesus asked of his followers then and is asking now. Building relationships is a conscious choice to engage authentically, that is, without a set agenda beyond the desire to get to know someone. It requires attention and time, both of which tend to be in low supply in our harried and hurried lives.

When we make room for others – in our hearts, in our work, in our home – we prepare the soil of our, and their, souls for an encounter with Christ. And that is evangelization at its best. Few hearts are one over by doctrine and dogma, but many are readied to hear and accept the good news because someone took time and attention to engage them, to invite them, and to make them feel that they belong. Human beings long to belong.



Hospitality is a decision made out of love for fellow human beings and for God. It flows through our days and finds myriad opportunities to lighten the load, brighten the day, and bring about joy. Hospitality demands the openness and vulnerability of encounter. Both parties are changed by it. Exercising hospitality slowly transforms us into more Christlike disciples.