

A Tradition of Hospitality

BY SCOTT H. MOORE

Long before there was a “hospitality industry,” the practice of welcoming strangers was central to faithful discipleship. Three recent books can help us recover this rich tradition of hospitality and, by extension, the Christian faith that requires its practice.

Long before there was a “hospitality industry” – think of the scores of books on hotel management, travel and leisure, and the entertaining of guests (not a few of them are authored by Martha Stewart and her armies of copycat designers and decorators) – the practice of welcoming strangers was central to the Christian faith. Today a growing number of Christian theologians and historians are turning toward understanding hospitality as an essential Christian practice that integrates the moral and intellectual virtues.

Christine Pohl, who teaches social ethics at Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky, is one of the most articulate leaders in the recent reflection on this ancient practice. Her *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999, 205 pp., \$18.00) is must reading for anyone seeking to understand the theological significance of hospitality. She divides her account into Remembering, Reconsidering, and Recovering the practice of hospitality. The introductory section is an overview of the ancient and biblical accounts of hospitality as well as a short history of hospitality in the Church.

In the second division on “Reconsidering the Tradition,” she turns from biblical exegesis and church history to a more properly theological consideration of hospitality. For Pohl, hospitality becomes the means by which we see the world and others as they actually are, as marked by the image of God. Hospitality enables recognition, and this recognition affords the dignity that can be so easily hidden within those in need of hospitality. We begin

actually to notice the stranger in our midst and to see Christ in the least of these. Pohl notes that by being hospitable, barriers of class, ethnicity, and credentials are overcome as we seek to build a welcoming community together. In the concluding division, "Recovering the Practice," she considers how hospitality is put into practice. She is well aware of the fragility of hospitality and the obstacles (both actual and perceived) which stand in the way of its appropriation. In an appendix she describes a number of Christian communities – like L'Abri Fellowship, The Catholic Worker, and The Open Door Community – devoted to hospitality.

Pohl's volume is an excellent starting point for churches, families, and individuals who have become convicted of the imperative that we share our lives with the strangers in our midst, including those strangers that we thought we knew. The deficiencies of *Making Room* are a consequence of its virtues. In the attempt to introduce and recover the practice, Pohl must necessarily work for breadth rather than depth. Biblical scholars and church historians may find the treatment brief and cursory, theologians and philosophers may wish for a more rigorous argument that considers alternatives, and social workers and practitioners probably will find it all too theoretical and not sufficiently practical for their needs. Nonetheless, *Making Room* is an important book that has made a substantial impact on the recovery of the practice of hospitality.

Amy G. Oden, a church historian at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, DC, has edited a marvelous companion volume to any serious reflection on the Christian practice of hospitality. *And You Welcomed Me: A Sourcebook on Hospitality in Early Christianity* (Abingdon Press, 2001, 316 pp., \$27.00) is a collection of readings on hospitality from early Christian writers. Oden begins with an excellent overview of the practice of hospitality in the ancient Near East, focusing on hospitality as a moral category while reminding her readers of its important roots in Hebrew, Greek, and Roman practice. She then offers a compendium of writings on hospitality from the first eight centuries of the Church. Not merely drawing on conventional theological treatises and scriptural exegesis, the excerpts come from a wide diversity of sources, including letters, sermons, prayers, saints' lives, diaries, communal instructions and rule books, and more. Before each excerpt Oden provides a brief, but helpful, summary statement about the author and historical context of the text.

Oden divides her rich primary source material into thematic chapters organized around various dimensions of the practice of hospitality. She begins with writings on Christian identity that demonstrate that Christians understand themselves as those who are in need of the Divine hospitality – they describe themselves as pilgrims, strangers, sojourners, and the poor. She then turns toward texts that address cultivating "eyes that can see" the stranger, and especially recognize the stranger as Christ. Since the reciprocity of hospitality transforms both host and guest, Oden also includes a col-

lection of texts that seek to understand the spiritual dynamics of hospitality and its participation within the life of God. It is God who is at work within us and it is God whom we welcome and by whom we have been changed. Not treating hospitality as a merely abstract category, Oden includes a section on the specific activities within hospitality: welcoming, foot washing, feeding, and lodging. These practices require institutionalization, and she turns toward the many texts that address the concrete needs and demands for adequate buildings, priestly offices, and the rules for monastic communities. In the final section, she offers some wonderful examples of stories that describe great models of hospitality, whether found in creation (as through examples in the animal kingdom), in biblical figures (like Abraham), or in the lives of early Christian saints.

And You Welcomed Me is hard to put down. It reads like a travelogue through some of the great texts of Christian spirituality and practice. Other duties may be calling, but I find myself wanting to read just one more excerpt. Moreover, this book directs our attention back toward the great texts from which they were taken. It is not enough to sample a bit of Basil or merely a portion of Lactantius's *Institutes*. One wants to read the whole. Most important of all, *And You Welcomed Me* reminds us in a multitude of ways of how central hospitality is (and always has been) to Christian faith. Hospitality is not optional. It is not an act of supererogation; it is a practice essential to the faith given once unto all the saints.

If there is a deficiency to this volume, it is that it not easy to use as a "sourcebook," as the title suggests. The index includes primary source authors but not titles, subjects, or biblical passages. If one is looking for a particular subject or attempting to cross-reference texts or concepts, it is difficult to do here. These are small complaints, however, for a volume so rich and rewarding.

Perhaps the finest recent book to be published on hospitality is Elizabeth Newman's *Untamed Hospitality: Welcoming God and Other Strangers* (Brazos Press, 2007, 234 pp., \$22.99), a volume in "The Christian Practice of Everyday Life" series. Newman, a theologian at Baptist Theological Seminary of Richmond in Virginia, weaves together exegesis, exposition, and argument into a persuasive tapestry of reflection and contemplation on hospitality. After examining many of the contemporary distortions of hospitality, Newman considers the "strange hospitality of Christian worship." In short, she shows that worship, properly understood, is hospitality. "To sing, to pray, to pass the peace, to listen to God's word, to eat at God's table is to share, through the gift and power of the Spirit, in God's own giving and receiving. Such a vision of worship...enables us to practice hospitality more faithfully" (p. 42). Her examination of the relation of hospitality to worship is one of the most refreshing and inspiring sections of the entire volume.

In the second part of *Untamed Hospitality*, Newman turns toward understanding the vigilance necessary to practice hospitality amidst the contem-

porary challenges presented by science, economics, ethics, politics, and education. For Newman, our practice of hospitality challenges the way Christians should think about these ever-present domains of our contemporary lives. Responding to Richard Rorty's criticism that views (like hospitality) that substantially challenge liberal democracy's self-understanding must be understood as "crazy" because they cross the limits of "what *we* can take seriously," Newman argues that the "practitioners of Christian hospitality must accept...how radically differently they are called to live, teach, and learn, and be from what modern politics...allows" (p. 124). Hospitality will indeed appear to be "madness," but only because "*we*" have a different understanding of the ends toward which human beings are called. Each of these chapters integrates thoughtful theological reflection with a clear-eyed analysis of the socio-political world.

In the concluding section, Newman addresses the necessity of hospitality for unity in the Body of Christ. Bringing her argument back to the question of worship with which she began, she explores how the celebration of the Eucharist can transform and heal our divided communion. *Untamed Hospitality* is an exceptional volume that deserves a wide readership.

Is the fact that these three books are authored by leading women theologians relevant to the subject matter of hospitality? As each book amply demonstrates, the hospitality imperative found in Scripture and exemplified in the history of Christian faith is not directed only to women. It may be, however, that in recent centuries men have been less inclined to see hospitality as an essential task, and we men have abstracted ourselves from the nitty-gritty work of welcoming, feeding, and tending to the weak and the vulnerable. To the extent that is the case, then we have also failed to worship faithfully. Perhaps women have eyes to see the stranger, eyes not blinded or deceived by "more important matters." In any case, these three women have made extraordinary contributions to our understanding of hospitality and, by extension, to the Christian faith that requires its practice.



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