

Spiritual Essay

The other bits

Ministry as hospitality

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FAIRLY EARLY ON IN THEIR CAREERS, successful theologians learn to divide texts into the theological bits and the other bits. The theological bits are above all the pieces of argument or imagery, and nowadays stories, in which the text speaks directly about God or Church or ministry or whatever. These are the raw material of theology.

The other bits are the everyday details, at the beginning and the end of letters: the stock greetings, the list of addressees, the incidental autobiographical detail, and so on. These may be useful for history, but are considered to be distractions within theology.

So, if you are reflecting on the theology of ministry, you look at the texts which mention priests, bishops and deacons, at the place which they have in the local church, and at the way in which these structures are grounded in the mystery of Jesus Christ. You may conclude with some tentative statements about ministry within the local churches, and perhaps some larger statements about the way in which ministry is situated within the Church related to Christ. And eventually we may be in a position to say something about the ministry of women within the Church.

In this exploratory paper, however, I would like to begin with the other bits of Scripture. I shall sketch the implications of the list of names and greetings which we find in most of the letters of the New Testament and the apostolic period. I want to argue that from this perspective, ministry is not defined first with reference to the local community, but with reference to the relationship between Christian communities. That is to say, ministry is defined by hospitality. While the context of hospitality was soon and understandably obscured within the Church, I shall ask whether it may not offer an illuminating way to reflect on ministry today.

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Hospitality sought and offered

The first impression gained about the early Christian communities from Acts and from the letters of the apostolic period is one of busyness. The churches were busy sending, authenticating and receiving visitors from other communities in order to build up their life. Indeed, ministry within the churches can almost be defined by the hospitality which is sought and offered, given and received.

The survival of so many letters itself witnesses to the importance of hospitable relationships between churches. If letters were kept, it was usually because the communities to which they were sent valued them. The fact that so many letters were written pseudonymously also testifies to their importance. The pervasiveness of letters indicates that communities defined their own existence by reference to people outside them, and the ministry within the communities was also exercised in relationship to the ministry of others.

More significant than the fact of letters, however, is what they reveal of the relationship between communities. They witness to a continuous succession of visitors sent and of visitors received, all concerned with building the life of the communities. The range of visitors is evidently diverse. Paul, who with Barnabas was sent as an evangelist, gives pride of place to the evangelists whom he himself sent. So he sends Timothy to the Corinthian community, and in turn welcomes Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus from it.

Evangelists were evidently sent by the Apostles. A more unplanned, but equally important travelling ministry, however, was exercised by prophets. Since their arrival in communities is described only when their prophecy proved significant, it may be presumed that they were also a feature of the early Church.

Nor did visitors travel alone. In Acts Peter and Paul are accompanied from community to community, and Paul commends Phoebe and others to the communities to whom he writes. When he collects for the church of Jerusalem, he sends Titus with two others. Visits between churches, then, often belonged at the group-tour and not the back-packer end of the market. But even Paul's entourage pales into insignificance when we compare it with the delegation which Ignatius tried to persuade the local churches to send to Antioch. Each church was to send a group of representatives, including the local bishop, to strengthen the church of Antioch in its precarious Christian life. This was an accepted part of the ministry of hospitality. If Ignatius had had his way, fatted calves would have been

running for cover from one end of Syria to the other, and the local church would surely have been bankrupt.

The cost of hospitality

If the ministry of hospitality was to be effective, emissaries sent had to become guests welcomed. Visitors had to be authenticated, housed, fed and heard. In the nature of things, visitors are given more publicity than those who offer them hospitality. But even so, the literature assumes and endorses the practice of hospitality. Paul asks Philemon, for example, to prepare a room for him, and commends Gaius for his hospitality.

The extravagant request made by Ignatius suggests the obvious point that hospitality can be a burden. It therefore needed to be supported and ordered within the communities. When Paul tells a touchy community at great length that he was not in fact a burden to anyone, the fuss which he makes indicates that the hospitality offered by Christian communities could reasonably be felt to be a burden. Even if it was generously borne, it imposed a cost, as did the support of widows and the poor.

The practice of hospitality, therefore, needed checks and balances. Visitors were clearly expected to have letters of commendation; visitors who stayed too long were legitimately seen as a burden. The *Didache* established the rules of hospitality. It claimed that genuine evangelists and prophets could be discerned by the fact that they stayed no more than three days. Anyone who stayed longer was demonstrated to be a sponger and not a genuine minister.

The practice of hospitality was central within the church communities. Its importance is seen most clearly in cases where it collapses. 3 John, for example, describes a local community in which a recalcitrant leadership refused to accept visitors. Emissaries from the church had told the elder that Gaius was conspicuous for his hospitality to visitors, while Diotrephes abused his authority by refusing to welcome visiting Christians. He even excommunicated those who did welcome them. The denial of hospitality itself therefore constituted schism.

The *Letter of Clement* also points to the breakdown in hospitality. Clement responds by encouraging the Corinthians to offer appropriate hospitality to visitors from the Roman church and to send visitors to Rome. In this community the ministry of local churches was defined by enabling appropriate hospitality.

These are some of the dimensions of hospitality. It was not, of course, exercised in isolation from the apostolic structure. It should be seen, rather, as a central way in which a church which based itself on the preaching of the apostles maintained its unity of life and faith. The relationship between apostolic faith and ministry, therefore, demands that ministry be defined in terms of hospitality.

Seeking theological endorsement

This brief survey indicates that, while letters to local communities often emphasize the duties of ministers within their communities, ministry was not defined primarily by the local community. Both the existence and the content of letters indicate that the ministers in the local communities had a wider responsibility to send and receive guests from other communities. It is therefore not paradoxical but natural that the letters of Ignatius, which offer the most passionate defence of the dignity of local ministry, should also offer the most extravagant witness to the importance of hospitality between communities for the development of the Church.

We should expect such an important element of the daily life and ministry of the early Church to receive strong theological endorsement. Luke defines the ministry both of the Twelve and of the seventy-two disciples in terms of hospitality. Jesus instructs them to travel light and without resources precisely so that they can throw themselves on the hospitality of their hearers, and move on if they are not received. Thus ministry has to do with receiving hospitality. Almost immediately after their journey, the Twelve receive a lesson in offering hospitality. When they see that the people are tired, the disciples want to send them away. Jesus insists, however, that the disciples feed them, even with totally inadequate resources. In the interchange of hospitality, God is disclosed as the God of creative hospitality.

When it is described theologically, hospitality is associated with transience. In fact, the movement between communities was often involuntary, as people fled from persecution. In letters such as 1 Peter, which reflect this transience, hospitality is correspondingly emphasized. Thus it is associated with the lively awaiting of the Lord's coming, which is also the context within which ministry is exercised most fruitfully.

Whatever happened to hospitality?

My claim that hospitality formed the bread and butter context of ministry in the early Church may seem to be falsified by the fact that it is now clearly only the caviare – treasured but rare. Any claim to discover in the early documents a central theme whose centrality was lost until the writer has rediscovered it is usually reckoned clever rather than persuasive. We judge instinctively that what was once central should leave stronger traces than that.

My answer to this objection is threefold. In the first place, inevitable changes within the Church did obscure the importance of hospitality. Secondly, in later theology aspects of hospitality have been incorporated under less appropriate categories. And thirdly, because hospitality has been peripheral to the theory of ministry, important instances of hospitality within the Church have been wrongly seen as marginal. Let me briefly develop each of these points.

In the first place, the importance of hospitality was obscured as the Church expanded and became more firmly established. By the fourth century the local communities came to take a leading role in providing services within the towns. As they grew more wealthy and responsible, it was natural for them to define their ministry more tightly by reference to the local community.

At the same time, doctrinal disputes meant that visitors from other churches were seen as an occasion of danger as well as of grace. Letters of commendation became more formal, and the relative authority to be attributed to commendation by different communities inevitably became a theme of debate.

These patterns of growth and of conflict also led naturally to increased stratification within churches, and to more formal hierarchical relationships between them. Hospitality was enshrined in the understanding that the bishops form a college, but one that was seen as an instrument primarily of authority and only secondarily of hospitality. The relationships between churches, too, were increasingly defined in terms of rights and authority, so that metropolitan churches had precedence over surrounding churches, patriarchates over other metropolitan churches, and – at least in the western Church – Rome over other patriarchates. In looking at the relationship between churches, it became natural to think first in terms of authority, and indeed impossible to conceive of churches unified in faith and life without reference to an authoritative centre.

The emphasis on the local church and the translation of hospitality into hierarchy was accompanied by a relatively flat eschatology, in which the present life was no longer seen vividly as a time of waiting, and the sense of transience came under pressure. The Church was seen as solid, and ministry was hierarchically structured, and bound to a local church with hierarchical relationships to other churches. The hospitable concern for other churches was institutionalized in authoritative relationships.

Secondly, in this vision, some features of the hospitality of the Church were defined in inappropriate terms. The ministry entailed in missions, for example, and in religious orders which transcended the borders of the local church under its bishop, are both prime examples of hospitality between communities. But they have come to be defined awkwardly as expressions of the Petrine office, with the result that the Bishop of Rome is seen as the highest Superior of religious congregations.

Thirdly, some aspects of the present and future Church have been seen as marginal or as regrettable, precisely because hospitality is not seen as central to ministry. Migrant chaplaincy, for example, is usually seen as a marginal and temporary form of ministry within a church, which will last only until people feel themselves part of a homogeneous local church. Papal visits, too, are often hailed or deplored as regal visitations. But at a popular level, they are spontaneously celebrated and enjoyed as occasions of ceremonious hospitality. Similarly, visits by Catholic speakers from other churches are often seen not as the exercise of ministry but as tourism or even as intrusion. But if ministry is about hospitality, the importance of such visits can be given the weight which they really deserve.

Ministry for the future

An appreciation of the importance of hospitality may also enable us to look at the ministry of the future in other than nostalgic or melancholy ways. The shortage of clergy, for example, will necessitate exchange between communities within local churches at many levels and the development of new patterns of hospitality. This can be seen as regrettable expediency, or as a properly creative recovery of hospitable ministry.

Finally, when seen within the context of hospitality, ministry can encompass the characteristic features of the society in which we live. Within this context, international and secular reporting of

church affairs, our reliance on papers like the *Tablet* for reliable information about the Church, and the development of pay television, are neither regrettable nor incidental, but a contemporary form of hospitable ministry.

Examples could be multiplied. In conclusion, hospitality remains central to reflection on ministry, and our thinking about the Church is flawed when we leave it out of account.

The God of hospitality

I would like now to turn to ask what may be the theological implications of speaking about defining ministry with reference to hospitality. In the first place, hospitality is more than a warm but thin way of speaking about ministry. It provides a valuable, overarching metaphor within theology, which can illuminate the place of ministry within Christian faith. While I cannot substantiate this claim in detail, even paragraph headings will give you some idea of the directions such a theology would take.

The nature of God can well be described as hospitality. The metaphor picks up the energy, mutuality and unity in diversity which any Christian understanding of God as Trinity must track. It also suggests how creation may be both a free and a natural expression of God's nature, and that the world, and particularly human creation, images the hospitality of God.

The relationship between human destiny, human moral life, human sin and restoration is also illuminated by the metaphor of hospitality. The nature of hospitality is to respect the otherness of both guest and host. It leads naturally to acceptance of God's invitation to enjoy God's life. Sin, as the refusal of hospitality, both distorts personal and structural relationships within the world, and makes it impossible to accept God's invitation.

Within this theology, it is natural to describe Jesus Christ as hospitality incarnate and, in Irenaean terms, as the natural climax of creation. In him, the Son of God journeys to a far country to seek and offer hospitality. In Jesus Christ God's invitation is definitively offered to and accepted by humanity.

In Jesus Christ, too, hospitality is expressed in the political and personal relationships of a human life. The Lucan account of the woman at Simon's house is emblematic. Here the woman who welcomes Jesus as guest, against all the practices which govern political and religious life, finds God as host. As will be the case definitively

in the resurrection, the hospitality of God proves victorious over the logic and power of the structures of inhospitality.

The Church is the sacrament of hospitality firstly in the sense that it is the community of disciples who have found a hospitable God in Jesus Christ, and whom the Spirit leads to go out to find hospitality for the Word of God among the poor. Secondly, the Church represents the world transformed by hospitality; she proclaims the transformed world, awaits it, and although in maimed ways, struggles to represent it in her own life.

Finally, the Church is gathered in the eucharist, the sacrament of God's hospitality. There Christ is welcomed by the disciples who are invited to share God's hospitality. Furthermore, the cost of hospitality is enacted in the memorial of the Last Supper and passion, in which the disciples of Christ commit themselves to follow the hospitality of Jesus.

A ministry of hospitality rooted in the eucharist

This very brief and schematic outline of the metaphor of hospitality suggests that ministry too may be set richly within the context of hospitality. Ministry is about proclaiming the hospitality of God, seeking a welcome for the Word of God in a far country, and enabling the Church to live as an expression of hospitality. Of its nature it extends beyond the local community to the welcoming of guests from other communities, sending them out to strengthen the life of the Church, and seeking a home for the Word of God in the world.

When understood in this way, ministry within the Church is clearly more extensive than ordained ministry. But ordained ministry is also a ministry of hospitality. It is about enabling hospitality to the Word of God and shaping a hospitable Christian life within and between communities. This is most evident in the episcopal role, and particularly in the title Father of the Poor given to and earned by bishops in the fourth and fifth centuries.

I wonder, however, whether this view does not encourage us to attribute a significantly broader form of hospitality to the ordained ministry than is allowed by a prevailing theology of ministry. For in this theology the linkages made between ministry and hospitality have presupposed a relatively narrow view of ministerial hospitality.

The post-Tridentine theology of ordained ministry was based on a group of theological metaphors. It described the work of Christ as

satisfaction made for sin. This metaphor fitted easily with the understanding of the eucharist as sacrifice, and explained how it could be propitiatory. If the mass was sacrificial, the paradigm of ordained ministry was a priesthood defined by the power to offer sacrifice. The identification of the sacrifice of the mass with the Last Supper and with the sacrifice of Calvary was explained, at least partially, by saying that the priest acted in the person of Christ. This concept could be further broadened to demand identity of gender between Jesus Christ and the priest.

From this perspective the priest, who acts sacramentally in the person of Christ, is naturally described as the host of the eucharistic banquet – for Christ is host. The laity at the eucharist are guests at the banquet. And the natural focus of eucharistic hospitality is the priest who acts as host to the local community. This understanding of the eucharist is consistent with the representation of Christ as host in the multiplication of the loaves and the Last Supper.

Within the theology of hospitality, however, it is more natural to see Christ, and therefore the Church and her ministers, as guests. In general, Christ's work is more naturally described as at-one-ment or as reconciliation by the one who comes as a guest. Of this the heavenly banquet, at which we enjoy God's hospitality, is a natural symbol. Meals in the Gospels at which those who, like the sinful woman, offer hospitality to Jesus and in the process discover God's hospitality, are natural images of the movement of hospitality that is crystallized in the eucharist.

Christ the guest at the eucharist

Is it not difficult, however, to reconcile this view of Christ as guest in the eucharist with the crucial set of meals where Jesus acts as host? Even here the role of Jesus as host is nuanced. In the stories of the feeding of the multitudes in Matthew and Mark, for example, the disciples are commanded to feed those who live on the margins of their world. They are not to act primarily as hosts to the Christian community, but to the outsiders to whom they are sent. Furthermore, while Jesus is portrayed as host at the feeding of the crowds, he is also in a very real sense the guest. For the crowd which surrounds him has gone out of its way to welcome God's Word. The incident, therefore, repeats the pattern of the Gospels. Jesus discloses in the meal God's hospitality to people who have already welcomed him as guest in the words he speaks.

In the Last Supper, too, Jesus' role as host is nuanced by the complex process of handing-over which is central to the meal. While Jesus enters the meal as host, his radical vulnerability to his disciples, enacted in his handing over by Judas, shows that he is really their guest. He is further presented as guest in the words of institution, in which he hands himself over as guest to his disciples, and anticipates the conclusion of his mission of hospitality the next day. On Calvary the hospitality of God is definitively revealed in the rejection of the divine guest.

In the light of these nuances, is it not perhaps appropriate to describe Christ as guest at the eucharist? For in the eucharist, the movement of hospitality within the Gospel is maintained. As in the incarnation, Christ comes finally as a guest in lowliness, and God's hospitality is disclosed in the welcome which he receives. The Church, constituted by those who find God's hospitality in welcoming the stranger, is the host at the banquet. For this reason, therefore, the ministers of the Church also act as hosts. Their task is to encourage a proper hospitality to Christ by going out to strangers. For this reason, their hospitality cannot be defined comprehensively by relationship to any single community. Perhaps we could describe them as guest-masters.

Ministry in the person of Christ

A theology of hospitality might also illuminate discussion of the eucharistic celebrant. While it would not, of course, question the definitiveness of an exclusively male priesthood, it could offer useful reflection on the non-definitive arguments offered in support of it. It needs first to be admitted that the phrase 'in the person of Christ' is relatively weak. The ordained minister must first be seen as the representative of the Church. In celebrating the eucharist, however, he acts in the person of Christ in the functional sense that he enacts for the community the narrative of the Last Supper.

If this is the sense given to acting 'in the person of Christ', it is difficult to see how by itself it proves that those who act in the person of Christ must be male. In the first place this does not seem essential to the enactment itself. Because the celebrant is clearly distinguished from Christ within the narrative, the enactment allows for considerable differences of quality between celebrant and Christ.

Some aspects of the theology of hospitality may also be helpful in suggesting considerations that theological arguments in favour of

restricting eucharistic presidency to males must address. The more weight we give to the statement that the ordained minister acts in the person of Christ, the more weight we must also give to Christ's status as guest. The president will be bound by the rules of hospitality which frame Christ's identity in the Gospel. According to these rules, Christ comes as guest, and as any good guest must, he adapts himself to the condition of his hosts. This principle is the basis of the incarnation and the sacramental presence of Christ.

It would seem to follow that those who act in the person of Christ must also share in this adaptation to the community? Their various qualities and the liturgical shape of their enactment of the Last Supper must be shaped to the condition of the community, and particularly to what is required that it may be a hospitable community. If we wish to argue for, rather than simply assert, a restricted eucharistic presidency, we need to show why the hospitality of the community could never require that women act in the person of the hospitable Christ.

This point can be made in another way. God's will, which is given its definitive shape in Christ, is unconditional hospitality. It would seem to follow that, if the sacramental mediations of Christ's presence must be subject to God's will, then they must also be governed by the demands of hospitality. Hospitality, however, demands patterns of mutual accommodation between guests and hosts, which change according to culture and circumstance. For that reason, the demands of hospitality cannot be spelled out in concrete and unchanging detail. Given the definitive exclusion of women from priestly ordination, the theological challenge is to give persuasive reasons why the gender of the ordained ministry lies outside this economy.

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