

Seeking the way of hospitality

Ian Adams on the community of the refectory

IN TIME, the monastic settlements of the remote desert paved the way for new religious communities located nearer to where most people lived. This was a rediscovery of an ancient Jewish way of life, given renewed emphasis by Jesus of Nazareth: love of God and love of neighbour.

I was on retreat at a priory of Carmelite friars. There was only one other guest — a man with what appeared to be his life possessions crammed into a battered old car. He told me that this was how he would be spending the next few months, travelling from priory to monastery to religious house, in the hope and expectation that, at least for while, generous hospitality would be waiting for him. This had been his experience so far.

I like to remember this episode. He was not claiming to be on a worthy retreat to deepen his life of prayer and devotion (which was something like the story I was telling about myself to myself). He was a traveller who needed care — food, shelter, and the welcome of fellow human beings.

That is not to suggest that religious communities should accept flagrant misuse of their hospitality — most religious communities have worked out ways to avoid this — but that there is something important about simply *being there* for the people who need care, no questions asked, no means assessed, open-handed.

That encounter took place in the refectory, and I am suggesting the refectory as a symbol of the way of life that an individual or a community seeking to be in the way of the hospitable Jesus might follow. This is the community deciding to offer itself as a source of stability, presence, and hospitality to its wider communities. This is the individual seeking his or her own resources as

being a table set for more than one.

The monastic tradition almost always sees itself as being expressed in this flow between prayerful engagement with God, and activity on behalf of the world — and specifically on behalf of the most needy.

This motion invariably begins simply as presence, being alongside those who suffer, sharing their situation, and then working to bring relief. This we might call the practice of refectory, beginning with presence, then taking shape in many different ways: assisting the needy, standing up for the powerless, and feeding the hungry. Engagement with and on behalf of those at the bottom of the pile takes us, in the company of the monastics, into deep contact with the Jesus of the Gospels.

We are currently seeing a new interest in communities of hospitality, engaging with people in the ways that people now communicate. Some are experimenting with community houses, new kinds of small monastic settlements in the city, such as House 244 in Oxford, or COTA in Seattle. Others are experimenting with online presence, such as the Anglican cathedral of Second Life and i-Church.

This can be a wonderful but tough experience. Community can seem attractive enough, as long as it remains an idea. The challenge is actually doing it with others. But the learning from the monastics is that through this process of community-making we can be shaped to be more Christ-like, and the gracious Christ is made known.

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