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MAKE YOUR WELCOME HEARTY

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In October of 1933, Peter Maurin wrote the following poem and commentary in *The Catholic Worker*:

People who are in need

and are not afraid to beg

give to people not in need

The occasion to do good

for goodness sake.

Modern society calls the beggar

bum and panhandler

and gives him the bum's rush.

But the Greeks used to say

that people in need

are ambassadors of the gods.

Although you may be called

bums and panhandlers

you are in fact the ambassadors of God.

As God's ambassadors

you should be given

food, clothing and shelter

By those who are able to give it.

Mohammedan teachers tell us

that God commands hospitality

And hospitality is still practiced

in Mohammedan countries.

But the duty of hospitality

is neither taught nor practised

in Christian countries.

The poor are no longer

fed, clothed and sheltered

at personal sacrifice

But at the expense of the taxpayers.

And because the poor

are no longer

fed, clothed and sheltered

at personal sacrifice

The pagans say about Christians,

“See how they pass the buck.”

Maurin goes on to comment that a church council of the 5th century obliged bishops to establish houses of hospitality in connection with every parish. These houses were open to the poor, the sick, the orphaned, the aged, and the needy of every kind. The idea was that one must always be ready to recognize Christ in the unfamiliar face and so every parish and every home was to have its “Christ room,” a room set aside to receive the ambassadors of God who appear in the form of the needy and the visiting.

Hebrews 13, 2, asks us not to neglect hospitality, remarking that, in receiving strangers, “some have entertained angels without knowing it.” Lately we have neglected hospitality. There’s been a bad slippage. No longer in our parishes, homes, and hearts is there a “Christ room.” Not only do we no longer see hospitality as a privilege, we no longer even see it as duty. Maurin is right, the Islamic world is doing much better at it than we are.

Why is this so? Are we more selfish? Are we busier? Is Christianity as a religion less hospitable than Islam? There are a number of reasons for the demise of our sense of hospitality. One of them, surely, is the one Maurin points out, we have turned the duty of hospitality over to government agencies, the taxpayer, social security, social services. They are asked to take care of the widow, the orphan, the aged, and the stranger. More importantly though, the demise of hospitality has occurred because we have developed a sense of privacy and efficiency that militate against it.

Our culture is becoming ever more narcissistic and idiosyncratic, that is, more and more we have the attitude that things are our own. We speak of my space, my time, my family, my home, my community, my room, my stereo, my plans, my agenda, my friendships, my effectiveness, and even, in a way, of my church. In such a context we allow other persons into our lives, our homes, our communities, and our churches, most selectively. We are hospitable to our own, to those who meet our standards and our timetables. This invariably excludes the poor from our hearts, homes, and churches, since they have no sense of our standards and timetables. Their problems are neither antiseptic nor conveniently scheduled.

Compounding this is the problem of efficiency. Thomas Merton was once asked what he thought the worst problem was facing Western civilization. Instead of answering with something like “injustice,” “moral decay,” or “lack of interiority,” he simply replied: “Efficiency!”

Our problem in the Western world, everywhere from the Pentagon to our monasteries, is that the plant must run! The classes must be taught, the crops must be sown and harvested, the kids need to be driven for their lessons, the meeting must run as scheduled, the supper must be cooked, the essay needs to be written, the

mortgage needs to be paid, the plane needs to be caught, things must keep running, there is no other way, the show must go on, we need to do what we need to do!

In all that, partly, we are losing our souls because in it there is no space or time for hospitality and hospitality is the mark of a truly gracious soul.

Would that the hallmark of our Christian homes and churches be the graciousness of our welcome and would that when we die, each of us, might be most remembered for that, our hospitality, the graciousness of our welcome!