

Hospitality is very familiar to us. In many different ways, people honor their visitors and guests by providing food, shelter and any other comforts within their power to offer, all in an atmosphere of friendship and congeniality. This is especially true in Spred. From the moment members of a group arrive, the elements of good hospitality are apparent.

Having prepared warm and comfortable surroundings and everything needed for the session, catechists settle quietly to establish a tranquillity that will immediately begin the process of calming and relaxation for both catechists and our friends. The experience of being welcomed into an atmosphere of friendship and acceptance is joyful and affirming. Spred is an invitation to everyone to be *real*, to be truly ourselves, and to feel valued.

We have all enjoyed many experiences of hospitality, from simple visits with family and friends to attending functions like weddings, special celebrations and conferences, where sharing food and friendship have been comforting and joyful.

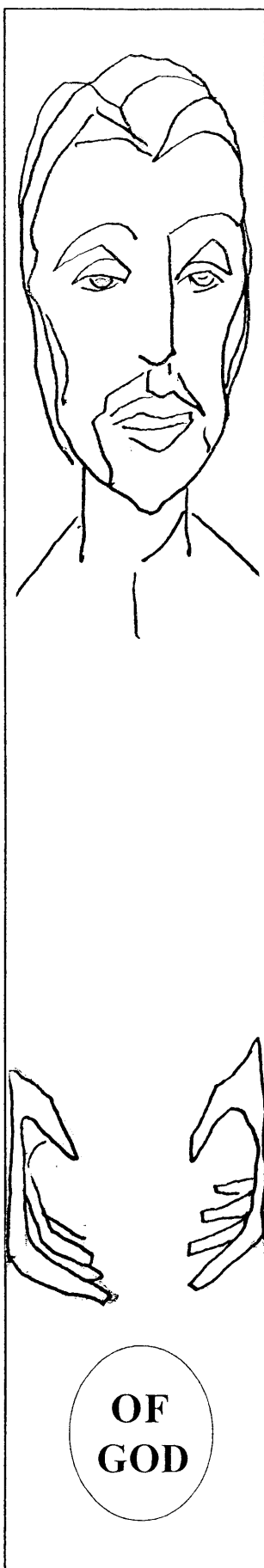
In his book entitled The Hospitality of God, the author, Fr. Brendan Byrne offers a “Reading of St. Luke’s Gospel” which highlights the incidences in Jesus’ ministry when hospitality in one form or another was key to the conversion of one or many people meeting Jesus.

In the Introduction to the book, the author notes that reflecting on the life and ministry of Jesus in the context of the hospitality that Jesus both gave and received - and how Jesus reached people through hospitality - “is attractive and helpful for making the Gospel speak to people today.” (1)

He also notes that “Luke sees the whole life and ministry of Jesus as a *visitation* on God’s part to Israel and the world. From the start, this raises the question: how will this guest, this visitor be *received*? A crucial point is that those who receive him find that he brings them into a much wider sphere of hospitality: the ‘hospitality of God.’” (2)

In Luke’s Gospel, there were many occasions when Jesus initiated contact with people, like getting into Simon’s boat in order to teach the crowd by the lakeside, and then directing the fishermen to put down their nets in the deep water resulting in a catch which almost broke their nets. (5.3-4,6)

There were also many very brief encounters between Jesus and people who showed even a



moment of acknowledgement of Jesus' power. They were to be rewarded by an outpouring of love and acceptance, and perhaps a cure, like the leper who fell on his face before Jesus saying: "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean." Jesus responded immediately by curing his leprosy. (5:12-13)

This reminds me of how our friends in Spred are always delighted to have *chance* meetings with catechists, for example in church, at the shops or at the cinema, and they are always eager to say hello and to ask when Spred is next on! These brief exchanges are so much appreciated by our friends, their families and caregivers and are very simple examples of Spred hospitality.

An obvious setting for hospitality is the sharing of a meal. There are many occasions in Luke's Gospel when a meal was the setting for Jesus to give instruction and explanation, or for an encounter with Jesus which led to a total life change for one or more of the people present.

There were many different settings for these meals, from a joyful banquet celebrating Levi's conversion to discipleship, to a meal in a much more contentious atmosphere at the house of Simon the Pharisee: from the feeding of the crowd of five thousand on the hillside to the homeliness of a visit to Martha and Mary in Bethany. There are many other meals detailed in the Gospel, the most significant one being the Last Supper, but in this as in all of them, it is the hospitality of Jesus that is evident.

Giving some insight into the background of the call of Levi, Fr. Byrne helps readers to appreciate that despite his wealth, as a tax collector, Levi was considered to be a sinner and so was excluded from Jewish society. However, a call to be a follower of Jesus was worth more to Levi than all his money. In celebration, Levi held a banquet for Jesus, to which he also invited his tax-collector friends.

Our friends in Spred have often been excluded. They and their families have often been left on the edges of communities, neglected, their needs un-recognized, their suffering ignored. Like Levi, they are delighted to feel included, and being in Spred means being included.

In contrast to the joyful atmosphere of Levi's banquet, a meal at the house of Simon the Pharisee is very different. (7:36-50) For a host, the familiar gestures of hospitality to be offered guests included the washing of their feet, kisses of welcome and the anointing of their heads with oil. Simon failed to provide any of these courtesies for Jesus, and was quite outraged when they were provided instead by a gate-crasher, a woman known to have had a bad reputation.

Fr. Byrne notes that this scene illustrates the hospitality theme very well. That Jesus as the divine visitor to the world received hospitality **not** from the "host" who ought to have provided it, but instead from a "sinner" who came because she sensed a welcome from Jesus. At the end of this encounter, the Pharisee was cold, distant and unloving, neither seeking nor experiencing forgiveness, while the woman had been transformed by Jesus' power to save. (3)

At Spred, great emphasis is placed on creating an environment that is warm, safe, quiet and restful. When each person arrives, there is a warm welcome for everyone, and a greeting shared. At the catechist preparation session, catechists show concern for each other as they experience their session and then prepare for the coming of our friends the following week. At the integrated session, the friends are welcomed very warmly and carefully.

In Chapter 9 of the Gospel, Luke describes a very dramatic need for hospitality when five thousand people were gathered in a lonely place and the day was almost over. The disciples thought that sending the crowd away to find food and shelter for themselves was the answer, but Jesus challenged **them** to feed the people, a task that seemed impossible to them. However they followed Jesus' instructions, and the crowd was fed, and fed abundantly. (9:10-17)

It is significant that Luke describes the actions of Jesus - blessing and breaking the bread - in the same way as he later described the blessing at the Last Supper, preparing the disciples for the time when the church would offer to the community the hospitality of God. (4)

Spred offers the church a means of providing spiritual nourishment of our friends in a way that is otherwise very difficult to achieve. In Spred, the emphasis is on welcoming, serving and journeying together; the focus is on our personhood, on the gifts we have to share. The evidence of growth in faith, particularly in our friends, is the increase in joy, love, concern for each other and enthusiasm for participating in a worshipping community.

Later in the Gospel, Luke describes a meal in a very different setting, namely in the home of Martha and Mary in Bethany. (10: 38-42) It would appear that both women seemed to make both a right and a wrong choice. Martha was anxious to offer service and hospitality to Jesus, but actually may have been too caught-up in frenetic activity to really listen to him, Mary had chosen to sit listening to Jesus, and as such was not offering effective service.

Spred sessions offer both catechists and friends a wonderful opportunity for peaceful reflection on both our personal life experiences and on the Word of God. In the celebration room, hospitality is highlighted in our personal stories of being loved, comforted, and supported by family and friends, and then in the biblical evocation and message, we hear that Jesus loves and cares for us. In contrast to the buzz and flurry of our daily lives, Spred offers havens of peace and a chance to be directed by the still, small voice of God.

The final part of our Spred session is our meal, our agape, to which all courtesies of good hospitality apply. Having provided beautiful table linen, dishes, candles and flowers as well as suitable and attractive food, the catechists then give their attention to the people around the table, including everyone, spending time, sharing friendship, hearing personal news, celebrating joys and sorrows, to having love and care apparent in every action and in every moment.

Spred Family Masses are particularly welcoming of our friends into the larger parish community. These are occasions when we can experience joyful celebrations of the Eucharist which allows all to participate more freely, to be better recognized as the valuable members of the church that they are. Our follow-up celebration with tea in the parish hall is a tangible example of the hospitality of the parish community. It is no surprise that everyone looks forward to coming back the next time, both to Family Masses and to Spred sessions! Shalom...peace...till we meet again.

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Brendan Byrne, The Hospitality of God. (1) p.2, (2) p.4, (3) p.75-76, (4) p. 85, (5) p.172-173.

