

SHELTERING THE HOMELESS

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The phrase "*sheltering the homeless*" refers to the practice of pilgrimage. The history of pilgrimages is also the history of the "homes" built to provide shelter for travellers. The guide to the pilgrimage of Santiago de Compostela talks about some welcome places as "*holy sites, house of God, the break of the saints, pilgrims' rest, solace of the poor, health of the sick, rescue of the dead and the living*". Generally speaking, the person who lives this kind of pilgrimage wants to know God, look for him, face him, regain faith, grow in hope. All those who make this pilgrimage have in themselves a strong thirst for humanity, they want to set goals, discover new goals. In the search for God they look for themselves and for others. So you will understand that pilgrims are not only those who go to places dear to a spirituality or faith. We are all pilgrims because we are all looking for the absolute and we seek ourselves, we are looking for a happy and dignified life. Our tradition conveys to us a very nice picture: we are a humanity in pilgrimage.

But behind the phrase "sheltering the homeless", there is the Evangelical expression (Mt 25,35.43) "*welcoming the strangers*", probably more topical and present in the bull of Pope Francis for the extraordinary Jubilee we are celebrating. A practice that is nowadays dramatically highlighted by the very wide migratory phenomenon which brings together men and women from poor countries or in war. In the face of this phenomenon defined as "*the most important social phenomenon of our time*", there is a need to radically spread the culture of hospitality, particularly towards the strangers who knock at the doors of our country.

In Europe religious life, through the monasteries scattered across the continent, has always been contributing to build this culture of hospitality and welcome. St. Benedict in his rule writes: "*each person who comes, may he/she be welcomed as the person of Christ.*" Even today, some 300,000 religious present in Europe seek to embody in works of mercy the charisms of their founders, also towards those who have lost their dignity because they are eradicated from their living environment.

1. Why shelter?

For many cultures, hospitality is seen as a sacred duty as through hospitality a man meets his human vocation: he realizes his humanity by welcoming the humanity of the other. Every man, since he's born, is himself host to the human that is in him. Welcome to find oneself, to become men, to humanize his humanity and to respect and honour the humanity of the other.

Being generous offers new life. The Bible suggests that the reward for the hospitality offered generously is high: it is Life. Abraham and Sara, already aged, who welcome the three pilgrims at the Oaks of Mamore, providing food and water, receive the gift of life; to Mary and Martha, who welcome Jesus and his followers with care and attention at the most tragic moment, the Lord offers a new life. The practice of hospitality has deep roots in the Bible and the history of the Church. "*The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt*" (Lev 19:33-34). In Jesus Christ, God made himself stranger to meet men and make sure that those who believe in him "*are no longer strangers and aliens, but citizens with the saints and also members of the House of God*" (Eph. 2.19). Through the story of the Samaritan, a stranger to the Jews, Jesus reveals that a merciful stranger is no longer a foreigner, but gets close, he decides to get close to the other and thus removes all strangeness. With the coming of Jesus, the ethnic or cultural differences can no longer be criteria of separation or exclusion: each wall placed between men fell (Ed 2.14) and therefore "*there is no longer Jew or Greek*" (Gal 3.28). Jesus, the foreign host, has made the strangeness a space of meeting and hospitality by opening a new path of communion among men. Welcoming the stranger must be for us, Christians, a service for choosing life.

2. How shelter?

I state four attitudes:

a. *Welcome*

The work of mercy invites the faithful to find accommodation for the pilgrims. Accommodation, better known as the 'House', is the sign of the dignity of a person and his family. It is the sign of resting on the way, of conviviality, relationships, peace. Accommodate then is not only offer a room, but is synonymous of 'welcome', 'integrate'.

Give shelter is not give a piece of land, but it is give a place to share together. It is not simply give a home, but it is above all feel at home. It is a commitment to relationship, rather than a transfer of ownership. Open one's house to the other, in the sense of making oneself home to the other, the home where the other is welcomed. The poor, the stranger, whose humanity is humiliated by the burden of shortages and deprivations, rejection and abandonment, starts to be welcomed when I start to feel mine his humiliation, mine his shame, when I start to feel my own mortification the mortification of his humanity. Then, without unnecessary guilt and hypocritical good feelings, the relationship of hospitality which leads me to do everything I can for the other can start. In this regard, it is clear that hospitality humanizes above all the one who exercises it. The person who has not lived pity for the harmed humanity of the other has not started yet to be a real person.

b. *Relation*

The welcome is a commitment to relation. The person responding to it is not just one more person to help, but rather a face to discover, to contemplate, to watch, to respect. Yet, it is necessary that the one who welcomes frees his face from any residue of prejudice, of bullying, of superiority, of arrogance, of sufficiency. You only need a merciful heart capable of listening to communicate something of ourselves to the other, capable of meeting a person and not only a need. The Pope talks a lot of *tenderness*, to connect people with the heart and not only by services, "*to give a plate of pasta*" but "*with the napkin underneath*". There is no mercy if there is no gathering of faces and the path of friendship is able to build bridges of encounter. Reciprocity in relationship allows us to pass from the other as "category" (defined on the basis of religious, ethnic, cultural etc. belonging) to the other as "you as a person" (with a biography, a personal history, a burden of sufferings and a present full of fear). Without this knowledge, which is particularly necessary and difficult with respect to strangers, no real hospitality can occur.

c. *Integration*

Besides the problem of hospitality, there is a need to consider a scheme of integration that should focus above all on the cultural and social sides. Unfortunately, the situation of immigrants in many European countries still shows an obvious inability for integration. Unfortunately, the story today tells us about routes which have led to forms of extremism and intolerance. It is certainly not easy to find a solution, particularly to the "*fear of difference*". Difference inspires fear and destabilizes the *status quo*. Welcome then can mean anything or nothing, but in practice it means above all to give the opportunity to participate in the professional and social life of the host country, comply with the culture and traditions of the place, but also enrich this country by sharing the rich history of the own place of origin. However, it becomes possible if these fundamental values which constitute the Western democracies are accepted: freedom of religion, secularism of the State, respect of the dignity of women etc.

d. *Proclamation*

The Pope recalls that "*mercy is neither 'angelism' nor pure sentimentality. It is in relation to this that the authenticity of our being disciples of Jesus, our credibility as Christians in the world today is to be seen*". Indeed "*the Church's very credibility is seen in how she shows merciful and compassionate love*" (MV 10). In the work of mercy, which according to the Evangelical saying is made to Christ himself, "*you did it to me*", is implemented the proclamation of the Gospel that must go with the gesture of hospitality. In addition, even if we respect the freedom of conscience and of religion of the immigrants arriving, it is fair to bear witness to one's faith and to suggest a new route of life, of hope, through a clear and serene

evangelization. The real challenge is our ability of Christians to present in an incisive way, by testimony, the proposal of a genuine and full life, able to meet the basic requirements of the human person.

3. Who can shelter?

We have seen that hospitality is not only a question of space, but of relationship. May welcome the person who feels as a pilgrim, not owner of a piece of land or of a space, but keeper of a gift. Hospitality takes shape from the memory that each person has been given a land, which is dignity, and that this gift is, according to the project of God, for all. But this is not true for all. In our Europe, whose goal is to create bridges, walls go on being built. The Gospels speak of the Samaritans who were hostile to open the doors of their houses to pilgrims who were heading to Jerusalem. Unfortunately, this tragic situation is still present today. Many men, women, elderly and children seek hospitality on our land because they are fleeing situations of war, persecution, violence and poverty, but they run into walls and barriers. But what is the deeper reason for this rejection? The answers could be many, but the most immediate for Governments is the concern to maintain order, security and control within the borders of their States. This answer, which may seem the most obvious, conceals a deep selfishness and a profound inability to generate integration among peoples. *"Too often, we give in to the temptation to close in on the horizon of one's own interests, so that others become something superfluous or worse still, a bother, an obstacle". "Individualism - Pope Francis goes on – keeps persons at a distance and stirs up especially the limits and shortcomings, weakening the desire and the ability of a cohabitation in which everyone may be free and happy in the company of the others with the richness of their diversity"*.

4. Shelter where?

Hospitality, before being a political and social issue, is work of mercy which is lived in the ordinary and everyday life. It is received in the time, in the heart, in the affection, thinking of the other, in worrying and praying for each other. It is received in one's house to share. It is received in the Christian community, by learning to remove 'we/you' distinctions, parishioner and non-parishioner, community or extra-community, by having the courage to make available spaces of the Church for the needy.

In his talk to the religious, the Pope encouraged them several times to open their empty buildings to those who are in need. Aware that the empty House which is not made available is for the homeless, from this influential position I appeal to all the religious of Europe to undertake concrete projects of welcome and integration. It is a question of carrying out projects, even intercongregational ones, in collaboration with public and private institutions that open new paths that contribute to give back to Europe this dynamic and multicultural identity that belongs to it.