

Some of you may know that I have worked off and on now for many years with the Missionaries of Charity. I will never forget one day when I was there washing dishes, and a sister ran up to me very excited saying, “We have just received a new Jesus, you should come to meet him.” In their beautiful simplicity, the sisters know without a doubt that they receive Christ in every single person that they welcome into their homes. So, I walked to the front door and there was a homeless man, filthy and unkempt, a man I had probably walked by on the street many times without a second look, who was being tended to by several excited sisters who were treating him as if he were Christ Himself.

In our first reading, we encounter a woman who showed great hospitality to Elisha because she knew that he was a great prophet of God. She arranged a room for him so that he could stay with her in comfort whenever he passed through the town. Out of gratitude for her hospitality, Elisha interceded with God so that she might be blessed with life through the birth of a child.

In our Gospel, Jesus is speaking to his Apostles, and He deepens their understanding of the value of hospitality. He says, “Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me. Whoever receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward, and whoever receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man’s reward. And whoever gives only a cup of cold water to one of these little ones to drink because the little one is a disciple – amen, I say to you, he will surely not lose his reward.”

In other words, it is a good thing to be hospitable to someone who is a good person. This is a good thing, but the heavenly reward for this is smaller than the reward which is reserved for those who receive the “little ones,” those who have the least honor in society. In receiving them... in giving to those who cannot return the

favor... we receive an even greater reward from our Heavenly Father than we would if we gave to someone on this earth who could repay our generosity.

In this, we experience the great reversal of Christianity. “Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave” (Mt 20:26-27). “Just so, the last will be first and the first shall be last” (Mt 20:16). Again and again, Christ teaches us that we are called to serve the least among us and in this we are glorified by our Heavenly Father. As Paul says, the ones among us with the least honor must be clothed by us with even greater honor.

This spiritual truth is found within today’s readings. “Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me.” As we heard in our second reading, in our baptism we are baptized into the death of Christ Jesus so that He might live within us. Christ lives within His believers, and therefore when we receive a follower of Christ, we receive Christ Himself. And in receiving Him, we receive His Father.

This truth was foreshadowed by an account of Abraham in the Book of Genesis. One day, Abraham was encamped at the Oaks of Mamre, and he looked out to see three men standing there. He hurriedly invited them into his home and washed their feet before giving them food and drink. Little did he know that he was entertaining angels, angels who blessed Abraham for his hospitality by having his wife Sarah give birth in her old age. Reflecting on this account, the writer of Hebrews said, “Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have unknowingly entertained angels” (Heb 13:2). Early Christians saw these three angels as an image of the Trinity, of the God whom we encounter when we serve those least in our midst.

Of course, we know from Christ’s example that we are not called to share this love only with our Christian brothers and sisters. Instead, like Christ we are called

to be welcoming and loving to all we meet, regardless of their creed... regardless of their orientation... regardless of the many labels we attach to people in our society. We are especially called to serve the poor and the sick. Many saints have spoken of the powerful ways that they have encountered Christ in the poor and the sick. Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati spoke of the way that these “little ones” have a light around them that the rest of us do not have.

We are all called to share Christ’s love with everyone we meet, treating each and every single one of them as if they are Christ themselves. We don’t check IDs at the doors of our churches because we are not a special club reserved to the elect few. Rather, we are a people who are called to be welcoming to others. In speaking about this, Pope Francis says, “The thing that the Church needs most today is the ability to heal the wounds and warm the hearts of the faithful. I see the Church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars. We must heal his wounds. Then we can talk about everything else.”

We must learn how to be a place of love that never shies away from the truth of what we believe while at the same time learning to welcome everyone that we encounter with open arms, even if they don’t believe as we believe or live a lifestyle contrary to our teachings. We must learn to love them as we find them and seek to heal their wounds. It is not enough, however, for us to simply stand here and wait for them to come to us. We must go out to them. I often wonder how many times I must have passed by that homeless man on the streets without looking at him twice. It took these beautiful sisters to pass by him and recognize in him the face of Christ. We too must go out and discover Christ in those who are least among us, welcoming them into our hearts and homes, bathing them and tending to their needs, so that together we might be reborn into eternal life.