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*To Receive the Other, to Receive God,  
to Receive God in the Other.  
A theological and ethical approach  
to mutual hospitality*

**Abstract:** The phenomenon of migration, becoming an increasingly frequent experience of Europe and the world, is not only a purely political or social issue, but for Christians it is also an important ethical and theological issue. The author analyzes the ethical and theological aspects of migration, including the issue of the right / duty of hospitality.

**Keywords:** Church, migration, integration

**Abstrakt:** Zjawisko migracji stając się coraz częstszym doświadczeniem Europy i świata jest nie tylko kwestią czysto polityczną czy społeczną, ale dla chrześcijan jest także istotnym zagadnieniem o charakterze etycznym i teologicznym. Autor podejmuje analizę etycznych i teologicznych aspektów migracji, w tym także kwestię prawa/obowiązku gościnności.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Kościół, migracja, integracja

### **Preliminary**

If we consider the calls of the biblical Law, which is also the heart of the Gospel – to offer a cult to God (first Commandment) and to respect the dignity of other men (second Commandment) – this represents a great challenge for the Jews as well as the Christian Community. Even if the common reference to Abraham, father of the believers, who is a migrant, walking to the Promised Land, is central to our memory... Even if the first human experience of Jesus, as a child, is as a migrant, on the way from Egypt, in the first months of his human life... It is not sure that

the spiritual and moral exercise to welcome the brother and the migrant is considered by all the Christian people as the acting expression of their faith. Hospitality and love, offered to people in need, according to the principles of Mosaic Law, the teaching of the prophets, the predication of Jesus-Christ, is today, as well as in the past, a spiritual call for conversion. We can be touched by the Gospel and meanwhile we can refuse another man who comes to us and disturbs our way of life, like the friend we do not expect in the night [Luke 11, 5]... We can pray for the protection of God our Father and keep closed our door to the migrants who ask for protection. Now, in the first Letter of St John, we can read: *He who pretends to love God he does not see, and remains insensible to his brother in need, how can Love could stay in him?* [1 John, 3, 17].

The main theological assertion of this approach would be to say that we can assume this appearing paradox between the love of God and the love of our brother, which is never an antagonism between a spiritual and a human love, when we recognise God in the other man, with his vulnerability. To receive is first to look at the other man, woman, child or elder. It is a physical and spiritual experience in which one concern engages another's concern. Recognising God in the other, in the singular experience of a mutual visitation and hospitality, opens the meaning of hospitality itself. And we can remember the Gospel of St Matthew, chapter 25, in which we find the three parables: the ten virgins, the talents and the last judgement. In this "judgement", the King identifies himself as the poor, the foreigner, the suffering people and the prisoner: *What you did for one of these brothers of mine, you did it for me* [Mat. 25, 40].

### **1. The Christian theological approach as a means for the social understanding of hospitality and solidarity**

How to think together, to receive and to believe, considering our common memory and our contemporary social thinking and sensibilities?

If we start from our experience of meeting one another, we could propose that our human experience of discovering cultural differences and our common humanity opens us to understanding what we could call our co-humanity. This concept of co-humanity suggests what Jesus himself experiments with, from his baptism – this high symbolic act of his human solidarity and communion between divinity and humanity. We could say that the experience of hospitality has its deep meaning in our baptism: we are immersed together in the same water and we cross together to the other side of the river, the side of justice and love where God is waiting for us.

The first level of this invitation to theological research considers the various concerns that constitute the experience of encounters with others and which make a link between the reference of the alliance in Christ and the experience of mutual consideration, in our context, today. The word “concern” is to be understood in its physical and spiritual meaning. To offer our “concern” is really a fundamental experience of alterity and co-presence. Actually we could propose that mutual hospitality begins with the experience of looking at the other and offering each other mutual concern.

In our Christian theology of creation, which is a memory and a celebration of God’s concern for life and His creatures, we could say that the human being comes to life with God’s concern. Concern and love which give reality to a human being – man and woman – called everybody to reach God’s resemblance. We read, in the patristic theology of the first centuries of Christianity, that God the Creator looks, at the same time, at the man He calls to live and Jesus-Christ, his loved son, who is the Saviour and the perfect man.

Our baptism in the human experience of concern, with the migrants and refugees, leads us to solidarity and to sympathy, alliance and communion. This experience is profound and sometimes difficult. And we can understand that some people prefer to turn away their concern. For this experience of meeting and solidarity everybody calls: “Do you believe?” and “If you believe, love and you will see...”

Of course we can say that we are often caught up in emergencies and this situation pushes us to the front line of humanitarian action. We have so much to do. And we realise that we have to learn all the jobs of human solidarity: to take care of the bodies, to lead the children to school, to understand law, to offer accompaniment in our administrations... All these actions concern charity and consideration of the man who is in desolation. We are in this pass from de-solation (which means “first out of the land”) to con-solation (“opens to mutual recognition”).

## **2. When Jesus approaches Bartimaeus**

The experience of Jesus-Christ meeting suffering or excluded people is always a dialogue. “*What do you want? What can I do for you?*” Jesus asks Bartimaeus [Mark 10, 51]. This dialogue opens for everybody the possibility to try to express his hope. But we can say that we have, with this dialogue, the theological paradigm of alliance: the biblical and Christian alliance is a dialogue between God and each person and this is the model of our social fraternity: to listen and to speak to

the other – especially the man who is waiting for a message of consideration and solidarity. Human solidarity – which is the consideration of the other as another myself, *equal and in need of help*, as said Pope John-Paul II [John Paul II 1987: 39] – needs to be founded in shared concerns and words or promises. To receive and to welcome is first to enter into a dialogue: to listen to a story of suffering and death – war, night, trafficking, fear, running and looking for a new hope... To listen to a broken story which is still a human one. To be listened to is already to be recalled to life. Only concern and listening can insert the experience of welcome in the double dimension of memory and hope and to prevent it from being reduced to action and the organisation of action for the other. We know that humanitarian action can exhaust all the actors of solidarity because such endeavour pushes the whole person over their physical and psychological limits.

To listen and to consider makes a link between to receive and to gather, to discover and to offer. The persons we receive and whose way we share are also in our mind and in our prayers: we can call them by their names that we pronounce them in front of God, our Father. To gather and to offer are the other side of to receive and to welcome. We can say that this spiritual movement builds human memory.

### **3. Hospitality as a dialogue gives its complete signification to mutual hospitality.**

When Abraham looks at the three men at the Oak of Mamre [Gen. 18], he experiences meeting the unknown. He cannot give the name of these persons or this person – for the text presents one or three persons: *three men* or *my Lord*.

*When Abraham saw them, he ran to meet them and he said: O Lord, please, if I received your grace, do not go on your way without be received by your servant. Let us bring water, you could wash your feet and have a rest under the tree. I have going to take a piece of bread and you will have strength to go on ; for it is the reason why you passed near you servant... [Gen. 18, 3-5].*

Abraham identifies these three unknown men as his Lord and takes care of them. He does not know them as he cannot give a name to the country where his Lord sends him to. But he goes there and without knowing the men, he receives them, thinking that these men are God himself coming towards him. The hospitality becomes a grace, given to him and he is honoured to have been chosen to receive these visitors. To offer hospitality is an honour and he gives the best of his richness: wheat flour and his youngest lamb. To receive appears as a call to give. And we

could say that to offer means the joy to receive. So, hospitality is, for Abraham, the experience of mutuality. At this point, we think of the golden rule which is in the two testaments: Do to the others what you would have them do for you [Matthew 7, 12].

The symbol of this mutual hospitality is to be seen in the promise of fertility in the time coming: Next year, Sara, your wife, will have a son [Gen.18, 10]. In this experience of mutual hospitality, the future is opened – once again – to the gift of life. We think, at this point of our reflection, the great hope of the migrant people to have a child and to invest in the future as a time of new possibilities.

We could say that we have the same perspective when we read about the visit of the Prophet Elyah to the poor widow in Sarepta – in a time of drought and great poverty. When the prophet asks the poor woman for a meal, he announces that the flour and the oil never will run out until the day of grace that God promises to the poor (*anawim*: those who have no wealth but only their faith and hope in God).

#### **4. Our God is never resigned and He calls us to use our reserves to care for life.**

In the experience of exchange which is characteristic of mutual hospitality, we can say that we are joined in God's project to fulfil an alliance in, for and with our humanity. And the call for hospitality shows our part of the responsibility in this story/history of alliance, with God, with Jesus and between ourselves. The challenge is not only to survive in crisis situations but to stay and to act in the inspiration of the Beatitudes: You are happy, you, poor people... You are happy when you fight for peace, justice and when you are persecuted for my Name... for the kingdom is opened for you [Mat. 5, 1-11].

The two main references to reflect upon and connect the experience of welcome and fraternal alliance – as a symbolic exchange – are the two moments of the Passion of Jesus: when Jesus washes the feet of his disciples and when he breaks the bread, offering it to his disciples: *This is my body* [John 13, 1 – 20; Mark 14, 22-25]. We remember a third text when Jesus calls his disciples to feed the hungry crowd: *Give them something to eat* [Luke 9, 13]. After washing the feet of the disciples, Jesus says: “*Do you understand what I did: if I wash your feet, you have to wash each other's feet.*” [John 13, 12-15]. This act is not only a purification or ritual but a resurrectional experience: to take care of humanity and to open a new alliance for the future, toward the coming time of God.

“To receive and to give” is the memory of Christ, he who gave his life – his body and his love – for the whole humanity and who calls his disciples to give their love to whoever arrived last and whose feet are tied...

### **5. The experience of mutual hospitality founds and opens a community for the future**

The intuition of receiving the other, especially migrant people who must leave land, family, brothers and friends, brings to mind the call to welcome the Son of God in our human community. This experience founds and re-founds the Church (as well as the social community) with these men and women, children and elderly. Jesus Christ is in the experience of welcome, as a man who needs to be recognised as the Son. The expression used by Jesus when he sent his disciples: “*He who welcomes you, welcomes me, and he who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.*” [Luke 9, 48], this expression can be understood as a sense of mission but also as the meaning of the experience of migrant people themselves. Something within meeting and mutual consideration concerns the announcement and the Kingdom of God. We understand that the problem of migration is not only a social and political question (organisation or reorganisation of the social space) but a theological point: to offer dignity is to announce communion in Christ: communion in which each human being is a member of Christ.

We realise that we are called to link the three references: **universal fraternity in Christ, mission received from Christ and communion already realised by Christ.**

It becomes clear, when we share the way with migrant people that the “challenge” is to believe with them and to believe in one another, as God believes in us and in each person. And this mutual consideration, as members of a Body, leads us to devote our life. “*We would like to give you our own life, because you became so dear to us*” [1 Thess. 2, 8].

If we found a pastoral theology on the principle of dignity, we keep memory of the concern of God on all his creatures. Founding our moral and social theology on dignity, we make a link between creation, salvation and love of our brother. And we active the community life to the future. For it cannot exist a pastoral thinking without hope and if we reduce social and pastoral thinking only in the action can lead us to exhaustion – and perhaps to distrust.

## 6. Human rights as common duties

In the Encyclical “Pacem in terris”, in 1963, John XXIII wrote that the respect of human rights has an effect for the person who is respected; this respect creates in the person an obligation to respect the rights of the other(s). And the text continues, saying:

*“When the rules of the collective life are expressed in rights and duties, people open their heart to spiritual values; they understand what is truth, justice, love and freedom; they realize that they belong to a community of this order. More, they are called to know God, in His Truth, Transcendence and Unicity. So, the relationship with God appears as the foundation of their life, personal and common life with the others.”* [John XXIII 1963: 44-45].

## 7. Hope offered to the hopeless

In the third part of his “theological trilogy”, the title of which is “the Church in the breath of the Spirit”, contemporary theologian Jürgen Moltmann sheds light on the capacity of anticipation and hope which is inherent in giving one’s own life and which is involved in the messianic mediation.

*“In the Christian conception of the messianic mediation about time coming, anticipation and resistance are united in the representation of time coming and self giving. In the places where freedom is anticipated in particular liberations, these liberations cannot be only justified if there are liberations for the others, not as fight for personal interests. It results that the particular anticipations about future (engagements, solidarities, sharing) cannot be showed but only as self giving for the future of the others. The real hope is an experience of giving for the future of the hopeless people. The anticipation of freedom is acted in the liberation of the oppressed people. Faith is offered in the love of the poor people...”* [Moltmann 1980: ch. 4, n. 5].

## Actualisation

The four verbs that Pope Francis uses in his message for Peace Day (1 January 2018), invite us to rise to the challenge of mutual hospitality in the context of the current migrations. These four verbs: to receive, to protect, to promote, to integrate paint an active picture of mutual responsibility and lead us to reflect

upon the circumstances of a human community, in our modern (post-modern?) world [Francis 2018].

**To receive is to consider the existence of the other and his own particular story and history.** It consists, in the same time, in re-thinking the capacities of human community, for the present and future. The question is to take care of life and take care of “life-together”. Finally, to receive is to open new opportunities for discovering and meeting. The condition of receiving is to overcome our fear in face of whom we do not know. In our perspective of mutual hospitality, to receive must be conjugated in the mode of reciprocity: we receive one another, with our experience, culture, memory and faith.

***To protect is to consider the other as a member of our family, as a member of the same social and spiritual body.*** As a member of a dialogue group in Israël-Palestine said: “When we shall understand that, protecting the other, we protect ourselves, we shall be on the way of peace”. To protect is to make reference to human rights which are – as we said – human duties between generations, today and tomorrow. We know that we need the engagement of the others to be protected ourselves.

***To promote is to encourage, to open the possibilities and to trust the capacities of everybody.*** We know that if we do not hope for and with the other and if we do not expect much from this person, we remain in bad feeling and in bad consideration. Mutual encouragement says that everybody has a message for the community; this message is unique and it brings something that we have never heard.

***To integrate is to recognise that the other who came and asked for hospitality is a member of our human community, a member of Christ’s body.*** To integrate is not to refuse or to deny cultural, religious or spiritual specificities. It is to offer one another our talents and experiences. Reciprocity finds here its greatest meaning: to integrate opens to liberation and reconciliation, in our particular community and in the universal community.

Here is the challenge of the new Alliance in Jesus-Christ in our history: a mutual hospitality which is the experience of receiving one another and becoming a community in Christ.



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