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PRACTICING OUR FAITH

*A Way of Life for a
Searching People*

SECOND EDITION



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Chapter 3

HOSPITALITY



Ana María Pineda

For many decades, the Mission District of San Francisco has been a home and a welcome *posada* (shelter) for a diverse population of Hispanics and Latinos. Over the years, it has taken on the aged familiarity of the neighborhoods its inhabitants left behind in their Latin American countries of origin. Its streets bustle with activity as people attend to the daily needs of family and work and as children come and go to school. Throughout the day, the bells of St. Peter's announce the presence of the church. The Mission District teems with life, as the culture and customs of the Latino world fill its days with vitality.

On this December evening, children of every age process down Twenty-Fourth Street, some with lighted candles in hand and others carrying on their shoulders statues of Mary and Joseph. Each Advent, the young and the old reenact the story of Joseph seeking lodging for his young wife, Mary, who is weary from travel and heavy with child. For nine nights in a row, children and adults assume the identity of the weary couple or of the innkeepers, processing around the inside of the church or throughout the neighborhood, moving



*En nombre del cielo,
buenos moradores,
dad a unos viajeros
posada esta noche.*

(In the name of God,
we ask those who dwell here,
give to some travelers
lodging this evening.)

TRADITIONAL SONG FOR *Las Posadas*

from one designated site to the next. This is the beloved ritual of *Las Posadas*.

At each station, an ancient exchange is repeated. Those playing the role of Joseph approach the inn, knock on the door, and say in a loud voice, *En nombre del cielo, buenos moradores, dad a unos viajeros posada esta noche*. From inside, a chorus of voices responds, *Aquí no es meson sigan adelante; yo no puedo abrir no sea algun tunante* (This is not an inn; move on—I cannot open lest you be a scoundrel). As Joseph moves from one inn to the next, the innkeepers grow angry and even threaten violence, while the night grows colder and the young couple's weariness turns to exhaustion. *Venimos rendidos desde Nazareth, yo soy carpintero de nombre José* (We are tired traveling from Nazareth; I am a carpenter named Joseph), the anxious husband implores. Finally, he even reveals his wife's true identity, begging for *posada* for just one night for *la Reina del Cielo*, the Queen of Heaven—to no avail.

For eight days, the scene is reenacted. Finally, on the ninth day, the eve of Christmas, Joseph's request moves the heart of an innkeeper, who offers the young couple all that he has left—a stable. Yet the stable is enhanced by the love with which the innkeeper offers it, and this humble place becomes the birthplace of Jesus. In an outpouring of joy and festivity, those gathered on the final night celebrate the generosity of the innkeeper and the *posada* given to Mary and Joseph in song and dance, food and drink. Candy and treats from the piñata shower the children, and the community recalls anew how the stranger at one's door can be God in disguise.

Every December, Hispanic communities relive in their flesh the Gospel truth that “the Word became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:14). “He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him” (John 1:10–11). In *Las Posadas*, they ritually participate in being rejected and being welcomed, in slamming the door on the needy and opening it wide. They are in this way renewed in the Christian practice of hospitality, the practice of providing a space where the stranger is taken in and known as one who bears gifts.

STRANGERS IN OUR MIDST

Although *Las Posadas* is a beautiful, engaging ritual, the reality it addresses is a painful one: the reality of human need and exclusion. When the ritual takes place in the Mission District of San Francisco, many of the participants—once refugees themselves—remember their own experience as strangers. Through the ritual, the community affirms the goodness of taking people in, and those who once needed *posada* are reminded to offer it to others.

This is a lesson that is needed in other communities as well. The need for shelter, for *posada*, is a fundamental human need. None of us ever knows for sure when we might be uprooted and cast on the mercy of others. Throughout human history, there have been times when people were dislocated, becoming vulnerable as they journeyed far from home. Sometimes there have been people to take them in, and sometimes not.

Just as the human need for hospitality is a constant, so, it seems, is the human fear of the stranger. Unfortunately, the fear of “the strange one” has a long history in human societies. The stranger seems to portend danger—sometimes of physical harm, but also because the stranger represents the unknown, a challenge to the familiar constructs of our personal world. And so we human beings try to keep strangers at a distance; we avoid risky encounters or we try to neutralize the stranger’s power in order to protect our own. Some societies try to appease strangers with gifts; others exclude or even destroy them.

These fundamental human needs and fears confront contemporary men and women intensely. As the world shrinks and mobility increases, we encounter strangers frequently. But this has only heightened our fears. Those who enjoy comfort and shelter edge their way around homeless strangers. Those whose health is presently strong turn away from the gaunt, blemished faces of those living with AIDS. The prosperous never enter the poverty-stricken neighborhoods that abound with gang violence, drug abuse, unemployment, and welfare dependency. "Strangers" do not belong in the world in which the "comfortable" move with relative ease. And so there is no room for those who do not conform to mainstream standards or speak the mainstream language. Access to borders and to basic resources—shelter, employment, education, and health care—is cut off, as the powerful respond to genuine human need with an inhospitality fueled by fear.

Ironically, it is not just hospitality to the "stranger" that is in peril in our society. We are short not only of tables that welcome strangers but even of tables that welcome friends. In a society that prizes youthfulness, the elderly are often isolated from the affection and care of their own families. In many busy families, children find no after-school welcome home, and spouses find little time to host one another over supper. And when we become estranged—separated by grievances large or small, or simply crowded out of one another's lives—we all too often become "strangers" even to those we once loved. Can we move beyond strangeness and estrangement to learn the skills of welcoming one another and to claim the joy of homecoming?

STRANGERS, GUESTS, AND HOSTS IN THE BIBLE

In the traditions shaped by the Bible, offering hospitality is a moral imperative. The expectation that God's people are people who will welcome strangers and treat them justly runs throughout the Bible. This expectation is not based on any special immunity to the dangers unknown people might present—far from it. Rather, it emerges from knowing the hospitality God has shown to us.

The Hebrew Scriptures (called by many Christians the Old Testament) tell the story of the descendants of Abraham and Sarah,



When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. 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: I am the LORD your God.

LEVITICUS 19:33–34

who answered God's call to journey far from home in search of a promised land. Later, after years of exile and slavery in Egypt, these descendants were a refugee people, wandering in a wilderness, and later still they were forced into captivity again and sent off to a distant land. As a result, their laws always required them to deal justly and compassionately with the strangers among them. "You shall also love the stranger," God instructs the people through Moses, "for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Deuteronomy 10:19). Resident aliens must be judged and protected by the same laws that govern insiders, and strangers must be treated with the same respect one would wish for oneself. Just as God protected the people of Israel when they were refugees, so God insists on proper care for other aliens now, judging harshly those who treat them ill. God's people will be a people whose just hospitality flows from gratitude for God's past care and from their own painful memories of refugee life.

Hospitality was also a crucial practice among the early Christians. One New Testament word incorporates a profound truth: *xenos*, the word that means "stranger" in Greek, also means "guest" and "host." This one word signals the essential mutuality that is at the heart of hospitality. No one is strange except in relation to someone else; we make one another guests and hosts by how we treat one another. There is a common English word that uses this same root: *xenophobia*, fear of the stranger, which is often associated with extreme nationalism or intense "my group is better than your group" attitudes. Turn this word around and make a little change, however, and you get the New Testament word for hospitality: *philoxenia*, a love of the guest or stranger. *Philoxenia* can also mean love of the whole atmosphere of hospitality and the whole activity of guesting and hosting. Indeed, within a philoxenic circle of mutuality, unexpected transformations can occur. This happens again and again when Jesus



Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

ROMANS 12:13

eats with others. He arrives at a wedding as a guest, but when the wine runs out, he provides more and becomes the host (John 2:1–11). Martha invites him to her house to be her guest and wears herself out with serving, but he teaches her that on this day it is better to sit and receive (Luke 10:38–42).

This circle of mutual hospitality can embrace and transform the people who enter it. The early church, which met in houses, grew up turning hosts into guests and guests into hosts. The apostle Paul, whose ministry involved traveling from one house church to another, looked forward to the nourishing hospitality that awaited him in each place, just as the young churches looked forward to the gifts he would bring to them.

We need to think about how similar transformations can happen in our own lives, as those we thought were our guests end up hosting us instead, giving us the gifts of their presence. Work for the homeless, for example, frequently begins with the thought that a privileged person can help someone in need. Often, however, the ostensible hosts discover that they have received from the homeless at least as much as they have given.

This notion that the guest—even a strange one—may bear surprising gifts and may indeed be a Holy One leads to a third biblical perspective on hospitality. “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it,” says the Letter to the Hebrews (13:2). Abraham’s warm welcome to three men who visited his tent (Genesis 18) was an ancient example; these guests brought with them the astounding news that Abraham’s aged wife, Sarah, would bear a child. Later, the idea that the face of the stranger is indeed the face of Christ appears in Matthew’s Gospel (25:38). When it is most fully realized, hospitality not only welcomes strangers; it also recognizes their holiness. It sees in the stranger a person dear to and made in the image of God, someone bearing distinctive gifts that only he or she can bring.

BECOMING A HOSPITABLE PEOPLE

Many of us know that we should offer hospitality, but we wonder whether we can. Hospitality is made up of hard work undertaken under risky conditions, and without structures and commitments for welcoming strangers, fear crowds out what needs to be done. Hospitable places where guests can disclose the gifts they bear come into being only when people take up this practice and grow wise, by experience, in doing it well. In the face of overwhelming human need for shelter and care, and in the face of our own fear of strangers, we need to develop ways of supporting one another in the practice of hospitality.

Today, communities of many cultures are doing this hard work in response to concrete needs. In 1986, for example, a group of concerned Central Americans in San Francisco came together to create the organization CARECEN (Central American Resource Center) to provide legal defense for Central Americans who were negatively affected by a new immigration law. Relying heavily on volunteers, CARECEN expanded over time to provide a wide range of services, particularly to Latinos who had little or no access to basic health care. The Spanish-speaking staff and volunteers took an approach to health and medicine informed by Hispanic culture, and Latinos felt welcome. In many instances, staff and volunteers had themselves benefited from CARECEN's services, so the stresses and pressures experienced by clients were familiar to those who now found themselves at the giving end. Those who had first come as guests now found themselves in the privileged position of being the hosts.

As the organization grew, CARECEN found itself in need of a new *posada*, a site where the expanding services could be housed.



To offer hospitality to a stranger is to welcome something new, unfamiliar, and unknown into our life-world. . . . Strangers have stories to tell which we have never heard before, stories which can redirect our seeing and stimulate our imaginations. The stories invite us to view the world from a novel perspective.

THOMAS OGLETREE, *Hospitality to the Stranger*

Not surprisingly, they turned to St. Peter's parish, whose welcoming spirit was well known even though it was obvious that the physical plant had little space to spare. On less than a city block in a densely populated neighborhood, the parish grounds included the church, a small parish hall, the parish convent, the rectory, and a two-storied elementary school, all in constant use for meetings, a homeless shelter, and a small community-run co-op. The only extra space was in the convent, which had once housed twenty members of a religious community of women who had taught in the elementary school and worked in the parish; it now housed only five. After considerable discussion, all concerned agreed to see if the building could be architecturally modified to make room for both the services of CARECEN and the religious who continued to work in the parish. It could. The convent, while remaining a home for the religious women whose order had given service to the parish community for over a hundred years, widened its doors to respond to the medical needs of Latinos.

In spite of its limited resources, this parish continually looks for ways to extend hospitality, helping both guests and hosts to grow stronger in the many aspects and the richness of this practice. Here, hospitality extends beyond feeding the hungry and sheltering the homeless; here, it also involves creating space where people can learn how to receive and give. In neighborhoods across the nation, the church is often in a good position not only to gather families around the Eucharist each Sunday but also to prepare them to expand the circle of those who are made welcome in their communities. Unfortunately, the church's walls sometimes seem to shut people out instead of welcoming them, and even what happens inside those walls can have the effect of excluding others. Often churchgoers are uncomfortable with people whose spiritual devotions are unfamiliar or with people whose ethnicity, class, or age group is different from their own. Each Christian community must struggle to find ways of creating a *posada* where all can become free to receive and give. Preaching and liturgy must speak a welcoming message to those both inside and outside church walls.

In San Jose, California, the Portuguese community celebrates the practice of hospitality annually on the Feast of the Holy Spirit. Once again, the walls of the church broaden to embrace the larger community as the parish members process through the city streets.

The procession leads into a shared liturgy and ends with a parish-sponsored meal to which everyone in the neighborhood is invited. The meal in itself is a significant part of the celebration; traditionally, it has been seen as an expression of a community's responsibility to make provision for those who have less. This celebration is no small challenge, for the parish church is located in a working sector of the city that is growing less familiar to those who have lived there for decades. At a time when this church is struggling to serve people discharged from a nearby mental institution and to adapt to the increasing ethnic diversity of its neighborhood, this procession, liturgy, and meal strengthen its members in the practice of hospitality.

In San Francisco and San Jose, as in all large cities, economic problems have given rise to delinquency, gangs, and violence. All these factors make hospitality to the stranger challenging and often formidable. Nevertheless, these West Coast communities have brought together their creativity and talent to find ways of participating in the Christian practice of welcoming the stranger, the alienated, the homeless, the other. While alert to the importance of prudent and thoughtful consideration, they have found ways to bolster the effectiveness of individual practices of hospitality through the strength of community. What would be a daunting undertaking for any single individual is addressed by committed groups of people who together discern how to extend hospitality and provide *posada* to the stranger. Similar examples of congregational hospitality exist all over the world.

WEAVING HOSPITABLE PATTERNS OF LIFE

Over five decades ago, Antonio and María left their homeland to seek greater security for their young children. Life in the United States was different from anything they had ever experienced before, and making ends meet required hard work. María abandoned her profession as an elementary school teacher to work in a laundry, while Antonio dreamed of being able to support the family on his salary and of sparing his young wife the hardship of working in a foreign country. They longed to return to their native land, and every year Antonio and María reminded their children that they would one day return home. As the years progressed, their own home became a *posada*, a haven for other relatives and friends who arrived in the United States

pursuing the same dreams that had once brought them here. The door to María and Antonio's home was always open to those in need of a friend or a place to stay; it is difficult even to estimate how many enjoyed the warmth of their welcome over the years. Their *posada* now boasts a houseful of young Latino professionals who fill it with grandchildren and continued commitment to the Latino community.

Every holiday, and especially Christmas, has been a special occasion to gather as an extended family to celebrate and give thanks for many blessings. And every holiday brings Charles to the warmth of this home and family. Somewhere along the way, Charles appeared as a friend to one of the boys. Who exactly he was, or how he lived, or where his own family was—these questions were never asked. A solitary man, not well-off, somewhat of a hanger-on, Charles appears empty-handed and alone each holiday season. So different from the robust members of the family, he comes seeking human warmth and care; he arrives, the continual stranger in background and culture, at the front door of María and Antonio's home, where he is received unquestioningly and given loving, generous *posada*.

To welcome the stranger is to acknowledge him as a human being made in God's image; it is to treat her as one of equal worth with ourselves—indeed, as one who may teach us something out of the richness of experiences different from our own. The stranger's gifts may come to a family circle or to a society. Yet the undocumented foreigner—the alien who crosses over the borders of narrow and provincial worlds—is too often not greeted with hospitality or even acknowledged as a human being in God's image.

It is perhaps less difficult for marginalized communities to reach out than for those long-settled to do so. Those who have been strangers themselves have developed an empathy for others who confront a similar reality. Within the biblical story, however, it is clear that all God's people are spiritually descended from migrants and wanderers, and that all are called to hospitality. In spite of the difficulties and threats encountered on the streets of U.S. neighborhoods today, Hispanic families want their children to know how to respond to the needs of the poor, the alien, the marginalized, and the physically challenged—and indeed, this undergirds the relatively low rate of homelessness in the Hispanic community. People do take one another in, taught to do so both by example and by the annual

return of *Las Posadas*. The members of other communities need to learn from this, so that they can participate more fully in the Gospel practice of hospitality.

HOSPITALITY, PERSONAL AND PUBLIC

In contemporary society, opportunities to practice hospitality abound. They appear at many levels, from public policy deliberations to barely noticeable acts of personal kindness. In 1987, for example, ministers of Catholic communities in the Archdiocese of Chicago responded to the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 with a statement setting forth the Christian responsibility to immigrants. The statement challenged all believers to resist unjust treatment of the men and women who seek refuge in this land and invited communities to give the finest of their resources for the compassionate care of the immigrant. The authors of the statement committed themselves not only to denounce the abuse of basic human rights, including raids on workplaces, but also to educate communities to respond to the needs of the alien, the widow, and the orphan in their midst. This statement challenged Christians to join together in attending to the needs of the stranger in ways that would go beyond anything a single person could do.

Perhaps one of the most powerful insights into the dynamic of hospitality comes from seeing the liberation, joy, and support experienced by those who have sought and found *posada*, those who have been the outsiders and who have been taken in by Christians who recognized in their faces the face of Jesus. Such a one is Refugio. In following her in her story, we may walk in the steps of a stranger seeking shelter and safety. We may understand both fear and hope, finally seeing the shadowed face of the Christ behind the visage of those who seek refuge and count on Christian hospitality.

Refugio fled one night from her home in Central America, bringing her three small children with her. She was uncertain of her future but convinced that she could no longer stay in the abusive marriage she had endured for more than a decade. The profile of her battered nose gave silent testimony to the beatings that had been regularly inflicted on her by her husband. She had withstood the beatings



Then the king will say to those on his right hand, "Come, blessed of my Father, take possession of the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me to eat; I was thirsty and you gave me to drink; I was a stranger and you took me in."

MATTHEW 25:34-35

for the sake of the children—or so she had believed until one day the children became the objects of her husband's uncontrollable rage. It was then that she gathered up courage to leave her husband. It was a risky proposition, but the welfare of her children required it of her.

For weeks, Refugio had plotted how and when she would escape. Her husband's family was prominent in the community, and all signs of impropriety were suppressed. Refugio could not confide in relatives or friends. It had taken her this long to summon up courage to leave the situation, and she could not chance losing the opportunity to seek out a new life. In her mind's eye, Refugio reviewed the list of friends and acquaintances whom she knew had left for the United States. To whom could she turn, and who would offer her the help that she needed? Finally, one morning as she awakened from her uneasy slumber, the face of a distant relative crystallized before her. She had forgotten that he had left their town some time ago and now lived somewhere in the United States. Refugio would have to search out his relatives and discreetly discover his whereabouts.

Eventually, she managed to locate and contact him. She hoped that he would understand the urgency of her request and the need to hold it in confidence. Anxiously, she awaited his reply; at last, a cryptic message was delivered to her. It conveyed news that arrangements had been made for her to settle in a city on the West Coast. Her relatives indicated that for her safety, it was best that she not travel to the city where he lived but rather settle in the Latino sector of a larger city. Refugio had heard the name of the neighborhood mentioned before. She had hoped that her relative would offer her the protection of his proximity, but she understood all too well the wisdom of his decision to locate her elsewhere.

Time passed slowly as she painfully attended to the detailed preparations her departure required. Finally, the day arrived. She was filled with the dread of exposure. What if her husband discovered her plans? What if some relative had become suspicious or had noticed her increasing anxiety? At the designated hour, she and her children boarded a small van. They crouched down in the van as they were driven across the U.S. border. From there, they traveled for what seemed an eternity. Refugio was filled with self-doubt. Perhaps it had not been such a good idea to leave her husband. What would she do in this strange land? She could not speak the language. She did not have much money, and what would she do once it was spent? As the children began to fret and cry, her fear increased, and she felt helpless to assure them that all would be well. Finally, overcome by weariness, Refugio fell asleep.

It was dawn when Refugio awoke. The first rays of sunlight warmed the neighborhood of small houses and apartment buildings. Over them loomed a church steeple that seemed to cast a protective shadow on the neighborhood. As the van drove down the narrow streets, Refugio caught glimpses of street signs with Spanish names and store after store bearing the names of cherished homelands that had been left behind—Little Habana, Acapulco, Jalisco, El Tazumal, Borinque. . . . The sleepy neighborhood seemed to be awakening: people waited on the corner for buses to take them to work, storekeepers bustled around putting out their merchandise, cars wove their way through the narrow streets. Refugio was caught up in the sounds and rhythm of a Latino neighborhood. It seemed to soothe her anxious heart, bringing a growing sense of tranquility to her spirits and offering her weary body a place to rest.

This traveler had at long last found a resting place, lodging for herself and her children. Refugio found herself humming a song from her childhood:

*Me llamo José,
vengo con María mi esposa que espera niño.
Vengo a pedir posadas.
(My name is Joseph,
I come with Mary, my wife, who is expecting a child.
I come asking for welcome.)*

It was a melody Refugio would recall later that year as she celebrated the season of Jesus' awaited birth. In her new neighborhood, she and her children would join her new community in *Las Posadas*. The stranger taken in had become the host opening her doors in Christian welcome.

Las Posadas is more than ritual. It crystallizes the community's experience of being nourished and challenged daily by the central Christian mystery—namely, that the stranger at our door can be both gift and challenge, human and divine. All Christians are called to the practice of hospitality. What is important is that each community discover how to practice that hospitality in ways that are relevant to its own situation.