



Pastoral Letter of Archbishop Joseph E. Harris



RETURN TO
HOSPITALITY



Cover:

The Trinity, also called **The Hospitality of Abraham**, by Russian artist Andrei Rublev, painted around 1410. Rich in symbolism, the icon depicts the three angels who visited Abraham at the Oak of Mamre (Genesis 18:1-15).

RETURN TO HOSPITALITY

PASTORAL LETTER TO
THE CATHOLIC FAITHFUL
AND TO ALL PEOPLE OF GOODWILL
FOR THE HOLY SEASON OF LENT

***“Continue to love one another like brothers,
and remember to welcome strangers,
for by doing this, people have entertained
angels without knowing it”***

(Hebrews 13:1-2).



Dear Friends in Christ and all People of Goodwill,

Bring back the ole time days ...

**Used to be everyone cared for each other
Lived like brothers, respected one another
In times gone by we used to share
Together we'd make do and if I draw a sou-sou
What was mine was yours too.**

**I know them days done pass and gone
And I know that life must carry on
But if I must join in with the pack
Then I going back, I going back. Yeah, yeah**

(Richard Nappy Mayers, Old Time Days)

In those ole time days, we lived in relative peace and harmony, a far cry from the situation that we live in today. We blame each other, the police, the home and school but we have refused, as Trinbagonians, to return to the values which sustained our forefathers and which have the potential to sustain us. As we in the Catholic Communion approach the season of Lent, I take the opportunity to speak with you about one of these values, the value of **hospitality**.

You know the story told in Genesis 18: 1-15. Abraham is sitting in the shade after lunch resting from the noonday heat, when he sees three strangers approaching his tent. He hurries to them and earnestly presses them to come into the shade, offering rest, food and hospitality. A little water to wash their feet from the dust of travel, a splendid meal of "a fine and tender calf" and fresh milk, and Sarah is roused to prepare fresh bread while they rest. And when all is ready, Abraham himself serves them and remains standing under a nearby tree, attentive to them. The reward of this display of hospitality is the assurance to his wife Sarah that by the following year, she would hold in her arms

the long awaited son, heir to all God's promises to the couple, whose advanced age had made them almost despair of this happy outcome.

While we may interpret this quality and activity narrowly as the welcome we give to strangers, the text from the Letter to the Hebrews situates hospitality within the action of love, love as brothers and sisters bound by a common parentage and inhabiting a common home. And since God is Love, to practise hospitality is to act like God, and so be most truly human. In this land we all participate, in some measure, in the feasts and practices of one another's culture and religion, including the prayer, fasting and almsgiving of Christian Lent. So I am confident this invitation to hospitality during the Lenten season, which must become a habit of daily living, will find resonance with people everywhere.

Hospitality was a common practice in our culture before affluence and competition replaced generosity. Most of us can recall the practice of neighbours taking in children either because of the death of a parent, or economic difficulties caused by numerous children, or the desire of parents or relatives to offer children an opportunity for better educational prospects. In those situations, the miracle of loaves and fishes was a daily occurrence, as poor people helped those less well off than themselves. Paradoxically, now that homes have fewer children, more space and better amenities, hearts no longer seem to be as open to care. We also were more inclined to sharing our resources: *gayap* or *len'* hand gave people homes. True, Habitat for Humanity and other groups harness the goodwill and generosity of some for the benefit of those seeking better homes but housing is now largely left to the Government. Indeed, we have come to defer almost everything to the anonymity of the entity we call 'the Government' and so excuse ourselves from the duty of care.

We can object that times are different, that we cannot risk trusting the neighbour or worse yet the stranger. We justify our withdrawal behind high walls and wrought iron and into

secure compounds, preferring to become prisoners of our own fear than to risk the alternative, which is to look at the other as a brother or sister. It is no wonder we cannot find a solution to the prevalence of crime in our society, having organised our relationships on fear, greed, competitiveness and selfishness. We have chosen to follow these gods instead of the God of Jesus Christ whose trademarks are compassion and steadfast love, and so we keep a sabbath of endless toil in the service of ever more acquisitiveness. We cannot afford a break in the cycle of productivity lest we fall behind in the race to the top. So Sunday is taken up with lessons, sports, shopping, housekeeping to ensure we will be ever ready for the perennial Monday race.

I want to suggest a return to the practice of observing **Sunday** and to practices that make us open to the fact that all we have and indeed all of our life is **gift**. A gift cannot be merited or acquired: it can only be received; and one cannot receive with closed fists or full hands. To receive, hands and hearts must be receptive, open, turned towards the giver in an attitude of expectation and gratefulness. We cannot cultivate these attitudes in the malls and other temples of commerce. In these places, the attitudes are those of having and getting, of unnecessary consumption and, often, mindless entertainment mediated by the selfie and Instagram, Facebook and Snapchat – even in the presence of family or friends.

To celebrate Sunday, authentically, is to place oneself once more in an attitude of presence before God, who is the Source and Sustainer of all life. This requires time dedicated to prayer, which is so often crowded out by the busyness of daily life that we need to stop deliberately and realign ourselves onto the reality of our status as creatures of a beneficent God.

Our advances in technology and the resulting rise in our standard of living have tended to make us believe we can provide ourselves with everything that we need, that we have to some extent ‘outgrown’ God and with that arrogance, we have forgotten the art of prayer. Prayer becomes significant only when we are confronted by the ultimate questions, prompted

by such things as terminal illness, unexpected death and loss of power. Then, we stammer a remembered vocabulary and once again try to recall the voice of God. Sunday celebrated as the Day of the Lord will help us to rediscover the place we can call home, a Father's House where our welcome is always assured.

As Catholics, we celebrate Sunday as the Lord's Day in honour of the Resurrection of Our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. This event is the pledge of our own resurrection and our security against the fear of death and sense of futility. It is fitting then that the chief way of marking this gift of life would be to participate in the Eucharist, the re-presentation of the Passion and Resurrection by which this life was made available to us. No private prayer can adequately acknowledge and affirm our faith in this gift. It would be as if when invited to a dear friend's birthday celebration, I preferred to have a private cake and ice cream party at my convenience in my own space. It would not be surprising that the relationship would be affected by this slight. We are social beings, meant for community and to thrive in communion with other human beings. The same laws govern our relationship with God; we cannot slight God's offer of hospitality and hope that responding when and how it suits us will help that relationship to flourish. Hospitality towards God as towards our neighbour is a constant attitude of the heart and will.

FLAVOUR THE WEEK

I am familiar with the argument that 'We get nothing out of church.' Allow me to explore a little with you what you might want to 'get out' of worship. You want good preaching, something that touches your heart and gives you 'something to hold on to', not too long, not too short, not quarrelling nor too angry, something speaking a language that is close to you, not as if you're preparing for an exam, something not too political or social, but not so 'holy' that it has no relevance to where we are living today. You want good music that will suit your taste, not too modern nor too traditional, not too jazzy nor too folk, not

too dead nor too upbeat. But do not ask you to sing along, you prefer to listen. You also need a good sound system and a priest, not a lay minister.

A caricature perhaps? But not too far off if I go by the complaints that reach me. What I hear is that you want to **belong**, to feel welcome and at home in your place of worship. You want to hear a **word** that will give you comfort, challenge, and a compass by which to navigate the rest of the week. You want something beautiful – music, decorations, atmosphere; something that soothes your spirit and helps your whole being to relax into prayer. You want these demands met when you choose a place of worship. And yes, the Priest or Deacon or Lay Minister has a responsibility to proclaim the Word of God in a way that speaks to the congregation present before him or her, with passion, authenticity and from the heart. The music ministry is also charged with enhancing the celebration, leading the congregation in singing, mindful of the dictum of the great St Augustine, “He who sings, prays twice.”

But what is your role at worship? Do you drive up, fill up, drive off? Or are you conscious that you have accepted an invitation from the Son of God to a feast with his friends, in honour of God, His Father, to celebrate the capital action of His love for each one of us in creation?

Pause to reflect on that and you cannot remain a passive spectator fulfilling an obligation enforced by the ‘church police’, some long dead parent whose admonitions continue to enforce compliance. No, you must become a guest, catching the spirit of graciousness flowing from the Cross of Christ over all who stand with you beneath that Cross. You should be contributing to the attitude of welcome and hospitality, of openness to God and your brothers and sisters that each participant needs in order to meet God in his Word and Sacraments. You truly enter into a relationship with the Whole Christ in which prayer becomes a natural vocabulary: your needs and longings flow into the whole language of the Liturgy and you come to will the Will of God. True you will stumble and fall on your way, but

assured of the welcome of our Prodigal Father, Sunday worship will become the 'source and summit' of your prayer and your strength for the way ahead.

Hospitality also gives a particular flavour to almsgiving. When we give even "a cup of cold water" out of love (Mt 10:42) it takes on an added value. Such acts of generosity arise from an awareness of the presence of Christ in the other person, an awareness that Christ himself promises to reward. Indeed, Matthew 25 is a sobering account of the criteria on which we will be judged before God. "Whatsoever you did to the least of these brothers of mine, you did to me" (Mt 25:40). With such ready opportunities for salvation offered us, we have every incentive to become hospitable people whose hands are not only raised in prayer, but also extended in generosity. The following of Christ is never a private or solitary undertaking. Mission, ministry and service are part and parcel of being a disciple. Before you protest that you cannot take on another thing, allow me to show you some of the opportunities waiting on your attention.

Listening – So many people in our families, places of work, our neighbourhoods are withering away from lack of attention. The children whom we ignore because we are preoccupied with our favourite programme or game, the spouse whom we fail to see as a person, the senior citizen – conversation with whom demands too much effort from us. And yet, we know from personal experience the effect on us of genuine attention and regard in the form of a smile, a remark, a hug.

Presence – In our places of work, so often we are absent in the moment, barely conscious of the person whom we are required to serve or, worse, hostile or mute. Consider the effect of the opposite attitude – presence in the moment, graciousness, helpfulness, pleasant speech.

Service – Fearful that service will demean us, we hide behind sullenness and gruffness, forgetting the Servant whom we follow, the Lord and Master who washed the feet of his disciples and commanded – not suggested – commanded us to do

likewise. Will helping an elderly or infirm person with his or her burden diminish us? Will we be reduced in the eyes of the One who matters by refusing to lord it over our subordinates and treating them with reverence instead? Will working for the common good instead of climbing over others in the race for honours make us less or more human?

SOME HARD ISSUES

Confronted with migration, vagrancy, social failure of many kinds, how are we called to practise hospitality in the face of the particular demands of our times? What is our response and responsibility to the CARICOM nationals, the Venezuelans, and persons of other nationalities who appear in our neighbourhood? Are we silent in the face of their exploitation? Or if we hesitate out of fear to speak out, do we at the very least offer them the solace of a gesture of compassion, do we offer a share of the fruits of our land, a word in their language, signs that we acknowledge our shared humanity?

Where the situation is less irregular, are we the persons who would invite a foreigner to our Church event, our neighbourhood party, our home? Such hospitality does not seem to have caused damage to the other denominations that have practised hospitality. Why are we so afraid, we whose tradition prized hospitality from its very origins?

Do we offer a Spirit-inspired response to the needs of the stranger? Would we use our resources to facilitate language classes or other activities to foster the inclusion of these brothers and sisters in our society? Would we accept invitations from them to share in their hospitality, or do we hold ourselves aloof, forgetting the pattern of our Saviour who became the friend of tax collectors and prostitutes to show them the loving face of the Father?

And what of our home-grown outcasts, the school failures whom our systems of competition and scarcity exclude from the table?

Are we content to leave them to the death-dealing collectives that send them to early graves, or can we find it in ourselves to create circles of welcome where these sons and daughters of our Father can find their place in the feast of life? Instead of exclusive, expensive lessons for our children alone, can we work to make our schools and homework centres places of nurture for more of our children? Knowledge is not diminished by being shared. Instead of newer electronic gadgets for our children, can we pool our resources and train more children in the use and care of these technological tools so more members of the coming generation can be prepared for the coming world?

In this context, **fasting** takes on an added dimension; we become less predatory and also more generous. It is not a fast acceptable to God if we abuse, oppress or denigrate others. Fasting invites us to recognise our brothers and sisters and to share our bread with them. Indeed, hospitality implies breaking bread with others. And here again, the example of Jesus is instructive. Most often He is recognised in 'the breaking of bread', an activity that always involves others, this breaking of bread is never a solitary activity. Maybe this might inspire us to revive the practice of the **Family Sunday Meal**. In a society where eating has degenerated into a hasty, distracted activity, leading to poor dietary habits and the damaging consequences at so many levels, hospitality in the form of a family meal may help to restore the bonds of communion and companionship.

THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

In this country, we are blessed with the example of numerous saints whose hospitality and generous welcome improved the quality of life for our people. We have only to think of so many parents, grandparents and teachers who in the course of very ordinary lives became heroes of love and service, who made God and the things of God real and immediate, who taught us how to pray and to live enthusiastically. Archbishop Anthony Pantin, Servant of God, stands out as an exemplary model of welcome and hospitality, of joy and prayerfulness. This is part

of the tradition in which we stand and from which we can draw courage to speak once again the Word of God to our society. In this country dedicated to Our Blessed Mother, her example must animate us in this work for the salvation of souls. Here was a young woman who responded to a request from God to risk her life for the salvation of the world. Her unqualified "YES" was given in courage and love, confident that God would be faithful to what He promised. In a society where death was a real risk of her "YES" to God's request, she did not waver, but offered herself – body, soul and spirit – to the Will of the Father. Thanks to that "*fiat*", we became brothers and sisters of the Son of God, were introduced into the family of God and offered the opportunity to become other bearers of Christ to our world.

In the light of such generosity and divine fidelity, we can do no less. We too must be willing to give the Son of God a place in our life, body, soul and spirit, so that Christ may find a welcome in our society today. God has not, like a celebrity, bowled the first ball and retired to the stands. No, intimately concerned and involved in our world and its affairs, God never leaves us, seeking only hearts that are open to welcome him as he 'stands at our door and knocks'.

During this Lent, therefore, let us pray for the grace of hospitality, asking for the graces outlined in the Letter to the Romans 12:9-13:

***Do not let your love be a pretence,
but sincerely prefer good to evil.
Love each other as much as brothers should,
And have a profound respect for each other.
Work for the Lord with untiring effort
And with great earnestness of spirit.
If you have hope, this will make you cheerful.
Do not give up if trials come; and keep on praying.
If any of the saints are in need you must share with them;
And you should make hospitality your special care.***

During this Lent, let us undertake some **action** to influence the

climate in our land. The first movement is to '**rend our hearts**' as the prophet Joel instructs us at the beginning of Lent. No superficial change, no 'tearing of garments' but an examination of what is hardened in our hearts.

Have we decided not to devote quality time to prayer because we are satisfied with how we are?

Have we refused to forgive a parent who hurt us, closing our heart to reconciliation?

Do we hug grudges and hurts, keeping parts of our heart crowded with anger?

Are we aware of how we hurt the people with whom we live and yet refuse to change?

Are our thoughts filled with violence because of slights, real or imagined?

Do we notice when a parishioner is absent from church for a long while and seek to find out why?

If you do away with the clenched fist, the wicked word...

In a culture as verbal as ours, in which we pass quickly from speech to unreflective action, Lent presents us with an opportunity to grow more humane.

Is our regular speech laced with sarcasm and obscenity, even in our homes?

Are we in the habit of striking a partner, a friend, a child in order to enforce our will?

Do we use violent speech or action as a way to avoid accepting that we have made a mistake?

**Is our conversation degrading and vulgar, do we often make fun of people different from ourselves?
Are we in the habit of spreading false or malicious stories about others?**

When will you share your bread with the hungry?

In this land of plenty, many people around us go to bed hungry; children do not go to school because they lack money for transportation, uniforms, books; women sell themselves in stores and on the streets to provide for their dependents; people live on the streets for lack of welcome in their families or decent housing. Lent must prick our conscience to come to the help of these people.

Have we closed our eyes to the people in need on our street, in our workplace, our school?

Do we refuse to share for fear that we will have to reduce our standard of consumption?

Do we value our pets more than our helpers, spending more money on the animals and showing them more consideration than our fellow human being?

Do we assume that poverty is due to laziness of the poor and so justify our refusal to help them?

Are we afraid to look at the poor because their condition makes us uncomfortable, so we prefer to fence them out?

When will you welcome in the homeless poor?

It is one thing to give an occasional hand-out to a poor family, a homeless man, a needy schoolchild. It is another thing entirely to acknowledge they are members of the Body of Christ by

inviting them to be part of your family, your lessons group, your clean-up crew.

Are we satisfied to give only our cast-off clothes, worn shoes and our out-dated books, and call that charity? Or if we give 'good' things, we want the recipients to acknowledge us and to remain in our debt?

Are we content with once monthly lunch to the pensioner in our neighbourhood, or can we imagine inviting him home on Sunday?

Will you include the students who need help in your extra lessons class alongside your elite students? Or are money and prestige preventing you from opening your heart?

Do we speak to the poor with hostility and condescension to reinforce our superior status?

Can you recognise the talents and abilities that the less well-off can offer you, and can you see yourself accepting their offer?

But now, the Lord speaks, come back to me with all your heart, fasting, weeping, mourning...

The only sustainable way towards a restoration of our land is by means of a **return to the Lord**. The disease that has corrupted our land can only be healed by our willingness to confess our sinful disobedience, make reparation for the damage we have caused, and ask the Lord to heal us and our land.

When I look at how I allot my time during the day, what time do I give to prayer? Does this show that God is truly first in my life?

Do I acknowledge that all I have and my whole life are gifts from God, to be accepted with gratitude and used for the

good of my community?

If God were to ask me now for an account of my life, would I be comfortable to give it? What would I want to change?

Am I a person who brings joy to my surroundings, a bearer of Good News, or am I a sour pessimist, relishing bad news?

Is Jesus Christ a Friend of mine or have I avoided becoming intimate with him because I do not want to know or do his Father's Will?

As you take time to reflect on this Examination of Life, invite a partner, an associate, a child to do the exercise with you and, in humility, seek the Sacrament of Reconciliation to fortify yourself to make a new beginning. This is not just a personal self-improvement plan: we are called to be the Body of Christ in our country so that the transformation we so urgently need can begin. Above all, do not be discouraged or daunted by the enormity of the task before us. God is on our side, we cannot fail, unless we refuse to align ourselves on the Cross of Christ, the one means of salvation. In the strength of that hope, let us set out.

I conclude with a reference to the Lenten Letter of Pope Francis for this year in which he asks us to consider the Word of God as **Gift**, underpinning our understanding of other persons as Gift. Using the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, he points us to the failure of the rich man to even see the beggar lying outside his mansion. The first consequence of loving money is blindness to our neighbour. The second consequence is an excessive love of oneself demonstrated by lavish display of wealth and a closing of the heart to generosity. Finally, the person in love with money forgets his place in creation, fooling himself into thinking he is self-sufficient, needing neither God nor man. When both of them die, as indeed all human beings, rich or poor, must eventually do, the Rich Man suddenly becomes able to see Lazarus and wants to bring him some cooling water. When Abraham explains that this is impossible, he begs him to

send Lazarus to warn his brothers to practise hospitality in order to avoid falling into Hell. Unfortunately, the time for extending love and care has passed, the opportunity to do good is no longer available. The gifts of the Word of God and the presence of our companions on life's journey can be accessed in this life only.

So while we have the opportunity, let us do good to all, but especially to those who are of one household with us in the Faith. May God give us his blessing during this holy season.

+ Joseph Harris
Archbishop of Port of Spain
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