

Welcoming the Stranger (2/2)

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McAllen, TX
May 2, 2015

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At the opening of this meeting we were discussing who is the stranger. Now I would like to revisit that term, but from a different angle. To begin with, we must understand that there is no such thing as a stranger. Even though the image that we often have of a stranger is one of loneliness, and that certainly is the painful experience of many in a strange land, you cannot be a stranger by yourself. If Pedro is a stranger to Peter, it is because Peter is also a stranger to Pedro. If Maria is a stranger to Mary, it is because Mary is also a stranger to Maria. Peter may think that Pedro is lonely because he does not have others around him who understand and support him. And that is probably true. But Pedro is lonely also because he does not understand Peter -because Peter, who may be his employer or his boss, appears inscrutable to Pedro.

This means that one important step in really being able to welcome and to understand the stranger is to try to discover what in us and in our way of doing things and of looking at things is strange to that stranger whom we wish to welcome. This doesn't mean that we necessarily have to change, to abandon all elements in our culture and our traditions that may seem

strange to the stranger. But it does mean that we must understand why they do seem strange to others.

Allow me to illustrate this with an experience I had some years ago. I was visiting a church whose traditional, English-speaking congregation had decided that they would share their facilities with another congregation of immigrants from El Salvador. In a conversation with the Anglo-American pastor, he told me that the Salvadoran congregation was very nice and friendly, that they had a shared meal and a shared service every month, and that it was all very inspiring to both. But there was a problem: The members of his congregation were complaining that when the Salvadorans used the bathrooms they would leave the soiled paper lying in a corner of the stall. He did not know how to approach the subject without being offensive, and he was hoping I would speak to the other congregation about that. Now, if you have traveled in Central America you have seen signs wherever tourists or other foreigners might be visiting: "The water pressure is very low. Paper will clog the toilets. Please deposit your paper in the basket." With a silent chuckle, I told the pastor that all he had to do was provide baskets in the stalls, or put up a sign in both English and Spanish indicating that it was appropriate to place the paper in the toilet bowl!

But that is only half of the story. That evening I was having dinner with the Salvadoran pastor at the home of some of his parishioners. At the head of the table sat an elderly man, obviously uneducated, but with the poise and demeanor of an old-style gentleman. When the conversation turned to their congregation and their relationship with the other congregation, this man said: "You know, those people are tremendous. They let us use their building. They are very nice to our children, who sometimes are quite boisterous. They try to talk to us. But some of their customs are filthy. Would you believe that there are no baskets by their toilets?"

Who was the stranger? Obviously, from the point of view of understanding the facilities available and how they work, the Salvadorans were strangers, and they needed to learn from their English-speaking brothers and sisters. Indeed, this congregation was doing more than most by way of welcoming the stranger. The Salvadorans saw that, and they appreciated it. But still, from the point of view of the Salvadorans, there was something of a stranger in this other congregation.

If María is a stranger to Mary, Mary is a stranger to María. If Pedro is a stranger to Peter, Peter is a stranger to Pedro. María and Pedro can only be strangers to Peter and Mary inasmuch as

Mary and Peter are strangers to Pedro and María. If Mary and Peter want to welcome the strangers Pedro and María, they must try to understand in what ways they themselves look strange to Pedro and María.

But then, there is a clear difference between Peter and Mary on the one hand and María and Pedro on the other. The strangeness that Pedro and María perceive in Peter and Mary is hidden because it is shared by most others around Mary and Peter. Most people around Peter speak Peter's language, and therefore Peter is seldom reminded that this is one of many possible ways of approaching life and doing things.

Mary does not see how strange her language is: A language where c-o-u-g-h does not rhyme with b-o-u-g-h, and neither of the two rhymes with t-h-o-u-g-h. But María scratches her head trying to figure out that one is cough, another is bough, and the third is though. And Pedro has a hard time understanding why "What can I do for you?" is good, but "What can I do you for?" is not.

Peter finds it strange that Pedro will not pronounce the letter aitch. But he would not find it so

strange if he were to ask Pedro, who would simply respond, "I honestly (jonestly) don't know, your honor (jonor)."

Peter and Mary value their families -their spouses and their children. If you ask them how many there are in their family, they will say, "four," or perhaps "five." They think it is very important that they have a home of their own, where they can enjoy their privacy, and leave aside the hustle and bustle of the rest of life.

María and Pedro also value their families. But their family includes spouses, children, her parents, his parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, second and third cousins, and even relatives by baptism -the *comadres* and *compadres*. Back home, if Peter had asked him how many were in his family, Pedro might have replied, "I really don't know. I have a wife and two children, two sisters and a brother, seven nieces and five nephews, two aunts, one uncle, my in-laws, and many more." Now learning to live in the US, he may well respond in terms of how many live with him: "My wife and two children, and her brother with two daughters."

María and Pedro would have been baffled by all of Peter's and Mary's talk of privacy. They

probably will not even have thought about it, but the fact is that in Spanish there was no word for "privacy" as a value, until contacts with other cultures -particularly with North America led to the invention of two possible translations, "privacidad "and "privacía." Even to this day, the official Spanish language does not include such a word. There is the word "privación," but this does not mean privacy, but rather deprivation. There is a word for "private", privado. But this word means both "private" and "deprived." To be "privado" can mean either to be private or to be deprived. If you have a hunting preserve, this is a "campo privado." If you are imprisoned and deprived of freedom, you are "privado de libertad." And there is a sense of a connection between these two, so that if you are very "privado" you are both very private and very deprived -deprived of fellowship, of human contact.



In the background and perspective of Peter and Mary, the best times are spent at home, behind closed doors and in the intimacy of his nuclear family. In the background and perspective of Maria and Pedro, the best times are spent on the sidewalk or the park, talking and sharing with whoever passes by, or in a large family gathering with parents, grandparents, siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles, and all the rest.

I could go on with many more examples -about the meaning of time and punctuality, about the manner conversations are conducted, about meals and celebrations, and many other similar subjects. But the point is that if Peter and Mary really do welcome María and Pedro, they will soon come to realize their own strangeness to María and Pedro.

This is one important reason why welcoming the stranger is difficult. It ultimately requires that we look at ourselves as strangers; that we ask questions such as, Why do we do things this particular way? Why do I see things this particular way? Why do we respond to certain situations in a particular way?

Notice the word "particular" in each one of those questions. When we ask those questions, we are setting aside one of the most cherished assurances of any dominant culture: our way of thinking, our understanding of reality, our response to various situations, are not normative.

They are not universal. They are particular. They are one option among many others. They may be better suited to the conditions in which we live. They may even be better in a higher sense.

But this cannot be taken for granted. If we are to welcome the stranger, and this implies acknowledging our own strangeness, it also implies the possibility that other ways of seeing the

world, other ways of doing things, other ways of reacting to various circumstances may make just as much sense as ours do.

This can be scary. We thought we were being good and kind in receiving this stranger. And now it turns out that, perhaps even without being aware of it, the stranger is challenging us; the stranger is turning us into strangers!

This may well be the underlying and often unrecognized cause of so much fear of the stranger. Quite often I hear comments such as "they will take our jobs," or "they will overwhelm our social services," or "they are illegal." But what I actually hear behind all those comments is "they scare us." "They will question our way of being human." And, "God forbid, they might even force us to question what it means to be American!"

Even though I don't like such feelings, I must acknowledge their validity. Indeed, the stranger -any stranger- is a challenge to us and a question mark on our own culture and traditions.

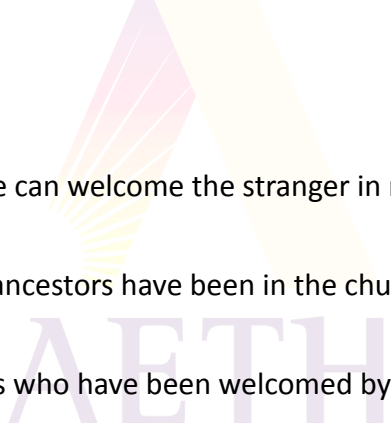
This we must acknowledge, because to offer a welcome to strangers without also welcoming

the questions and challenges that they bring to us is not really to welcome them. It is to invite them to come live among us, but not mess up our lives; to accommodate themselves to our way of being, while we remain unchanged; to give up who they are in order to become one of us.

All of this is true of the church as well as of society at large. And in the church, as in society at large, there are many reasons, and many levels of reasons, for welcoming the stranger.

In society at large we see publicity and marketing companies targeting immigrants, not because they are particularly concerned about their situation, but because they realize this is a growing market which they need. This is not wrong, for after all the task of such companies is to advertise and to sell. Likewise, in the church, there is the realization that the demographics of the nation are not what they used to be, and that churches must respond to the emerging situation simply to survive. This is not entirely wrong. After all, if the church is the bride of Christ we must love it, and we must seek its well-being. But it is not enough, for it turns the stranger into a means to an end.

Then, there are in the church those who would say that we have been commanded to welcome the stranger, and that we have been commanded to preach the gospel, so that in welcoming strangers and preaching the gospel to them we are obeying the commandment of God. This too is not entirely wrong. We certainly must welcome the stranger, and we certainly must preach the gospel. But even this is not enough, for it turns our welcoming and our witnessing into a matter of law, leading to a strange situation in which we preach the gospel because the law tells us to do it. I can well imagine what Luther would have said about that!



Then, as we saw this morning, we can welcome the stranger in recognition and celebration that we too -even those of us whose ancestors have been in the church for generations and generations- we too are strangers who have been welcomed by the one who made himself a stranger in order to be one of us. Now we are turning to the gospel! Now our welcoming is not a matter of calculation nor even a matter of obedience, but a matter of acknowledging and celebrating that we are all strangers, that all of us, who were not a people, are God's people; that we too, who were once far off, have been brought near. This is the gospel!

But there is more, for the gospel is also promised. Because the gospel is a promise, we are to

look at all things in the light of the promise of God. Because the gospel is a promise, we are called to live as those who truly await its fulfillment. Because the gospel is promise, I wonder what would happen if we in the church came to see the emerging demographics, not just as a challenge, nor even as an opportunity for evangelism, but as God's mighty work allowing us a glimpse of that glorious promise: "After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" singing praises to our God, and to the Lamb who sits on the throne. To them be praise for evermore! Amen!

