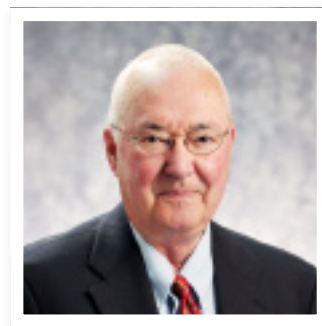


**THE PRAYER OF THE HEART  
BY LAWRENCE CUNNINGHAM**

# ON HOSPITALITY

The British theologian Nicholas Lash, commenting on the Emmaus encounter described in Luke 24, observed that the church was first described in an act of hospitality. The travelers who met the unknown person on the road to Emmaus recognized who he was in the breaking of the bread and recalled how their hearts burned as he had first opened up to them the meaning of the scriptures. At the end of the story they go and tell the others what they have experienced.

The Emmaus account, one of the most profound in all of the Gospels, is redolent of the liturgical life of the nascent church—touched by a moment of evangelization, and suffused with the glow of the Risen Christ. In one sense it is a climax moment of one of the most important themes in Luke's gospel: that of hospitality. However profound that passage is, its fullest meaning only becomes deepened when one reads it against the background of the frequent descriptions found in Luke as he depicts Jesus in that most intimate of hospitable occasions, the sharing of a meal. Such descriptions are found in Luke 5, 7, 11, 14, 15, 16, 19, 22, and 24 almost, as it were, serving as set pieces for the narrative as a whole.



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Anonymous,  
The Christ Child  
as Good Shepherd,  
1600-1650

The Gospel of Luke is punctuated with settings at which our Lord is at table. Sometimes he eats at the home of a Pharisee while other occasions find him at table with sinners. We who are unacquainted with the strict laws of Jewish ritual purity especially at meals may not see the full power of a dinner scene in Luke 19 with a publican like Zacchaeus; nor the oddness of dining at the home of a Pharisee when a woman, a sinner nonetheless, arrives to anoint the feet of Jesus. The critics of Jesus can think of little else to vilify him beyond saying that he eats with sinners and tax collectors. The social shift between eating with sinners and with Pharisees has profound implications perhaps no more largely noted than in the story told by Jesus about the Rich Man and Lazarus. Lazarus, sitting in the detritus of the rich man's gate surrounded by dogs (an unclean animal) ends up in the bosom of Abraham while the rich ends up in eternal torment. At least one part of the rich man's sin is his total neglect of the poor man who sits at his gate. Of course, the Eucharistic sharing at the Last Supper, where Jesus shares his own body and blood, is the supreme act of hospitality with one member of the company, Judas, denying himself the sharing of the table.

It has been observed more than once that the Eucharist was the one place in the Roman Empire where there was equality at table with slaves, free persons and aristocrats sharing in one meal. From its beginnings, Christian missionaries preached to "all nations", inviting each person to be regenerated in water and to join in the fellowship of the Eucharistic table. On the distaff side, the most extreme punishment the church could inflict on a person was to deny that person a place at the table as a punishment for public sin—that is what *excommunication* means—to separate one from union with those who share the Eucharist. That punishment explains why there is an historical link between penance and Eucharist.

Today there is much talk about the new evangelization. In the western world in particular, it is hard to preach the gospel effectively both because there are so many competing voices in our public, largely electronic, media. And, further, there are so many competing voices that tug us away from some of the gospel demands. There is a further problem, too little emphasized in the cascade of literature coming from the Church about this new evangelization, and that problem can be put in the form of a simple but fundamental question: is the church a hospitable community?

Do we *a priori* reluctantly invite some people to come to the table? Have we thought pastorally about the issue of the divorced and remarried? Have we accommodated ourselves to the culturally diverse who come to our country (half of all Catholics will speak Spanish as a first language by the year 2040)? Have we found a way to reach the young who think the church is only about "thou must" and "thou shall not"? Have we reflected upon the people who have been hurt by the members of the church in one way or another? In other words, if someone is tempted to accept the invitation to "return home" to the church, will they find a hospitable community awaiting them?

I am not a pastoral theologian nor do I pretend to be. Nonetheless, one thing strikes me as critical as we follow up on the new evangelization. Before we attempt to make a coherent plan to evangelize others, we need to first be converted (individually and communally), asking ourselves a very simple question: are we genuinely a hospitable community after the manner of Jesus, who ate with sinners and righteous alike thus giving us the first example?

Hospitality is a very old problem in the church. We should remember one particular issue of hospitality that the primitive church faced. Can one eat food that is not kosher in the Christian community? Do Gentile converts have to be circumcised? Had Paul not won that argument, humanly speaking, Christianity would have ended up as a small Jewish sectarian movement. In that sense, Saint Paul gave us the first example of the new evangelization.

Every age faces its own test of accommodation and ours is no different. As the new evangelization begins to gain some traction, we must ask ourselves again whether or not we are ready to welcome strangers, sinners and righteous alike, to the table. The hospitable welcome we need to offer today might take a clue from another act of welcoming found in Luke, the parable of the Prodigal Son (15:11-32). Let persons turn away from the “far country” of alienation, indifference, or sin and find a community that recognizes their return with joy. The new evangelization should be quick to forgive and prompt to welcome. Coming home is a form of conversion and the converted one should find a paternal embrace on that occasion.

