Hospitality as a Life Stance in Mission: Elements from Catholic Mission Experience in the Twentieth Century

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Through Jonathan Bonk’s gracious invitation, I became a senior mission scholar in residence at the Overseas Ministries Study Center in spring 2008. Little did I realize what the semester would hold in addition to research, a public lecture, and the weeklong seminar I gave as part of my residency. In April I broke my leg and had a slow recovery of many weeks at OMSC. As I considered the myriad professional interactions Jon Bonk and I have had over twenty-five years and the themes of this Festschrift, I immediately recalled the diverse expressions of hospitality from Jon and Jean Bonk, the OMSC staff, and residents as my physical mobility expanded that semester. The English word “hospitality” derives from the Latin hospes (a host/hostess, a guest-friend), as do hospitality, hospitable, hospital, and hospice.¹ Missionaries have learned from experience the many cultural expressions of hospitality around the world. Through a brief consideration of three such experiences of Catholic missionaries from the twentieth century, I will draw out some underlying dispositions of hospitality in relation to mission.²

H. A. Reinhold and the Apostleolate of the Sea

The first story is that of German-born Hans Ansgar Reinhold (1897–1968), who joined the German army in 1914, was wounded in action, and then was assigned to translating French and English codes as a member of army intelligence.³ After the war, while a student at the University of Freiburg, he read The Spirit of the Liturgy, by Romano Guardini, which became a crossroads in his life, for in it he glimpsed Christianity as a living experience. He met the liturgist Dom Odo Casel at Maria Laach Monastery, a noted center for liturgical renewal since the late 1910s. There Reinhold experienced missa recitata, or “dialogue Masses,” as they were called, which involved full participation of the people in song and responses during the Eucharistic celebration, rather than their passive presence as onlookers of what was “going on” at the altar. His liturgical experience and the consequent social dimensions of living the liturgy shaped the rest of his life and mission.⁴

Four years after his ordination in 1925, Reinhold was appointed port chaplain of Bremerhaven, “the ugliest of cities,” he remarked—“a stark unoriginal industrial city of unbelievable drabness and functional utilitarianism.” He was then named port chaplain in Hamburg and became cofounder of the International Apostolate of the Sea, an organization of port and sea chaplains and others who ministered to men of the sea.⁵ But a mission perspective that entwined liturgy and social action toward and among seamen who labored on cargo, cruise, or fishing ships brought him exile. At the 1934 International Congress of the Apostolate of the Sea that he organized in Germany, he refused to open the gathering with the required salute to Hitler and the accompanying song. On April 30, 1935, five Gestapo agents came to his office and forced him to sign the receipt of a decree that, he wrote, “banished me from all contacts with the sea and her men,” according to Section I of the law of the Reich President for the protection of people and state.¹² [I] had to leave the coast that very afternoon.³³ After three years of peripatetic exile in Europe and the United States, he was named port chaplain in Seattle, Washington.

During his college years Reinhold had worked aboard cruise ships and had observed the divided “worlds” on the upper and lower decks and in the ship’s hold. As a chaplain in two German ports, he witnessed firsthand the difficulties of a sailor’s life. Mariners were a commodity while on shore to be exploited by prostitutes, vendors, innkeepers, pub owners, and other entrappers, who sought sailors’ hard-earned wages. The men of the sea, gone from their home for lengthy periods of time, were not members of land-based parishes, nor were they even on the parish horizon. Not all sailors, of course, were practicing Catholics or any other kind of Christian. The few Christians Reinhold observed coming to the dock to tend to the sailors often perceived the men to be “poor boys,” who needed protection from those entrappers. From Reinhold’s perspective their form of Christian “mission” made “seamen as a group appear as heathens.”⁶

This approach toward sailors, Reinhold thought, demeaned the men. He abhorred the “petting and nursing attitude” adopted by ministers to sailors. He criticized social activities in the form of clubs provided by Christian groups, many of which, he said, “look like asylums for the destitute,” with “dances, card parties, and second rate musical events.”⁷ He deplored preachers who had no interest in the “social strife” of the men: sailors’ working conditions, the impact of sailors’ lives on families, the increase in mechanization on ships and consequent layoffs, and the lack of hospital care and sick benefits. International Congresses of the Apostleolate of the Sea addressed the social realities that were inhospitable for sailors and, at the same time, promoted the spiritual welfare of the Catholic men.

Reinhold envisioned the mission to and among sailors as a “traveler’s aid for grown-up men” based on the principles of Catholic Action: “all that is manly, active, courageous and altruistic in seamen should be appealed to.”⁸ Not only should Catholic clubs in ports be places of beauty, cleanliness, and hospitality, they should also be places where adult seamen actively participated in liturgy (missä recitata), with full liturgical participation spilling over into all areas of their lives.⁹ Sailors involved in Catholic Action aimed to effect change in their environment, working to make conditions more hospitable and just for living and working.

Anna Dengel: Hospitals, Healing, and Just Relationships

The second story is that of Anna Dengel (1892–1980), born in the Tyrolean town of Steeg, Austria. When she read mission literature from the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary at work in St. Catherine’s Hospital, Rawalpindi, then in India, Dengel drew

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inspiration for her life’s work: namely, to alleviate the suffering of women who had little or no access to health care because of Islamic and Hindu cultural and religious strictures. After obtaining her medical credentials with honor at Cork University in 1919, Dengel labored at St. Catherine’s until 1924, when she found herself completely exhausted. Being the only mission doctor who was a layperson, she had little social companionship, because the rules of the Sisters’ community at the time prescribed limited social interaction with others when the Sisters were not working in the hospital.

During a retreat in Europe, Dengel formed a resolution to found a congregation of women religious devoted to medical missions, something without precedent for Roman Catholics. On the contrary, according to church law, women religious were not to perform surgery, and specifically they could not practice obstetrics. Yet many medical problems of childbirth, infant mortality, and unsafe obstetrical practices affected women. Dengel was convinced of the need to work among Indian women, so in 1925 she, Dr. Joanna Lyons, and two registered nurses began the Pious Society of Medical Missionaries. Eleven years later, seeing the magnificent work the women accomplished, and after lobbying by several individuals and groups over the previous decades, the Vatican gave approval to the women to form the first Roman Catholic congregation of women to work as physicians, surgeons, and obstetricians. By 1967 the Medical Mission Sisters had grown to over 700 Sisters who worked in forty countries. In turn, the Sisters trained local women for medical practice in India, various countries in Africa, and elsewhere.

Dengel’s Mission to Samaritans (1945) laid out the relationship she saw between mission and medical care. Healing or tending to illness certainly could be seen as a “ministry of compassion,” which supported the home as the beginning of social transformation,” as Dana Robert has noted about the work of many women missionaries. But Dengel’s perspective expressed an understanding that medical practice was also an act of restitution, a “debt, which we, the white race, owe to the peoples subjected and exploited by our Forefathers.” Missionaries were like the Good Samaritan in the Gospel, though with modern means at their disposal. They provided not simply unguents, a place to recover, and expert medical care, but equally as important, women were made to feel at home and were valued in the hospital. A concern was that experiences such as these could make the healed women feel “in debt” to those who helped them. Dengel warned the Sisters that the works of mercy should be performed, even though conversions would not result. “The people must never get the idea that conversion and baptism are necessary to reward your devoted care.”

Between 1927 and 1945 Dengel edited Medical Missionary, the journal she inaugurated, which featured stories about the health of women across the world; actions being taken to treat illness such as malaria, leprosy, typhoid, and tuberculosis; and ways to address conditions women faced in their homes or from their culture that endangered women’s health. Mother Dengel and the Medical Mission Sisters in India were pioneers in reducing infant and maternity mortality and in lowering the death rate from devastating disease and from malnutrition. In the process, the life expectancy for women was raised in India. The Medical Missionary exemplified Dengel’s view that medical missions conjoined medicine, science, and social analysis with prayer, liturgy, and charity.

Dengel’s identification with suffering women linked the charity of Jesus with an infrastructure for social justice and a welcome to all. “Relieving suffering in the spirit of Christ means serving Him personally. . . . It brings tidings of peace, breaking down religious prejudice and race hatred. It is a way of bringing together under one friendly roof all classes, all colors and creeds.” Thus hospitality, which allowed for changed relationships toward the “other,” was a witness to God’s gratuitous love and embodied a living relationship between health, spirituality, and political realities.

It would be from Anna Dengel that Mother Teresa of Calcutta learned how to take care of poor and sick persons.

Hospitatlity in the Weihsien Internment Camp, Shandong, China

The third story is that of the Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi, St. Francis, Wisconsin, one of many women religious communities in the United States who sent Sisters to China in the 1920s. The congregation went to the Northern Province of Shandong (Shantung) in 1929, with their initial mission to teach in a “school for virgins,” that is, young ladies who, upon completion of their courses in catechetics, would assist priests in evangelization at various mission stations.

Beginning in 1931 several Chinese women sought admission to the Sisters’ congregation. (In 1947, when the Sisters had to leave China, twenty-five Chinese Sisters of St. Francis came to the United States with them.)

During World War II, the Japanese created a Civilian Assembly Camp, a euphemism for the Weihsien Internment Camp, located at a former Presbyterian mission, to keep civilians from Allied countries in northern China. The camp of about 1,900 people was under the guard of the Japanese Consulate Authority. Japanese officials sent seven Sisters of St. Francis to the camp, situated seventy to eighty miles east of their mission in Hungkailou, Tsianfu, where the Sisters also had a novitiate for Chinese women who desired to become Franciscan Sisters. The Sisters arrived at the camp on March 21, 1943, and, along with other civilians, were declared “enemy citizens” by the Japanese. The Chinese Sisters remained at the mission and continued the schools as best they could in an understaffed situation. For a time, when it was allowed, they brought food and other supplies to the Sisters in Weihsien and kept them informed on what was happening in the mission.

Internees were divided into nine departments to handle details of daily life in the camp. Food preparation fell within one area, and the Sisters were assigned to kitchen work. Initially the fare included vegetables, but as the war came to an end, meals had more rice, wet bread, tea, and water, but few nutritious items. Lines for daily roll call and meals were long and tiring, especially for older people. As one Sister recorded, “Everyone’s troubles were undernourishment, over-crowding, vermin, bad sanitation and lack of freedom.” Nevertheless, internees provided occasional entertainment and lectures for one another, and they shared the few books they had. One lengthy but popular tome that became well-worn in camp was John Gunther’s Inside
Hospitality is about relationships. The stories convey some type of reciprocity, of change, and of mutual learning.

us at all times. Here all nationalities and all denominations are represented, so our living together under present circumstances has broken down a great deal of prejudice on all sides. With many it has been their first contact with priests or Sisters." And, one might add, the camp was the first significant contact the Sisters had with other Christian groups, Jews, or Muslims.

Sister Servatia Berg observed, “In getting to know people of other faiths, we had to admire many things. I especially revered the Anglicans for their ‘quiet hour’ as they called it, each morning before roll call.” Presbyterian missionary John David Hayes, whom Sister Servatia characterized as “a genial person and one to whom you could speak openly,” asked for her St. Andrew Missal, which contained Mass prayers and Scripture readings for Sunday Masses. “When he returned [the missal], he deplored the Latin translation. I had never realized before that they were so poor, as the translation had been done in Belgium. He also told me that on that Sunday he used the missal in his services, reading the Collects of the day. We thought that made a certain bond of union with his services and our Masses earlier in the church.” Sister Servatia empathized with another minister, British Anglican Thomas Scott, who was a bishop. “It must have been difficult for him as far as his congregation was concerned because the Low and High Episcopalians had to worship together and often their views did not coincide, as I learned working with the women [washing] the vegetables.”

Internees enjoyed lectures on a variety of topics. “The Life of a Trappist,” presented by a monk in the camp, “was so popular,” Sister Servatia remarked, “that Catholics had a hard time getting into the room.” One evening Fr. Raymond de Jaegher (1905–80) presented by a monk in the camp, “was so popular,” Sister Servatia remarked, “that Catholics had a hard time getting into the room.” One evening Fr. Raymond de Jaegher (1905–80) spoke on “The Life of Father Vincent Lebbe,” a friend who in the early 1900s advocated strongly for an indigenous rather than European clergy in China. The Sisters discovered they were the only Catholics present at the lecture. A young lady, a Miss Brayne, from the China Inland Mission, was in attendance. Father deJaegher had given her a Bible, and she came at night to inquire about Catholic life. The Sisters met her in the camp’s library, where she read Catholic books while they read the Protestant books. A few months later, the young lady was baptized in the Sisters’ room and received her first Communion the following day.

The camp was liberated by the Duck Mission Team, seven paratroopers under direction of the Office of Strategic Services of the American Army, on August 15, 1945. The Sisters of St. Francis left the camp on September 25, 1945, and returned to their mission in Hungkailou to rejoin their Chinese Sisters.

Notes

1. This seeming reversal of the meaning of hospitality over the centuries is apparently also found in the Talmud (ushpiz, an innkeeper); in the medieval Aramaic of the Zohar, ushpiz came to mean a guest. See “Hostile Origins,” Philologos, November 26, 2001, at http://forward.com/author/philologos/?p=52.


The Sisters found themselves in close quarters with various Protestant groups (who organized themselves as the Weihsien Christian Fellowship), some Greek Orthodox Christians, Jews, and Muslims. Catholics used the Protestant church building in the camp for Sunday services. In a letter to the Mother Superior back in the United States, Sister Bede Brielmaier reflected, “These 2½ years in camp have taught us much. . . . I must say that the internees here all have been very kind and respectful toward..."
Christ,” 2. H. A. Reinhold Papers, MS2003-60, Box 18/15; all Reinhold citations from this collection). For Reinhold’s life and mission, see Upton, Worship in Spirit and Truth.

17. Sr. Bede [Brielmaier] to Mother General, August 26, 1945, Box 4108, 2 File 7, OSF Archives.
19. Ibid., 222, 275–76.