



ERZBISTUM
HAMBURG

Pastoral Letter of Archbishop Dr. Stefan Heße

on the Solemnity of St. Ansgar
on February 3, 2020



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Dear sisters and brothers!

“Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it!” (HEBR 13:2) What sounds like a quotation from a tear-off calendar is one of the most important virtues in Scripture, namely: **hospitality**.

In the Old Testament, the encounter of Abraham and his wife Sara with three strangers is a prime example of hospitality. Three strange men come to them. Abraham greets them and meets them with openness and generosity, not knowing whom he is meeting. He offers the men water, has fresh bread baked and even a young calf prepared. His hospitality is unintentional, in fact, quite exuberant. And in the end, the guests leave him even more than he could give them. The roles are suddenly reversed: the guests become hosts. They give Abraham and Sara a future perspective. They announce the good news to the previously childless couple that Sara will have a child next year. Thus, the encounter with the stranger becomes an unexpectedly great enrichment of their own lives.

By the way, in Latin there is only one word for guest and host: *hospes*. It is a sign that both the host and the guest enrich and give each other gifts. Everyone benefits from hospitality.

Dear fellow Christians!

The scene of Abraham’s banquet can be seen on the altarpiece in our Catholic Church of St. Michael on Helgoland. It fits exactly in the place where many people come as guests day after day. The islanders are their hosts. It also fits well into our church: Here we are all guests of Jesus Christ and as a church we can prove our hospitality to many visitors. By this I mean not only the church on Helgoland, but our entire archdiocese. Hospitality is part



of the good style of our church on all levels and in all places. It should not only be a matter of course in holiday resorts, but everywhere and for everyone. Hospitality shapes our lifestyle as Christians through and through.

When you hear the word guest, one may think of a hotel guest and or a nice evening visit. Hospitality goes deeper: the Greek word for hospitality is *philoxenie*. It is derived from *phileo* (to be a friend) and *xenos* (the stranger). Hospitality means love for the stranger. It is friendship with the stranger. In other words, hospitality means meeting the stranger and the newcomer. It means to warmly welcome them with kindness and love.

During the biblical times of Abraham, when there was no developed hotel system, hospitality was essential for survival. Hospices were places of safety. The monasteries were places of hospitality for centuries. In recent years, this life-saving meaning of hospitality has taken on a whole new relevance in the reception of many refugees in our country. I expressly thank everyone who works for them in our parishes, but also in our municipalities, and who are good hosts in the deepest sense of the word. I wish I do not have to mention now the xenophobia that unfortunately also exists.

Hospitality is the inner attitude of our church, not a marginal phenomenon. The revelation of God in Jesus Christ is not just a mere form of communication, but rather a personal encounter. That is why the content of our Christian faith can never be detached from its form. In this way our faith can and should show itself in our lived hospitality. It is not by chance that Jesus was a frequent guest of the people, his first sign is as a guest at the wedding at Cana. Again and again he invites people to himself, to his life: "Come and see!"

For me there are some very concrete points, how we or you can think and live hospitality further:

1. We are all guests on this earth. One of our most famous funeral songs in German begins with: „*Wir sind nur Gast auf Erden*“. (“*We are only guests on earth*”) It comes from one of the darkest times in our German history. During National Socialism, the author wanted to point out to our final home with God. We go to the heavenly banquet with God and our loved ones. This puts everything else into perspective, which by no means is insignificant. This has consequences for our here and now, for our dealings with this world, things and our whole life. It makes things light and relaxed, it even liberates. It also has consequences for our dealings with creation, which we have merely been entrusted with and should pass on to future generations in a responsible way. We all have a guest status on this earth. Let us behave like good guests.
2. Christ invites us again and again to himself. We can be his guests. Let us take up this divine invitation again and again with courage! He wants us to be at his side, we can listen to him and have communion with him during the Mass. We can just be with him in silence.

But the reverse is also true: The Lord wants to be a guest in our lives. For example, he invites himself into the life of the tax collector Zachäus or at Martha of Bethany: *“Today I must be your guest!”* In this sense, a well-known table prayer says: *“Come Lord Jesus, be our guest!”*

3. Our parishes receive many invitations. You may participate in many events, take part in projects and campaigns in our cities and municipalities. Many are happy when we are their guests. They expect us, and they expect something from us. Let us rejoice that we are asked to be guests. This is by no means a trivial matter. It would be nice if our parishes could respond to these requests with commitment and dedication.

- 4 Finally, let us be good hosts ourselves in our parishes and in all places of church life. Let us encounter our guests, visitors, the unknown and strangers. Let us be welcoming with our whole being! Let us greet them warmly and be accessible ourselves (see Pastoral Orientation Framework II., 5). It must always be a reminder especially when we see few or no guests in our parishes, when they do not feel welcome. To change this is primarily a question of attitude and heart. We are often richly rewarded by our guests. We are no longer just their hosts, but are allowed to be guests in their lives.

Dear sisters and brothers, hospitality is always unintentional. It wants to offer the other person a space in which he can enter and become a friend. This is what the recently deceased Münster theologian Johann Baptist Metz says: *“we must be able to forget ourselves, to step back, so that the other person, in his or her uniqueness, really opens to us. We must be able to let him in, allow him in his uniqueness, which often startles us and calls us to painful transformation. For the mystery of life does not open up to complacency, but to creative reciprocity.”* As a church in the Archdiocese of Hamburg let us truly be a church in relation to God and people. Let us live the call of the Epistle to the Hebrews in a concretely everyday: *“Do not forget hospitality, for through it some have sheltered angels without knowing it.”*

May God bless you and all those with whom we connect hospitably!

Your Archbishop



Dr. Stefan Heße



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