

Leadership Conference of Women Religious
2024 Annual Assembly – Orlando, Florida
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RADICAL INCLUSION AND CHRISTIAN HOSPITALITY

*All humanity, equal in dignity
in the marvelous diversity
which characterizes and enriches it
becomes one with the splendor of all creation,
manifesting the divine
truth, goodness and beauty.*

BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION

Since I received the invitation to be here with you, for which I am very grateful and honored, something stirred in my heart and found an echo in my mind.

That heartbeat and its echo, I believe, could reflect something of the many murmurs that the Spirit, the Divine *Ruah*, who recreates everything that exists, is whispering in these times of transition towards a cultural change. Discerning those soft divine lullabies will help us discover the divine gift we are being offered at this time and in this place.

Among those gentle whispers that the Divine *Ruah* is spreading throughout the world, there seems to be an impulse to recover the sense of Christian hospitality in the radical Inclusion of a fascinatingly diverse humanity in an astonishingly generous cosmos. Both Christoph Theobald and Erin Brigham¹ in their theological and ministerial reflections, bring us closer to this.

From such reflections and testimonies, I am deepening my understanding of hospitality in Christianity as a mystical-prophetic experience. I see it manifesting itself in a relational process that gradually reveals the equal dignity of all humanity, while embracing the whole of creation and manifesting divine truth, goodness and beauty.

Entering into this process is not without its challenges and resistances. Progressively the *other*, is revealed to me as my own flesh. It is the actualization of Isaiah's prophecy: **the other, myself** (Is 58:7).

The intentional experience of radical Inclusion as Christian hospitality is a kind of antidote that helps to counteract everything that distances, separates and divides. It is expressed in a lifestyle of alternative relationships that help to curb the growing polarization that threatens to divert us from who we are and who we are called to be. It leads us to fullness as we grow in our existential awareness of being made in the image and likeness of a Triune divinity, radically inclusive, radically one.

¹ Christoph Theobald, *El Estilo de la Vida Cristiana*, Ediciones Sígueme, 2016 and Erin Brigham, *Church as Field Hospital: Toward an Ecclesiology of Sanctuary*, Liturgical Press Academic, Collegeville, Minnesota, 2022.

Therefore, I consider that Christian hospitality is an expression of the intimate relationship between the mystical and the prophetic. *There is no prophetic experience without its mystical foundation; nor authentic mysticism without true prophecy.*²

Thanks to the invitation to share with you all, I have been reflecting on this theme. What I have been experiencing, from some sources that I have consulted, is my deepening conviction that radical Inclusion is a key option that gives us hope here and now, in this Holy Time as we ask ourselves, “Who then shall we be?”

1. I will begin with a very brief consideration of our context: some of the great transformations in which we are immersed.
2. I will continue with an approach to Christian hospitality as a potential mystical-prophetic experience along with some features of how Jesus of Nazareth practiced it.
3. I will conclude by pointing out some efforts towards the incarnation of this experience.

I. OUR CONTEXT: GREAT TRANSFORMATIONS IN WHICH WE FIND OURSELVES

I am convinced that some of the signs of the times, so evident in the Catholic Church and in our society, as a whole, however chaotic they may seem, are a *Kairos* of the Spirit, of the Divine *Ruah*, who recreates everything that exists.

We understand *kairos* as a favorable time, an opportune moment in which something important happens. In theology it is associated with the time of God. We find ourselves in a transition towards something new that is already in the process of transformation. Today we experience change of so much that we considered unchangeable.!

What is happening has been brewing for a long time. A new awakening nurtures and strengthens our awareness of the unprecedented changes that we are facing. The transformations we are witnessing have to do, among other things, with the emergence of diversities that in the past, were contained by a mentality that had naturalized discrimination, exclusion and inequality among human beings.

At the same time, for millennia, we have considered the natural world as ours to use and abuse. Today, the dramatic effects of climate change are finally having their impact on people who for decades have been denying or minimizing the scientific warnings that human activity is “pushing our planetary systems into dangerous instability.”³

The prophetic voices and actions of Women Religious have played a significant part in making us aware of this *kairos* of the Spirit, of the Divine *Ruah*, that recreates everything that exists. They, you, have been at the forefront of education, healthcare, work on the margins of society. Your contributions to the promotion of women's and girl's dignity are invaluable and have been decisive in the progressive

² José María Arnaiz, religioso marianista en: <https://www.ciudadredonda.org/articulo/necesitamos-profetas-hacer-de-nuestra-vida-una-profecia/>

³ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidrvetter/2023/10/24/we-are-afraid-scientists-issue-new-warning-as-world-enters-uncharted-climate-territory/>

recognition of our rights. You have worked tirelessly for the promotion of justice, peace and the care of creation.

All of this has been decisive in the awakening of conscience both to the groans of nature and to inhuman situations such as wars, genocide, human trafficking, the death penalty, the abuses of clericalism, racism, classism, sexism, and all types of discrimination and exclusion that are related to our society's "throw-away" mentality.

Paraphrasing a poem by Paul Celan⁴, I say,

In the face of the collapsing world,
you hold it in your arms.

Holding the world in our arms, offering it hospitality, is a viable and loving alternative to certain individualistic "habits of the heart" that are alive and well in our society today. These habits not only seek to maintain, but to increase the mechanisms of exclusion and even destruction of human diversity and our common home.

Women's religious communities bear witness to the fact that polarization, which is based on the spread of fear, lies, hatred and cruelty towards those who are considered a threat in their difference, can be transformed and overcome. Our words, attitudes and actions can bring the relational and egalitarian process of hospitality to life, and this is truly prophetic.

When we enter the dynamics of the radical inclusion of Christian hospitality, we can sow the seeds of a human and cosmic reality with different criteria. Then we begin to see with new eyes the "new things that are springing forth" (Is 43:18-19), the alternative worlds where ecocide, as well as racism, classism, sexism and other exclusionary "isms" are left behind as realities of the past that should never have happened.

Let us approach some aspects of the process of the Mystical-Prophetic experience of Christian hospitality as Radical inclusion. My hope is that we can recognize and renew the gift of being daughters and sons of God as we take on the challenging and joyful task of building solidarity through sister and brotherhood in Christ.

II. CHRISTIAN HOSPITALITY AS A POTENTIAL MYSTICAL-PROPHETIC EXPERIENCE

Hospitality is a process in which God's action in our lives recreates our heart and our whole being, humanizing us by the action of the Spirit, the Divine *Ruah*, who dwells in us (Ez 36:26-27). This allows us to discover our own flesh in the other, in her or his diversity: *the other, is myself* (Is 58:7).

Christian hospitality fosters encounters that transform and recreate life. The beautiful story of Abraham, Sara and their visitors in Mamre, (Gen 18:1-16) makes it clear that the promise is announced and realized in a context of hospitality. Revelation (3:20) reveals to us the identity of the one who seeks to be received: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come into her and dine with her and she with me."

⁴ Cf. <https://claraengel.tumblr.com/post/92645652720/vast-glowing-vault-paul-celan>.

II.1 LET US NOW LOOK AT THE PROCESS OF HOSPITALITY THAT THE WORD ITSELF REVEALS TO US

A look at the word "guest", with the help of its Latin and Greek roots, reveals something to us about the transforming process of encounter that occurs in the experience of hospitality⁵. The Greek root is "xenos", foreigner, one who is not equal to me, who does not belong to my social group, who comes from outside and asks to be received. Someone in need who is asking for help. The Latin word "hospes", guest, has the same root as the word "hostis", enemy. It is said that, for the ancient Romans, the foreigner was someone who lived beyond the borders of the empire; someone not of their own, and therefore an enemy, someone who threatened their integrity.

In some respects, this latter understanding is still present in our society today. We find it in the conviction that the stranger, the migrant, the person from a different country, with another skin color, language, sexual orientation or religion, is not equal to us, is not one of us, and, in some way, is not fully human.

This perception is not entirely conscious but has repercussions on the experience of hospitality, both in those who receive it and in those who offer it. This paradox in the words "guest-foreigner-enemy", seems to imply that hospitality entails a climate of risk that requires an act of mutual trust. The others, in their diversity, challenge me to believe in them and to venture to receive them. The others are also challenged, to believe that they will be received.

A second linguistic observation offers us another dimension of hospitality. In the French language, the term "hôte" designates both the one who is welcomed (the "guest" or invited) and the one who receives her (the "hospedera" or "hostess"). This ambiguity of the term can indicate that in the experience of hospitality a symmetry can be created that can even become reciprocity. We can come to recognize each other as equals in our diverse conditions and situations.

Reciprocity implies vulnerability. Shared vulnerability makes it possible for the one who welcomes to be welcomed and the one who is welcomed to welcome. This is an expression of gratuity, the offering of a free gift, which is at the very heart of Christian hospitality.

Finally, another characteristic of hospitality is its provisional, temporary character. The guest will leave and go her way having received and given the grace of mutual recognition in the truth, goodness and beauty of their mutual sacred identity. Once again, *the other, myself* (Is 57:8).

IN SYNTHESIS:

1. Hospitality involves a risk that requires an act of trust on both sides.
2. Guest and host come to recognize each other with a certain symmetry in their different situations and conditions, discovering the potential of a reciprocal relationship.
3. The dynamism of the host-guest relationship goes hand in hand with the mutual recognition of the vulnerability of both the host and the person received, making it possible for each to welcome and be welcomed.

⁵ Descripción fenomenológica de la experiencia de la Hospitalidad en: hospitalidad-santidad-pluralidad-estilos.pdf (uca.edu.ar) pp 4-8.

4. It is a gratuitous encounter that is unpredictable, both for the one who knocks at the door and for the one who opens it. This free gift is at the very heart of all Christian hospitality that radically includes the other as one's self.
5. Once the risk of true hospitality is taken, when the first contact is positive, a bond is created: a shared history, an experience that unites, a relationship that, even if brief or momentary, exists into the future.

The radical inclusion of Christian hospitality is a process of conversion that allows us to progressively move from *hostis* to *hospes*, from a perception of the other as a threat, to their revelation as a gift, recognizing ourselves as *hôte*, in that wonderful ambiguity of the word that translates into the experience of recognizing ourselves as hosts and guests at the same time, in vulnerability, reciprocity and gratuity.

Having said this, let us now consider some features of hospitality in Jesus of Nazareth, the Divine Word who incarnates himself in history.

II.2 SOME FEATURES OF THE HOSPITALITY THAT WE FIND IN JESUS OF NAZARETH

The French philosopher Jacques Derrida spoke of hospitality conditioned by norms, as different from absolute or sacred hospitality. He pointed out that this sacred hospitality is a gift from God that allows us to receive the unexpected guest as a divine presence in our midst. Welcoming someone in this way can be life-changing. However, Derrida concludes that this absolute hospitality, deeply inspired in messianic ethics, is out of our reach.⁶

A French Jesuit named Christoph Theobald published a critical study entitled *Christianity as Style*⁷. That style, for him, is the hospitality revealed in Jesus Christ. As opposed to Derrida, he thinks that it is possible for us to practice absolute, sacred or what I call "radical" hospitality because it is a way of life that we can choose among others. It was the style of Jesus, and if Jesus calls us to follow him, it must be possible for us to live that style as well.

The author finds reasons in the study of the Trinity by Hans Urs von Balthasar, a 20th century Swiss Catholic theologian. In Trinitarian theology, the divine persons are mutually hospitable. Love is a reciprocal welcome that implies a movement of emptying and self-giving on the part of both the person who receives and the one who is received. This is the style of Jesus of Nazareth.

We exist by walking towards others, and we not only walk towards the other person but we stay in them, we *are* in that person. The Trinity, whose image and likeness we are, is the fullest expression of hospitality. We reflect the divine Father/Mother by receiving each other as sisters and brothers in Jesus, the living Word. The Spirit, the divine *Ruah*, the bond of love, enables us to live each day with attitudes and actions of reciprocal hospitality, where the other is recognized as my very flesh in its marvelous

⁶For Derrida, hospitality is not an entity, nor an object, nor a thing, but an experience that appeals to the act and to the intention that leads beyond knowledge. It is an intentional experience that overflows even the limits of knowledge and that implies at all times the relationship with another person. Cf. *Dos conceptos de hospitalidad en Jacques Derrida – Migración con rostro humano* (Wordpress.com)

⁷ Edition in French, *Le christianisme comme style*, Ed. Cerf, 2007; traducido al español, *El Estilo de la Vida Cristiana*, Ediciones Sígueme, 2016. See also *Le christianisme comme style Entrer dans une manière d'habiter le monde* Christoph Theobald, *Dans Revue d'éthique et de théologie morale* 2008/HS (n°251), pages 235 à 248

diversity. As the image and likeness of the Trinity, our fragile and vulnerable humanity has the potential for communion.

The Trinitarian community has a unique quality that can be symbolized in a divine dance that maintains the identity of each of the persons as they interrelate. This indwelling is expressed in the total, mutual reciprocity of all three⁸.

This form of Trinitarian relationship, called *perichoresis*, is a way of understanding the invitation that God addresses to us in Jesus, through the Divine *Ruah*. In our diversity we join the dance of God's most intimate and universal love, moving with one another (in one) in such a way that we experience the fundamental interconnectedness that binds and enriches us. God's way is an unceasing dance, in which each person unendingly turns to the other in complete self-giving.

We exist in ourselves and our lives have meaning to the degree that we transcend ourselves, giving and receiving being from others.

The Trinity is the fullest expression of radical inclusion. Trinitarian theology tells us that the divine persons are mutually hospitable. Love is a reciprocal welcome that implies a movement of self-emptying and self-giving on the part of both the person who welcomes and the one who is welcomed. This is the style of Jesus of Nazareth.

God became vulnerable in the incarnation. Jesus came to us as fully human (Phil 2:5-8). Jesus knew what it was to be unprotected, to be a stranger: "The Word was in the world and the world was made through him. He came to his own and his own did not recognize him or welcome him" (Jn 1:10-11). Jesus did not always receive radical hospitality, but he offered it. He assumed our vulnerability, which includes the capacity to be wounded by others, and our fragility, that part of the human condition that experiences our brokenness from within⁹.

The *kenosis* of Jesus of Nazareth and his willingness to learn, manifest the simplicity and unity of his being. His hospitality elicits and reveals what is most basic to life. To take on our human flesh, to become one of us, is the culminating gesture of love for the world and for history. Jesus is vulnerable like us, waiting to be received, to be believed, to be nourished, to be included (cf Rev 3,20).

Jesus' style is one of open and unconditional hospitality. He proclaims the Good News in a credible and coherent way. The unity between what he lives inwardly and what he says and does, vividly express the gospel of freedom in a hospitable way. Our world, perhaps today more than ever, needs coherent and hospitable followers of Jesus.

As our awareness expands, we see and are moved by the diversity of faces disfigured by exclusion. The Divine *Ruah*, gently murmurs, reminding us that radical inclusion through Christian hospitality is a mystical-prophetic experience. It is revealed to us in those knocking on our doors, waiting to be received and recognized in their inalienable dignity.

⁸ See [Trinidad, camino y danza de Dios. La perijoresis \(religiondigital.org\)](http://Trinidad_camino_y_danza_de_Dios.La_perijoresis_(religiondigital.org))

⁹ Cecilia Avenatti, *La Dimensión Teológica de la Hospitalidad Incondicional de Jesús de Nazareth: Santidad y Fragilidad*, en *Raíces: nuestro método de Familia Grande/ 1ra. Ed- Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires: Santa María, 2021, p.78* cf: dimension-teologica-hospitalidad.pdf (uca.edu.ar)

Jesus, in his *kenosis*, his healthy detachment from himself and his dedication to others, is the guarantee made flesh of the possibility of radical inclusion as a response to the multiple faces of violence in today's world. Christian hospitality in service and in truth, is an authentic answer and a true source of peace and new life.

Let us now consider some of the processes that are being put into practice in response to these calls.

III. SOME EFFORTS TOWARDS LIVING CHRISTIAN HOSPITALITY TODAY

Jesus' style of open and unconditional hospitality, challenges us as we face the realities that contradict and deny this truth. As disciples of Jesus, how can we share the Good News that all of humanity and all that exists are manifestations of divine glory? We see the afflictions, we hear the cries, we know the anguish that so many people, families, societies, and entire nations are suffering and we want to participate in the slow and painful labor of promoting conditions that recognize and foster respect for their dignity. Our longing to participate is especially challenging at this time when our communities are smaller and with an advancing median age. And yet there are various ways to respond to the call for radical hospitality at any age and in any circumstances.

Yahweh said to Moses, "I have seen the affliction of my people in Egypt, I have heard the cries of their oppression, and I know their distress. I have come down to deliver them... and to bring them up out of that land to a land fertile and spacious, a land flowing with joy and gratitude". (cf. Ex 3:7-8)

To enter into the realm of Christian hospitality is to enter into the mystery of choosing to respond to the disfigured humanity of which we all form a part. It is an ethical dimension of our lives, a responsibility from which we cannot escape. For the Jewish and Christian scriptures, we could say that it is the paradox of unconditional being, always conditional, but possible.

Some paths have been blazed and certain strategies have been tried out from which we can learn. In order to live in a way of radical inclusion in the style of Jesus, perhaps a process of prayerful discernment in our communities can enlighten us, so that together we can situate ourselves in the face of emerging realities where people are groaning for recognition of their full dignity.

Our spiritualities, our interpersonal relationships, our communal spaces of encounter among ourselves and with those around us, reveal to us the inspirations of the Divine *Ruah*. They are mediations with a marvelous, sacred potential, that we are called to recreate and share. They are the treasures that Mathew's Gospel describes in 13:52: So, every leader who has been instructed in the Good News of God's Reign is like a homemaker who brings out from her treasures new things and old.

III.1 I CONCLUDE WITH A GLIMPSE AT MY COMMUNITY'S EXPERIENCE IN THIRTY-TWO YEARS, AS A MONASTERY SITUATED IN A LOW-INCOME NEIGHBORHOOD.

Something that has marked me since my first years in our service in favor of the dignity of women, especially the most needy, has been the gradual transformation that we, and they, see in their lives. A change takes place in these women as they are included in a variety of liturgical spaces both in the monastery and in our community center. They are readers and commentators of the Word; they participate in special celebrations called "Agape". We dialogue about the reality that surrounds us, and

the problems we face in church and in society. Gradually they become willing and able to touch and share their inner feelings and intuitions. As they tell their often painful and traumatic stories, they enter into processes of healing and begin to deepen their awareness of their dignity and that of others, and they respond to the invitation to translate their newfound wisdom into liberating actions at home, at church and in society.

In many of these women there is a great sensitivity and desire to deepen their experience of God. It is awe-inspiring how they embrace and propose images of God that include not only the feminine but also the amazing diversity in which humanity has been created in the divine image.

Similarly, they recognize and are grateful for the gift of creation and our common home entrusted to their care. Even the tiny plot of land where they live in our hot, dry semi-desert climate is a treasure to them. They understand that through God's boundless generosity, human beings have been given everything we need to live a dignified life. The inequality in the distribution of natural resources comes from our human misuse of God's gifts.

Opening homes, chapels and welcoming arms, to people who do not feel well-received in other ecclesial spaces, who are strangers to our neighborhood, that many consider dangerous; or those who have moved away and now return, are also transforming experiences. For my community, these have been encounters in which we have welcomed and been welcomed by others, when we recognize these each person and honor their dignity. As we join together at prayer, in simple conversation or at table, in the love, truth and freedom of the daughters and sons of God, we renew our awareness and identity in Christ. As true sisters and brothers we savor the fruits of listening to the Word and putting it into practice. Something different, something new, is being announced and taking shape.

In closing I want to share this simple story that happened to me and my community a few months ago. It was a day when I finally had some time to work on the presentation for this meeting with you. I had been looking forward to a day like this for several weeks. Then, around noon, I got a phone call. Lucía a woman we had known since we arrived in Torreon 32 years ago, was back in town with a friend and wanted to come and visit us. I must admit that I sighed inside with some frustration, but I got ahold of myself and invited them to join us for our midday meal.

Let me tell you a little about Lucía. Thirty years ago, she was a young woman who was angry with life in general. Her family suffered from a combination of alcoholism, poverty and violence. At one point she had considered religious life, but her frustration with all institutions and her very critical attitude towards almost everything, prevented her from following that path.

Through the years, she often stopped by our monastery because she was afraid, angry, hungry, or exhausted and needed a safe place to talk, pray, get something to eat or take a siesta. However, we did not escape from her often biting criticism.

Lucía moved out of town many years ago, mostly to get away from her family, and today she was back with a friend for a visit and wanted to stop by and say hello.

Her friend-partner, Peter was polite, but nervous when we were introduced and started the conversation at the table. But as the meal progressed, he didn't waste his time, talking about football or the weather. Early in the conversation he started to tell us his story, another tale of a childhood filled with violence, poverty and alcoholism.

When he met Lucía and felt an attraction to her, the last thing she wanted was a relationship with an alcoholic, so he joined AA and shortly after, began to court her. They have been together for several years now, and with their ups and downs, have remained faithful to their mutual values.

They don't share the ideals of the market economy. Peter leads a semi-professional musical group and Lucía makes handcrafts. When he doesn't have work as a musician, he joins her with the making and distribution of her art, along with others who share their ideals.

As our meal advanced, their simplicity and joy became contagious. Before saying good-bye, it seemed natural for us to invite them into our little chapel for a blessing. As we prayed together their eyes filled with tears of joy. It had been a long, long time since they had felt welcome in church.

As they were leaving, we exchanged small gifts, gave many Mexican "abrazos" before we waved goodbye. When they were gone, there was a strange peace and happiness in our hearts and our smiles. What had begun as an annoying interruption to our busy day, had turned into a grace-filled encounter that had touched us deeply.

I remembered Nuria Martínez Gayol writing that we have a glimpse of how to be hope for others; how to sustain the hope that has been and continues to be shipwrecked in our time. The ultimate foundation of Christian hope is that God has hope in us and has faith in the world, the work of the divine hands. God hopes in humanity because we are created in the divine image and likeness, because we are a treasured part of creation, and because God loves us unconditionally and freely and has given us the gift of recognizing and loving ourselves and others the same way.¹⁰

¹⁰Nuria Martínez-Gayol, *La Pequeña Esperanza*, Cuadernos Frontera Hegian, Ed. Instituto Teológico de Vida Religiosa, (Vitoria-Gasteiz).