

'The Lord your God loves the stranger...'



Written by BISHOP LEONARD P. BLAIR

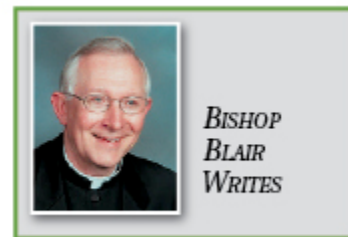
Saturday, 07 August 2010 00:00



As we celebrate our diocesan centenary and compare 1910 with 2010, it's probably safe to say that everyday life has changed more in the last 100 years than it did in the previous 1,000. The whole rhythm of life and human interaction is vastly different today because of the mode of living created by technology, transportation, communications and modern economics. No doubt something has been gained and something lost in our way of life compared to the past.

There is one human interaction that in modern society is not what it used to be; that is, hospitality, as practiced almost universally throughout history and the Bible in particular. I don't mean the advertised hospitality of a hotel chain to its guests or the hospitality a family shows to visiting relatives, but rather the ancient rules and customs of hospitality toward strangers, even enemies.

For the ancient Greeks, hospitality to the stranger was a sign of being civilized. For the Egyptians it was a way of securing a favorable existence in the afterlife. For the Romans it was not a courtesy but an obligation. For the Israelites, however, hospitality was sacred. By God's design the Jewish people came into being from patriarchs who had been wanderers, sojourners, strangers in the wilderness and in Egypt. In the Book of Deuteronomy (10:19) we read: "The Lord your God loves the stranger ... you also shall love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."



A few weeks ago the Sunday readings told us how Abraham, our "father in faith," and his wife Sarah welcomed a mysterious trio of strangers into their tent. They were not only welcomed, but treated royally and with great deference. Looking back at this event, the Letter to the Hebrews (13:2) says that Abraham and Sarah "entertained angels unawares."

The New Testament abounds in references to hospitality, not only in the life of Jesus and the Apostles who, after all, were itinerants much of the time, but also in the life of the early church. We can see the extent to which hospitality was key to all the missionary endeavors of the first Christians. Interestingly, when I lived in Rome I was told that often it was foreign immigrants — Filipino or Polish housemaids — who were bringing the Catholic faith back into the households and nurseries of Italian families who had grown indifferent to the practice of their Catholic faith.

If hospitality is part of who we are and what God expects of us, then no matter how different life in 2010 may be from life in 1910 or even 1910 B.C., we are obliged to practice hospitality toward strangers.

This applies first to acts of hospitality in our homes, parishes and communities. It has been shown over and over again that it is the welcoming parish, the hospitable community, that attracts new members and brings back alienated members to the faith. We should also remember hospitality when it comes to those who are in need because of economic hardship, natural disasters or other woes. Hospitality is not impersonal charity at arm's length, but personal care, personal welcome and engagement face to face. We can find a wonderful example in Blessed Teresa of Calcutta.

Hospitality to the stranger also has a direct application in the life of our country. The ancestors of most African-Americans were brought here against their will in the terrible institution of slavery. Native Americans have inhabited this land from time immemorial. Most of us, however, are descendants of immigrants, of ancestors who not all that long ago came to America

as strangers, hopefully not just in search of material prosperity, but also in pursuit of freedom and a more just and peaceful life for themselves and their families.

In our country today there is much controversy about how to deal with new immigrants, especially illegal immigrants. People can disagree, even strongly, about how to remedy the situation, but we can never forget the fundamental moral principles that flow from both faith and reason.

What are some of those principles? For one, people have a right to a decent life in their own homeland so that they don't have to leave, but if that fails people also have the right to migrate to support themselves and their families, just as so many of our ancestors did. Another principle is the rule of law and the right that sovereign nations like the United States have to control their own borders, but this does not abolish the duty every country has not only to grant asylum to the persecuted and to war refugees, but also to respect the basic human dignity and human rights of every immigrant, even the undocumented.

As our national bishops' conference has pointed out, the law adopted in Arizona which is receiving so much national attention only serves to underscore the urgent need for comprehensive immigration reform by the federal government. Immigrants are not criminals. Like the ancestors of most of us, they come to find work and support their families. Family is a special concern, and the bishops have been strong advocates of reform that protects the integrity of families.

Recently the Arizona bishops emphasized an urgent need, not for amnesty, but for a process to pursue legal status by persons who have entered our country illegally. That process might well include certain penalties, but it would be a necessary step in fixing our broken immigration system.

None of us can live the biblical precept of hospitality to strangers in the same way as Abraham and Sarah so long ago. We can, however, exercise greater hospitality in our homes, parishes and communities, and as good citizens we are obliged to make a positive, informed and morally-principled contribution to the national debate. For a good summary of what the bishops are advocating for comprehensive immigration reform, I recommend you visit the diocesan website at www.toledodiocese.org and look for the section "Learn about Immigration."

Every time we celebrate Mass, our human diversity finds a higher unity in God. Every race and nation is represented in the Catholic Church, and St. Paul's words to the Ephesians (2:19) apply to us all, that in Christ "you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the holy ones and members of the household of God." It must always be our desire to bring more and more people to Him in whom all cultures find purification, perfection and fulfillment.

At the end of our sojourn in this world our great hope is to be welcomed not into an earthly homeland, but a heavenly one. For this to happen we must heed the words of Psalm 15, that it is "the one who does justice who will live in the presence of the Lord."

Last Updated on Saturday, 07 August 2010 00:00