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Bishop of Rapid City**

**2015 Pastoral Ministry Days
Terra Sancta Retreat Center**

I was a Stranger: Welcoming the Stranger through Hospitality
March 22-24, 2015

OPENING CONFERENCE: “And You Welcomed Me” ~ March 23, 2015

Good morning everyone! It is so great for all of us to be here for our annual Pastoral Ministry Days. As your bishop, I am delighted to join you for these days of gathering and engaging the topic of Hospitality. It is my hope and prayer that these days of prayer and reflection will be of great benefit to all of us, but also will bear great fruit in our Diocese.

As you all know by now, if you looked into your packets, and certainly from the registration forms, and just look up at the monitors, that our theme this year is **“I Was a Stranger: Welcoming the Stranger through Hospitality.”**

The goal of these days, I believe will be these:

1. Gather as a faith community in prayer and reflection
– a great Lenten opportunity:
We ask the Holy Spirit to open our hearts to his power and direction.
2. Define Christian Hospitality as it pertains to stewardship:
 - a. Synopsis of stewardship
 - b. Biblical Hospitality
 - c. How will it change parish life?
 - d. Importance of hospitality in bringing us all into closer relationship with Christ
3. To reflect upon our own parish communities in regard to how it is lived out there:
 - a. Who are the strangers in our midst?
 - b. How do we welcome them?
4. What opportunities can we bring back to our parishes to raise the level of hospitality?

SYNOPSIS OF STEWARDSHIP

As we begin, let me do so by giving a brief synopsis of stewardship and kind of a review from last year’s PMD with Fr. Darrin Gurr.

We live in a culture today that values little when it comes to religion/faith and takes much for granted. As we all are aware, we have to fight for our religious freedom. There is an increasing separation of religion and government.

With the rise of secularism, [a new religion of today] God is being replaced as the center of the universe with man. Human beings are now the center of the universe. It's an "all about me" world.

Obviously that is not what God has intended. But we see it all the time. Jesus is seen more as an ethical model or a nice philosopher or a humble man who did good. We hear a spirituality that is like this: "I would rather take a walk around the lake or through the woods, to look at the wildlife or the flowers, than spend time in a building saying a bunch of prayers."

Or "You don't have to be involved in organized religion to be a spiritual person."

Attitudes such as this diminish or perhaps even disregard any notion of a stewardship of life whereby one gives their life away.

When we think of stewardship, we must see it as at the heart of Catholic spirituality; it is at the heart of what makes us disciples.

In the [USCCB] Pastoral Letter on *Stewardship: A Disciples Response*, stewardship is intimately connected to discipleship. They cannot be separated. Becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ naturally leads to the practice of stewardship – giving our lives away for others. It is what we do after we say "I believe."

Discipleship and stewardship – these are linked realities and they make up the fabric of a Christian life in which each day is lived in an intimate, personal relationship with the Lord. Christian stewards respond in a particular way to the call to be a disciple. In a real way, it is lived out through our vocation.

In the Pastoral Letter on *Stewardship: A Disciples Response*, [we read]: "*Each of us – clergy, religious, lay person; married, single; adult, child – has a personal vocation. God intends each one of us to play a unique role in carrying out his divine plan. The challenge then, is to understand our role – our vocation – and to respond generously to this call from God. Christian vocation entails the practice of Stewardship.*"

As we recall last year, Fr. Gurr shared: **Stewardship IS a spirituality.**

1. Mature disciples make a conscious, firm decision, carried out in actions, to be followers of Jesus Christ, no matter the cost to themselves.
2. Being a good disciple and faithful steward has its beginning in conversion. We are all called to conversion every day. It is a commitment expressed not in a single action, or a series of actions, but an entire way of life. In other words, it is part of our identity – who we are at our core. Conversion means committing one's entire life to the Lord.
3. Stewardship is an outward expression of discipleship with the power to change how we understand and live out our lives. Jesus' disciples – Christian stewards recognize God as –

- ~ **the origin of life,**
- ~ **the giver of freedom,**
- ~ **and the source of all things.**

Jesus' disciples are grateful for the gifts they received and are **EAGER** to use them to show their love for God and for one another.

As Christians, as Catholics, “the only choice we have is whether we want to live out our baptismal call, our life in Christ, sharing in his saving work.” It is not about volunteering, but living this life in Christ, and living it as Christ lived it.

No matter what age we are, young or old or middle aged, adult, child, high school student, college student, by virtue of baptism in Christ, we are called, challenged, invited to a lifestyle of stewardship in the heart of Jesus.

Therefore, stewardship is NOT A PROGRAM. It is A WAY OF LIFE; which means it must become an integral part of everything we do in our personal lives as well as in parish life. **IT IS WHO WE ARE – OUR TRUE IDENTITY.**

The traditional definition of stewardship has been in regard to sharing our time, talent and treasure. Looking at it through these lenses is fine, but as the Diocese of Rapid City, we have chosen to look at stewardship in our diocese through the lenses of hospitality, faith and discipleship.

In fact, as you may recall, the mission statement for stewardship in our diocese is:

To promote the Catholic Way of Life through: Hospitality, Faith & Discipleship

As you all know, this past year, we are focused on hospitality. We chose hospitality first because it lays the groundwork or the framework for faith and discipleship. If we do not do hospitality well, faith and discipleship will be diminished. I think as I move on, this will be more clear.

We now want to move into a definition of Biblical or Christian Hospitality.

BIBLICAL OR CHRISTIAN HOSPITALITY

We have been encouraging parishes to find ways to better welcome the stranger; to get others involved in parish life; to express appreciation for the many who live out stewardship in their parishes.

What is real hospitality? Hospitality is much more than a simple welcome or an offer of food or drink to someone. It is not so much about actions, but about attitude; about what's in the heart to make me want to be hospitable; a way of life. It can be very challenging to live it as a way of life.

Have you ever thought about hospitality as a virtue? It is an important virtue. What is a virtue?

St. Thomas Aquinas defines virtue as a habit **“by which we live righteously, of which no one can make bad use, which God works in us, without us.”** This definition does not apply to every kind of virtue that Aquinas discussed, but it captures the essence of what he thought are the most important kinds of virtues.

It is important to be mindful that not every habit is a virtue. It is a virtue if it improves and perfects the mind, the will and the human person as a whole, inclining it towards the good – in terms of the person's ultimate destiny. Let's define **it [virtue] as a habit that leads us to love more freely and more generously, as well as intentionally.**

I might even call it one of the Fruits of the Holy Spirit – it may not be listed in Galatians 5:22-23 with the other ones, but **I consider it to be a “fruit” because it does not come naturally for most people.**

Hospitality is an important virtue generally neglected by modern society. Oftentimes we prefer not to be bothered by others or to bother others. A secular culture, where the focus is on ourselves and our own happiness, tends to desensitize us to others around us, to their needs or just their presence. Living hospitality, not as an action, but a virtue can be challenging.

Hospitality requires us to accept others just as they are when they come into our lives, whether or not we like them or what they do; whether or not we know them or don't know them.

Pope Francis brought this out in the very beginning of *The Joy of the Gospel* when he wrote: *“The great danger in today's world, pervaded as it is by consumerism, is the desolation and anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart, the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures, and a blunted conscience. Whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor. God's voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good fades. **This is a very real danger for believers too.** Many fall prey to it, and end up resentful, angry and listless. That is no way to live a dignified and fulfilled life; it is not God's will for us, nor is it the life in the Spirit which has its source in the heart of the risen Christ.”* [Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, #2]

When we think about the stewardship of Hospitality – or the Virtue of Hospitality – it means that each person in our presence is important to us; is deeply valued because they, like all of us, have been created in God's image and likeness.

There is an inherent dignity that must be acknowledged by the way we treat our guests, or by the way we treat those we don't know in the parish, or as the Gospel puts it, the way in which we welcome the stranger. “When I was a stranger, you welcomed me.” [Matt 25:35]

A Personal Story:

When I was in my first year of major seminary at the North American College in Rome, first year students are not allowed to return to the US during the summer. They have to remain across the pond and engage some type of an apostolate or language study for four weeks. So the summer between my first and second year, one of the things that I did was to spend a month in Kenya with the Maryknoll priests. I had always wanted to go to Africa and I was always impressed with the Maryknoll Mission Society. Growing up, we would always get their magazine and I would always appreciate when they came to the parish.

The day after I arrived in Nairobi, we set out on an 8 hour ride to village named Bura Tana near the Indian Ocean, the eastern part of Kenya. So where we were, people lived in these round grass huts – perhaps about 10-12 feet in diameter. This would be the home for a whole family. The priest with whom we stayed, another seminarian and I were invited to the home of a Catholic family who lived in one of these houses. Eight people, I recall, inhabited this house. I was in for a shock when we got there.

We were invited in the hut and took our place seated on the ground. I didn't know what to expect, never have been in such a poor country. The whole family was not there, but there must have been about 5 members. The language was Kiswahili. Obviously, my English would not work here. They sat us down and proceeded to give us something to eat and some tea and milk to drink. They were so excited that we came to see them and could not refrain from offering generous hospitality to us. Why do I call it generous? There is a difference.

Hospitality is the friendly reception and treatment of guests or strangers. I think we would all agree. But this was generous hospitality. The difference? These people, this family had so little. They could not afford to send their kids to school. But in providing the food and drink, they shared with us what little they had. It was lived experience of the story in Mark's Gospel of the "widow's mite." It was more important to welcome us in such a way than to hold back. They certainly did not give from their excess.

I asked the priest about this family after we left and he told me their story. He said that our being there was very important to them, and them feeding us (sharing hospitality) was part of who they were, even though they had so little. I could have cried! That was generous hospitality, or at least one example of it. We were welcomed as Christ would have been welcomed.

Hospitality is an attitude of heart; it's a virtue that opens us to others and receives them on their own terms. It is intimately tied to the virtue of Charity.

"Hospitality means primarily the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. . . Hospitality is not a subtle invitation to adopt the lifestyle of the host, but the gift of a chance for the guest to find his own." [Fr. Henri Nouwen]

St. Benedict maintained that hospitality is prominent in living out a Christian way of life. A guest in your community represents Christ and **has a claim** on the welcome and care of the whole community. In other words, if we love one another, God abides in us and His love is perfected within us and is showered on those with whom we come in contact. The writings of St. John make it very clear that when loving others, it reflects our love for God. Because God loves us completely and unconditionally, when we love and serve others in the community through hospitality, we are also serving God. And it speaks about how we value others who are in our midst.

Nikos Kazantzakis – Greek writer and philosopher – *Zorba the Greek; The Last Temptation of Christ* – wrote: *"I knew that no matter what door you knock on in a Cretan village, it will be opened for you. A meal will be served in your honor and you will sleep between the best sheets in the house. In Crete the stranger is still the unknown god. Before him all doors and all hearts are opened."* [Nikos Kazantzakis, Report to Greco, pg. 312]

“The stranger is still the unknown god.” Certainly in the Greek pagan world, this would be their interpretation. In the Christian world, the stranger would be the known God, Jesus Christ himself. We see here in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus identifies himself with the stranger – the hungry, the imprisoned, the naked, the ill: “*Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.*”

We also see Jesus throughout the Gospels offering hospitality to these very same types of people. Hospitality could be looked at as “Incarnational spirituality.” In other words, the Incarnation brought Jesus into this human world as a human person so that we might be shown what it means to be human; so that we might be shown what it means to serve others, to reach out to others, to give our lives away for others; so that we might be shown how to live the **virtue** of hospitality.

The radical claim of Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel is that hospitality to the vulnerable and the stranger is a defining mark of a disciple – a distinctive attribute of one who is part of God’s Kingdom and is loyal to Jesus, whom we might call the “Divine Stranger.” Those who treat strangers as strangers rather than inviting them in as part of a process of changing them to valued guests are entirely out of step with the demands of the Gospel. This was not only very challenging teaching during 1st century Israel, but remains so even in our society today.

Christian hospitality is not merely a practice but a way of life. It is a view of God’s Kingdom that offers to each of us a unique way of being Christian, of modeling Jesus. It is not a specialized spiritual gift that only a few people have. It is about how we receive outsiders openly and provide a space/an environment for them to move from being strangers to guests, and then, hopefully to family. It is not burden, but a joy and a way of being for others. That’s why it is virtuous.

In the Letter to the Hebrews, the author writes, “*Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect hospitality, for through it some have unknowingly entertained angels. Be mindful of prisoners as if sharing their imprisonment, and of the ill-treated as of yourselves, for you also are in the body.*” [Heb 13:1]

“*Do not neglect hospitality, for through it some have unknowingly entertained angels.*” This should give us all pause to reflect upon those who come into our midst and how we receive them.

Hospitality as presented to us in the scriptures is not merely a practice, but a virtue, a way of life; a whole life view of the Kingdom of God that offers us a uniquely Christian ethic.

HOW WILL IT CHANGE PARISH LIFE?

First of all, hospitality implies *attentiveness* to the other and to the needs of others, even anticipating their needs. It is about paying attention. When we pay attention, we divest ourselves of self-preoccupation. To be hospitable we have to get out of ourselves and become interested in the other.

A while back, just after dark one evening, someone knocked on my door at home, two young girls and their dad. They did not introduce themselves, so I didn’t know if they were from somewhere in the neighborhood or they came specifically to the bishop’s house to try and sell me some Girl Scout cookies. I was right in the middle of something, but stopped and answered the door and all they asked if I wanted to buy some cookies. For some reason I quickly said “no thank you” to them. They said thank you and left.

After they left as I reflected upon this encounter, I was convicted that I did not engage them, was not attentive to them, did not provide room for them (like Pope Francis spoke of) but more or less dismissed them. The issue was not that I didn't want any cookies, but that there was no hospitality shown. I was self-preoccupied and not interested. This was something I have since confessed in the sacrament of penance. But the following morning in my personal prayer time, I prayed a rosary for these girls and their family as a way to repent of my inhospitality.

Often our lack of hospitality is simply the failure to notice and acknowledge others and their needs—the needs of the larger world and the needs of those closest to us. Jesus models that attentiveness. He noticed the sick, the excluded, the hungry, those that others passed by. God continues to be attentive to all of us, all the time. As we contemplate the ministry of Jesus, we are called to heighten our awareness of others so that we can carry on the ministry of Jesus, this ministry of hospitality.

When we look at our parishes, how many people come week after week, and still feel like they are anonymous? Is not our church God's house? Are not the people who enter the doors of our churches God's people, whether we know them or not?

The level of hospitality in the parish really should reflect the love of Christ for others. Parishioners of a stewardship parish seek to see the face of Christ in one another. Both parishioners and guests feel they belong and appreciated. Hospitality leads to a sense of ownership among parishioners. Ownership and personal involvement fosters a sense of "belonging." [Hospitality] enlivens a parish family because it fosters and creates a sense of family.

Are there cliques in your parish? Is there the "in-crowd"? Are there groups who have taken their own territory and put up a brick wall around it so it is hard for anyone else to enter into that ministry?

In parishes alive with hospitality, there are no cliques, no in-crowd – all people are the same and treated the same. Yes, we need leaders, but true leaders have open minds and hearts toward all parishioners and guests. They possess nothing. They desire to share the love of God "that has been poured into their hearts." The love of God flows through the heart of a faithful steward out to others.

Sometimes I wonder how many guests come through the doors of our churches on any given weekend. Do we know who they are? Do we ask them to identify themselves so that they can be properly welcomed as a guest among us? Do we offer them hospitality of any kind or do they come to us anonymously and leave anonymously?

Think about why they might be there on a given weekend. Are they weary travelers? Are they new in town and looking for a parish? Are they people who might be thinking about converting to the faith? Are they just looking for a more hospitable parish than where they have been attending? Who knows the reasons why people might show up in your churches! The reasons can be endless. But if they are not welcomed, that speaks more about who we are than who they are.

Many parishes have been doing hospitality events. We have asked them to do so. Now we know that hospitality in the church is not simply about having parish potlucks or parish picnics; or coffee and donuts after Mass. It is the same people who come to those all the time. It isn't just about having greeters at the door to welcome people. It isn't even just about setting a banquet table for the hungry, whether it be a hot meal for the poor or contributing as a parish to a food pantry. Hospitality absolutely includes all of these things, and none of them should be minimized. All of them, to some degree, are marks of a hospitable parish community.

As we now know, hospitality in the church is much more than these things. Hospitality is a virtue that opens us to others and receives them on their own terms. It is the act of inviting other people into **our** world because they are cherished by Christ, and therefore must be cherished by us because we value them.

Their presence is important to us. When we invite our neighbors to church or welcome “strangers” into our church, we are asking them to enter our world in the hopes that they might discover Jesus and his deep love for them; that they might experience a deeper need for a Savior in their lives, and become part of the Christian family who has been redeemed in Christ. **Even a registered parishioner may feel like a “stranger.”**

In today's world, we have both physical and spiritual pilgrims all around us whose lives and attitudes are out of sync with God. More than any other place, it is God's house that should be a place of welcome for everyone, a place which encourages faith and fidelity, a place that leads us all into a deeper life in Jesus.

If modern-day pilgrims are not welcome in God's house, where do we think they'll go instead? It's a question that should haunt us. To be welcoming is a sign that a community is alive and isn't living afraid.

The practice of hospitality may come easy for some, but may be quite challenging for others. It is not always easy to come out of our comfort zone. When was the last time you introduced yourself to someone in the parish whom you do not know? Or welcomed a guest/stranger who you have never seen before? **We are creatures of habit and do not like to be stretched.** When was the last time you sat in a different part of the church or went to Mass at a different time than usual so that you could get to know others in your parish family? When was the last time you shared with others how proud you are of your parish?

An orientation of welcome is a formidable indicator that we have a great desire to share the treasure of truth and peace that have been given to us by Christ our Host. A parish that does not welcome strangers for whatever reason (fear, insecurity, weariness, a desire for comfort and familiarity, self-focused, a lukewarmness) is dying spiritually (and maybe dying in regards to numbers as well). **At the very minimum, parishes that do not welcome strangers are less than who they are called to be.**

In the Church, we not only extend hospitality to others, **we uniquely participate in God's hospitality to us.** Perhaps more than anywhere else, it is in the Church where we most need to be cognizant of how faithful our hospitality is to the hospitality of our Host, Jesus Christ.

That many churches do not contemplate their church life within this context may tell us volumes about why so much of American culture views the Church as a place of unwelcome.

Keeping hospitality constantly in view increases our level of fidelity to Christ, and holds us accountable to each other in aiding the spiritual health of the Church through God's grace, and enlivens your parishes in ways you can't imagine – and it can change peoples' life of faith in ways unfathomable.

I recall moving to Iowa when in my mid-twenties. I shopped around for a parish and went to many different parishes looking for the right fit, a place where I would feel comfortable. For the most part, I came in anonymous and left anonymous in most all of them. Yes, I could have been a little more assertive in my approach to these communities. But a hospitable community always makes the first move, the first invitation, the first welcome.

I will speak later about the invitations I received in the parish that would become home for me – invitations that changed my life.

In conclusion, let's return to stewardship, putting it into one more perspective. Stewardship is "the living out the Eucharist that we celebrate."

- It is giving thanks and gratitude for the gifts God has given us
- It is putting our lives at the service of others as a sacrifice.

This is what the Eucharist is all about. So stewardship is living out concretely the Eucharist we celebrate every Sunday. The Eucharist is the great sign and agent of charity. When we come together to participate and partake of the greatest act of charity, we participate in the stewardship of Jesus himself. The Lord has given us all that He has – HIS VERY SELF – in totality.

Our participation in this act of charity, this act of stewardship, this Eucharist, implies that we bring all that we have, all that we are (which is all that God has given us) and we unite ourselves and these tremendous gifts and blessings to His saving sacrifice. Then having received from this very altar of love, having received from Christ's own stewardship, "if this celebration is to be sincere and thorough, it *will* lead to various works of charity and mutual help, as well as to missionary activity and to different forms of Christian witness." [*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 6]

We conclude the Mass with the words:

"Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life."

"Go and announce the Gospel."

This mandate sends us forth into the world to share precisely what and whom we have received. In receiving Christ himself, we are then sent forth to be the very face of Christ to others. We are sent forth to look for the face of Christ in others.

If we truly care for someone and their salvation, we will welcome them into our lives. We will be with them and walk with them. We will show them hospitality and love. Everyone is looking for and needing love. When they find it, they will listen to the one gives it to them.

If we take this seriously, then hospitality becomes more than what we do, but who we become. In becoming the face of Christ to others, we welcome “strangers” among us into our church; we invite them to enter our world in the hopes that they might discover Jesus and his deep love for them; that they might experience a deeper need for a Savior in their lives, and become part of our parish family who has been redeemed in Christ. That simple welcome, that simple invitation, could send them into a life of faith that they have never experienced before. This is why hospitality is so important.

Jesus told us that when we welcome anyone we are welcoming him. There are no exceptions.

‘Amen, I say to you, what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me.’