

# Hospitality – Who is the guest?

Possible interpretations of the reversal or mixing of places  
on the two sides of the boundary based on Derrida's  
lectures on Hospitality<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

In this article I explore Derrida's concept of the host-boundary-customer at the three Kantian levels (between states, communities and persons). The relational difference and essential unity of the persons of the Trinity illuminate the need to distinguish the "other" and the "self" even when it comes to the human person created in the image of God and living in community, in order to create a non-merging unity. God, entering the created world comes as a 'holy guest', while we realise that even we ourselves belong to the divine world and are in fact only guests in this world, that is to say, our essence is one of "ontological strangeness."<sup>3</sup>

## Keywords

hospitality, boundary, ontological alienation, Holy Guest, *perichoresis*

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Hospitalité*, Volume I. Séminaire, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 2021. My article is based on the original French Derrida text, the reasoning of the deconstructive language game is clearer in this language, the English translation of Derrida's lectures was published after the article was written: Jacques Derrida, *Hospitality, Volume I*, Translated by E. S. Burt, Edited by Pascale-Anne Brault and Peggy Kamuf, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2023).

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<sup>3</sup> Claudio Monge, *Le risque fou de l'hospitalité, De l'étrangéité ontologique à l'étrangéité théologique*, *Théologiques* 25/2 (2017), p. 36.

“To love purely is to consent to distance,  
it is to adore the distance between  
ourselves and that which we love.”<sup>4</sup>  
(Simone Weil)

## 1. Introduction

The theme of this journal issue<sup>5</sup>: hospitality in Derrida’s 1995–1996 university lectures at the EHESS<sup>6</sup>, is particularly important today, and we hope that these reflections will be able to contribute to the current and urgent promotion of peace.

When we talk about hospitality, we necessarily assume a relationship between two persons: the guest and the host – a multi-faceted relationship that is hidden and revealed in the symmetrical meaning of the word “hôte” (in French, it means both guest and host) that Derrida explores. This intrinsic mixing of the meanings of the word itself indicates one of the philosopher’s central ideas when he speaks of a changing (or rather a substitution<sup>7</sup>) of places between guest and host in his analysis of a chapter of Pierre Klossowski’s novel *Roberta Tonight*<sup>8</sup>:

the host waited for the stranger to cross the threshold, as if the stranger could rescue, free the host, as if the host were a hostage of his own place, his own power, his own self, his subjectivity.<sup>9</sup>

As if the host were a hostage (“otage” – a derivative of the word “hôte”) of his own subjectivity. Moreover, by feeling too much at home in the host’s home, Derrida argues, the guest appears in order to allow the host to feel like a guest/a stranger in his own home. So who is the guest? Who arrives and who is at home? Why is the guest expected in such an extraordinary way? Why this mutually desired reversal of places?

<sup>4</sup> Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*. Edited by Gustave Thibon, translated by Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr, 1947. (London: Routledge Classics, 2002), p. 65.

<sup>5</sup> My article is based on the lecture I gave in French at the academic conference “Derrida-Lectures/Derrida-Lectures 2022, In memoriam Jacques Derrida, HOSPITALITY - HOSTILITY - HOSTIPITALITY”, held on 14 October 2022 at Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Budapest.

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<sup>7</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Hospitalité, Volume I*. p. 161.

<sup>8</sup> Pierre Klossowski, *Roberte ce soir and The Revocation of the Edict of Nantes*. Translated by Austryn Wainhouse (Dallas: Dalkey Archive Press, 2002)

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Hospitalité*, p. 161. ... un maître qui attend son hôte comme un libérateur, son émancipateur, (...) comme si l'étranger pouvait sauver le maître, libérer le maître comme si le maître était prisonnier de son lieu et de son pouvoir, de son ipséité, de sa subjectivité... ‘

In search of possible answers to these questions, I will examine the meaning and quality of the three elements of hospitality (guest, host, and boundary) in Derrida's lectures at three levels: between states, between communities/cultures and, especially, between persons. Within the latter, I will explore the links between the divine and the human person, taking Derrida's reflection further, as the ultimate interpretation of hospitality. In a broad sense, I thus follow for a while Hegel's categories of the philosophy of law quoted with which Derrida sheds light on the communal levels of strangeness: family, civil society, state (nation-state).<sup>10</sup>

The Latin word *hostis*, the origin of the French word *hospitalité* (hospitality), contains yet another opposition, which Derrida deepens: *hospes*–*hostes* behind *hospitalité*–*hostilité* (hospitality–hostility). This internal dichotomy is illuminated by the role of the threshold, the boundary in hospitality, in receiving guests, within the problem of transgression. The boundary seems to be something we close when it comes to the enemy, protecting our inner space while also closing in on ourselves, however, when it comes to the guest we open it up, even if only to a certain extent (i.e. the boundary is not completely eliminated), still protecting our deeper integrity.

Alongside the right to hospitality (which assists the stranger who arrives), the author mentions the laws of hospitality, meant to protect the intimacy of the host's home. Derrida speaks of an unconditional and absolute hospitality, the realisation of which (at a legal level), though always conditional, should be the ideal of all hospitality, the supreme principle so to speak, the basis of all ethics. Derrida speculates, in almost poetic phrases<sup>11</sup>, on the language of absolute hospitality, which is silence, and on its gesture, to give space to the guest, if possible, without limits, without conditions. On a human level, this is obviously impossible to achieve in practice and the author himself acknowledges it by deconstructing his own ideal. Vertically expanding the absolute principle recommended by Derrida, we can say that the perfect example of the absolute hospitable host would be the silent Absolute, God, who withdraws to give us space, freedom, doing so perhaps in order to make us feel almost at home in the world given to us, yet to make us slowly discover the absence of the Host, longing for his particular welcome.

According to Derrida therefore, we can speak of two kinds of hospitality, practical and ideal, the latter being the basic principle of the former (and of "all ethics"), the common feature between the two being the identity of their components (guest, host,

<sup>10</sup> "étranger selon les 3 instances de l'ipséité, déterminé en subjectivité communautaire: famille, société civile, État (État-nation)." Op. cit. p. 86.

<sup>11</sup> "viens, je ne demande pas ton nom, ni même d'être responsable, ni d'où tu viens, ni où tu vas", "come, I'm not asking for your name, or even to be responsible, or where you're from, or where you're going" (op. cit. p. 165).

threshold), while the difference is the degree of hospitality. It should be added that even in absolute hospitality there remains at least a boundary between persons, which, if crossed, would result in the destruction of one or the other, so absolute hospitality also contains a certain prohibition, a limit. In the God we know from Revelation, there are two ways in which we can encounter this unity and difference at once. A non-merging unity of the divine Persons is formulated in the dogma of “*homoousion*”<sup>12</sup> (‘same in essence’), and within the Person of Christ, an equally incomprehensible unity and difference, a non-merging unity, is taught by the Church of the co-existence of the two natures of the Son, divine and human, “unmixed (...) and inseparable.”<sup>13</sup>

The meanings of the words “boundary” and “limit” thus contain a certain self-contradiction, or rather, in the process of deconstructing the contradictory connotations that exist in them in a parallel way (protection–prison, opening–closing, right–law), this contradiction reveals a deeper meaning that is not explained, perhaps not even expressible. I would illustrate this unexplained content with a simple biological phenomenon: even at the level of cell membranes, the boundary must contain the apparently contradictory capacities of demarcation (closure) and permeability (permeation) both, in order for a cell to survive. Neither absolute boundary nor absolute openness is possible in a living relationship between persons either (although we understand the meaning of the mathematical, geometric word “absolute boundary” at a rational, conceptual level).

## 2. “Hospitality” at community level

### 2.1. Between nations

Charles Ramond, in his article “Politique et déconstruction”<sup>14</sup> sheds light on the link between the method of deconstruction and peace. Derrida believes in a future democracy in which violence is eliminated by the deconstruction of the immutable opposing opinions, seen as the source of most violent events.

Deconstruction, then, is not so much a method as a change of attention. It introduces us to the unexpected idea that “conditions of possibility” are most often and at the same time “conditions of impossibility” (...). It is a highly paradoxical mode: to

<sup>12</sup> God is one in essence but three in Persons, in Heinrich Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum: A Compendium of Creeds, Definitions and Declarations of the Catholic Church*. Edited by Peter Huenermann (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012) DH 125. 325th Council of Nice.

<sup>13</sup> dogma of “*unio hypostatica*”: 451st Council of Chalcedon DH 302.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Ramond, *Politique et déconstruction* in *Derrida politique: La déconstruction de l'autorité*, Cités 2007/2 (n° 30), Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, pp. 11–16.

live and survive in constant self-criticism and disequilibrium. The art of remaining restless is both in philosophy and in politics an era of repentance, forgiveness and care for victims of all natures, the end of positions and role-playing.<sup>15</sup>

According to Derrida, the method of deconstruction (the admission, not judgement, of the stranger, be it a person or an idea, ideology – i.e. the practice of hospitality) would break down the walls between opposing positions and boundaries, and thus higher acts of humanity, brotherhood, forgiveness, compassion, uniting persons could be realized. For Derrida, this hierarchy of values is not explicit (it is the structure that is not justified), they seem to be juxtaposed (and precisely because of this), they seem to be mutually exclusive, mutually opposed: political and ideological positions in opposition to each other and sometimes in opposition to some common human value system in which connection, unity and peace predominate. In the name of the latter, in his view, it is necessary to dismantle ideologies and world views, although to justify the primacy of this higher value system (peace, love, acceptance), a thoughtful foundation and justification would also be necessary,<sup>16</sup> and to put it into practice, a structured, operationally developed programme would be essential.

In his third lecture, Derrida makes clear the “swirling”<sup>17</sup> effect of globalisation on borders: the European Union dissolves the status of the foreigner by opening internal borders<sup>18</sup>. With the help of “televsual-technological-scientific” tools (nowadays we would refer more to digital-technological tools, including social media) globalisation is erasing the borders between the inside and the outside, the capable and the unfit,<sup>19</sup> the real impact of which is demonstrated by the serious social crisis of our time, the dissolution of the private sphere: crisis of the family, human identity, moral order. Meanwhile, the borders have been closed even more to foreigners from outside the European Union and to those who are disconnected from the internet.

Derrida seems to be arguing for a move towards unity, towards absolute hospitality, which is in effect a kind of cosmopolitanism (inspired by Kant), a federation, but he adds in a realist or, if you like, deconstructivist way, the need for certain borders.

<sup>15</sup> Op. cit. p. 16. “La déconstruction n’est donc pas tant une méthode qu’une modification de notre attention. Elle nous familiarise avec l’idée inattendue que les « conditions de possibilité » sont le plus souvent, en même temps, des « conditions d’impossibilité » (...) (C’est un) régime hautement paradoxal, vivant et survivant dans la critique constante de soi et dans le déséquilibre. C’est l’art d’être inquiet, aussi bien en philosophie qu’en politique, l’époque des repentirs, des pardons, du souci des victimes de toutes natures, la fin des positions et des postures.”

<sup>16</sup> I.e. what and why should be forgiven in this imbalance, why peace is more valuable than war, etc.

<sup>17</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Hospitalité*, p. 96.

<sup>18</sup> How can we welcome them if they are no longer foreigners but fellow citizens?

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Derrida, *Hospitalité*, p. 96.

The problem of borders also arises in the relationship between the state and the cities of refuge. Those who need to flee from the potentially unjust laws of a particular state are received in these cities of refuge, but these cities necessarily belong to another state whose laws also bind them. Absolute hospitality, as an ethical principle at the level of relations between states, thus requires both the existence of borders and their controlled opening to the stranger who seeks admission.

Martin Bellerose, in his theological article on hospitality, wisely observes that this concept should perhaps not be used between states: hospitality is only between persons, and at the state level it is not so much a policy of hospitality as a policy of reception.<sup>20</sup> He is indeed right in the strict sense of the term, but by analogy (and especially along the lines of Derrida's associative thought) we can still speak of hospitality at this level, the structural elements and principles being the same.

## 2.2. Hospitality between cultures and communities

Here I would like to highlight Derrida's reflections on language (Lecture 5), which itself operates in the mode of hospitality. The gesture of welcome is realized in translation, as we let the expressions of another language into our mother tongue. Similarly to reflection, thought also operates in the manner of hospitality when we welcome new knowledge.

Derrida later returns to the rich theme of language when he reflects on whether the mother tongue really remains our last home (*chez-soi*) during an exile, as Hanna Arendt, deported by the Nazis, testifies (Lecture 6).

This line of thought leads to Rosenzweig's theory of the alienation of the Jewish people<sup>21</sup>. According to Derrida, the order of belonging to something is normally: land, blood (kinship) and language. Rosenzweig's *The Star of Redemption* shows that it is precisely because of the holiness and belonging to God of these components (Holy Land, holy people, holy language) that God's chosen people feel alienated, both scattered in other lands and in the Holy Land, which belongs to God. The difference between the sacred language (in which he prays) and his everyday language (in which he speaks to his friend) is the source of the homelessness he experiences in language. This situation "prevents the eternal people from living

<sup>20</sup> Martin Bellerose, "La péricorèse pour penser l'hospitalité", *Théologique*, Volume 25, numéro 2, 2017, "Théologie de la migration", pp. 146–147.

<sup>21</sup> Rosenzweig, Franz, *The Star of Redemption*, (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985).

fully in tune with the times (...) in fact, prayer prevents them from ever living in complete freedom free from all constraints.”<sup>22</sup>

Underneath the complexity of the strangeness Rosenzweig captures lies a particular notion of freedom. It is as if this freedom were opposed to the freedom of God, as if the world of God, enclosed in this other language and separate from man, were to limit man's freedom as experienced in his own language. The conception of freedom opposed to divine grace and law is the so-called indifferent conception of freedom, which recognizes only the input side of the concept (freedom from something), its only aspiration being that nothing and no one should limit it. But this freedom remains only a possibility, it is not realized in anything, because whatever it chooses, it would already have to limit itself. The whole concept of freedom also has an output side (freedom from something to something), a freely chosen value, ultimately the supreme Good, God, in whom freedom is realized. The latter is the qualitative freedom, which is also capable of limiting itself (renouncing all other values that hinder its own purpose) in order to achieve the good purpose it has found.<sup>23</sup>

This particular homelessness of the chosen people also highlights the human person's ontological homelessness, his or her alienation, not so much because of a frustration at God's nearness as because of a distance on this earth from God and from the past (as his or her own ultimate essential realisation).

### 3. Hospitality on a personal level

The context that most deeply reveals the meaning of hospitality is the interpersonal level. Here, depending on what is meant by the word “person”, several different relationships are possible.

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<sup>22</sup> Jacques Derrida: *Hospitalité*, p. 234. “empêche le peuple éternel de vivre entièrement accorder ou temps... la prière, dans un domaine linguistique saint, elle empêche en réalité de vivre jamais en totale liberté de toute contrainte.”

<sup>23</sup> For more on the emergence, causes and ethical consequences of indifferent and qualitative concepts of freedom, see Servais Pinckaers: *The Sources of Christian Ethics*. Translated by Mary Thomas Noble, (Washington: CUA Press, 1995), Chapters 14–15.

### 3.1. The person as his/her own host<sup>24</sup>

This relationship is illustrated by the Derridean definition of the psychoanalytic method, according to which “psychoanalysis...dislodges the ego from the authority of its home, it attempts to reconstitute... the place of hospitality but also the place of gathering.”<sup>25</sup> One can be hospitable to or even reject oneself and psychoanalysis tries to make this inner welcome of the self more possible.

There are dangers in welcoming and hosting the self as other or the other as self. Derrida mentions auto-immune diseases as a case of the body breaking down its own defences and attacking itself as other, as a stranger.<sup>26</sup>

On the other side of this issue – the reception of the other as one’s own – Byung-Chul Han in his popular book *The Burnout Society*<sup>27</sup> sees the cause of widespread diseases of our time, including various immune diseases, in confusing the concepts of “difference” and “otherness”. The other, the stranger, can no longer trigger the body’s necessary and strong immune response due to the extreme ‘tolerant’ attitudes of people of our time who (broadly speaking) perceive otherness as their own. They open the boundaries of their (unconscious) identity to the stranger, even if it is invasive. Thus, instead of immunisation, there will be hybridisation. The self is thus submerged in the negativity of the other, if it cannot deny it, since it is precisely in relation to the other, the stranger, that it can define and maintain itself.

Derrida, although as a “postmodernist” tolerantly open to difference, to otherness, and proclaiming the moral principle of absolute hospitality, still sees the root of strangeness in the inappropriability of the stranger<sup>28</sup> – the newcomer stranger whom we cannot integrate, make our own, “assimilate”, either conceptually (by definition) or at the level of relationship and lifestyle. Here we encounter again the double nature of the concept of the boundary of hospitality that both lets in and excludes. It is as if in the gesture of hospitality the arriving stranger, the other, would find himself in the wide borderland between the different and himself, looking for his own place between the enemy and his own extremes, always remaining in this intermediate state, knocking on ever more inward borders, but never crossing the

<sup>24</sup> Our relation to our self, the reception and acceptance of ourselves as an other, an “alien”, is an integral part of the formation of our narratable (understood) identity, a central theme of Paul Ricoeur, a contemporary of Derrida: Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, Translated by Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

<sup>25</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Hospitalité*, p. 275. “la psychanalyse...déloue le moi de son autorité de son chez-soi, elle tente de reconstituer... le lieu de l’hospitalité mais aussi le lieu de rassemblement.”

<sup>26</sup> Op. cit. p. 254.

<sup>27</sup> Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society* (Redwood City CA: Stanford U.P., 2015).

<sup>28</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Hospitalité*, p. 99.



final, most inward border that would dissolve, eliminate the other person. Here the most interesting question is what this innermost boundary is – perhaps the innermost sanctuary of our identity, which is already only connected to God, but even in relation to Him it keeps its own self, does not merge into God, and is connected with Him as a person. It is difficult to squeeze this innermost reality into the symbolism of hospitality, because we try to imagine the soul, something that is by nature outside space and time, within space.

There are other ways in which the question of being hospitable to ourselves, respecting our boundaries, comes up. In Byung Chul Han's aforementioned work, he talks about a paradigm shift at a societal level: instead of a life of self-restraint, we are living a lifestyle of unbridled freedom that values achievement. At work, we no longer have a boss who dictates from the outside, but one that dictates from within, who demands ever greater performance, and as a result we exploit ourselves, which ultimately leads to burnout, among other things.

We see that knowing and protecting our inner boundaries (in relation to ourselves, to our internalised expectations) and opening them at the right time, accepting ourselves is vitally important, and the health of our soul depends on this inner “osmosis”.

### **3.2. Body and hospitality**

Is our body a threshold between guest and host? Derrida briefly mentions the virus as a stranger forcibly invading our bodies as an example of the hostile connotation of the concept of hospitality. In the context of the body as a boundary/threshold, he reflects on the overlapping meanings of hospitality and sexuality, creating a new concept of “*hospitalsexualité*” (“hospita-sexuality”), whereby sexuality can be understood as a deep desire for hospitality, the embodiment of this desire. Hospitality, the elemental need to welcome the other, is thus unveiled in sexuality, illuminating the inwardly imprinted need to welcome the other, the inalienable law of our bodies.

Derrida does not mention eating as a bodily form of hospitality, which is also a crossing of the boundaries of our bodies, letting the other in – clearly, on a human level, this cannot be hospitality, because we integrate the nourishment into our bodies, thus it does not retain its otherness. Yet God chooses this way of relating to man by coming to us in hospitality in the Eucharist, and although the physical particles melt into our bodies, the substance they carry, God Himself, does not melt into us, mysteriously the most intimate relationship possible with Him remains.

### 3.3. Hospitality between human persons

Man can only be fulfilled in his intersubjectivity, in his relationships; his subjectivity is always permeated by intersubjectivity. Psychologically the openness to the otherness of the other is a condition of subjectivation. Hospitality is thus in fact a psychological necessity and an ethical imperative in interpersonal relations.

Claudio Monge in his article “Le risque fou de l’hospitalité” (“The mad risk of hospitality”)<sup>29</sup> explains the need to maintain a certain boundary in a deep and transparent interpersonal encounter, a boundary that is ethical, that is derived from respect and recognition of the other, and that also allows for a deeper reception of the other: “Where there is a real encounter, there is respect and recognition of the other, as well as responsibility towards the other, which introduces a boundary, a necessary distance, a distance of an ethical nature. It is this that allows the other to emerge in me, at once as a similar and as a stranger.”<sup>30</sup>

The dynamic of love brings people together, while respect and responsibility protect them from this. In Derrida’s terms, both levels of hospitality, the absolute, unconditional one and the legal, conditional one must be maintained in an authentic encounter. The authentic desire of absolute hospitality is present, that of giving without reservation or limits, but in order to make the relationship possible, a difference must be maintained through the keeping of boundaries. It is in this specificity of absolute and limited human love, unity and relationship that the Trinitarian image of God is made visible in man. The relational difference and essential unity of the three divine persons display and teach the necessity of the parallel presence of difference and non-convergent unity between the “other and the self” in man as well. A human person is realized in communion, a communion which always begins with the gesture of hospitality.

Monge quotes Bonhoeffer’s thought on communion and human community. In his doctoral dissertation *Sanctorum Communio*<sup>31</sup>, the Protestant theologian argues that *hospitality justifies the birth of homo ethicus*, operating in responsible freedom, with a logic

<sup>29</sup> Claudio Monge, “Le risque fou de l’hospitalité, De l’étrangéité ontologique à l’étrangéité théologique”, *Théologiques* 25/2 (2017).

<sup>30</sup> Op. cit. p. 38. “Là où il y a véritable rencontre, subsistent le respect et la reconnaissance d’autrui ainsi que la responsabilité pour autrui qui introduisent une limite et une nécessaire distance, une distance de nature éthique. Ce qui permet d’ailleurs que l’autre se constitue en moi, à la fois comme semblable et comme étranger.”

<sup>31</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*. Edited by Clifford J. Green, translated by Joachim Von Soosten, Reinhard Kraus and Nancy Lukens (Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1998).

of connection and gratuitousness, who corrects the logic of *homo economicus*, who proclaims the utilitarian principle of rational egoism.<sup>32</sup>

The realisation of interpersonal hospitality is made more difficult by the functionalist impersonalisation of social roles. This impersonalisation and functionalisation has been amplified in cyberspace relationships, where it is no longer certain that we are communicating with a human being and not a computer program.

Despite all these obstacles, man longs for life-giving, real personal relationships, for mutual acceptance. The Gospel commandment of love regulates and interprets the three directions of personal love towards oneself, others and God. “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Mt 22: 37b–40). It reveals the specificity and primacy of our love for God, and the deep connection between love of neighbour and love of self (if I do not love myself, I will not be able to love others, and vice versa). Love of the other as an alter ego, or love of my other self can only be achieved if God comes first.

#### 4. Hospitality between divine and human persons<sup>33</sup>

The theme of God appears repeatedly in the foreground and background of Derrida’s writings. On the one hand, he criticises the Judeo-Christian-Islamic monotheistic tradition accusing them of logocentrism. For example, in “Faith and Knowledge”<sup>34</sup> he deconstructs the word “religion”, and in other works (“Politiques de l’amitié”<sup>35</sup>) he is interested in the Nazi apostate lawyer Carl Schmitt and his spiritual descendants. On the other hand, the question of God is of direct interest to Derrida. Although he claims to be an atheist, he prays and approaches God through negative theology (“Comment ne pas parler”<sup>36</sup>, “Except the name”<sup>37</sup>), through the Jewish tradition

<sup>32</sup> Claudio Monge, *Le risque...*, p. 50.

<sup>33</sup> Monge distinguishes three levels of hospitality: 1. as a relationship between persons, 2. as a community or state function, where we speak of hospitality, institutionalized service rather than hospitality, 3. as theological hospitality, where we welcome God in some way in every reception of a stranger. (Claudio Monge, *Dieu hôte: recherche historique et théologique sur les rituels de l'hospitalité*, Bucarest, Zeta Books, 2008, pp. 506–507.)

<sup>34</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge” in Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo: *Religion* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998).

<sup>35</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Politics of Friendship”, *American Imago* Vol. 50, No. 3, LOVE, 1993, pp. 353–391, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

<sup>36</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Comment ne pas parler” in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, Volume II, Edited by Peggy Kamuf and Elisabeth G. Rottenberg (Redwood City CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).

<sup>37</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Except the name”, in *On the Name*, Edited by Thomas Dutoit, translated by David Wood, John P. Leavey, Jr., Ian McLeod, (Redwood City CA: Stanford University Press, 1995).

(*Glas*<sup>38</sup>, *Schibboleth*<sup>39</sup>, “Les Yeux de la langue”<sup>40</sup>, *Circonfession*<sup>41</sup>, *Mal d'archive*<sup>42</sup>, etc.), through literature (Joyce, Cixous, Celan, Jabès) and politics (“la démocratie à venir”). For God, the secret, hidden place is the meaning glimpsed through the gap of separation, the lost centre, which is also the place of promise and messianic expectation, the unpredictable deity without presence or power, the deity to come.<sup>43</sup>

In the last, ninth lecture of the seminar on hospitality, Derrida makes explicit the most profound motif of hospitality as the expectation of God’s announced coming, of God as a guest. Through the necessity of intersubjectivity, the essence of man also includes an “ontological hospitality”, an original openness to the other, a gift that seems to be reinforced by the religious commandments of theological hospitality. Derrida poses the question which grounds the other: is it ontological hospitality that grounds theological hospitality or vice versa? He maintains both hypotheses:

in one hypothesis, there is an unconditional law against whose background the event of the giving of the Torah appears (...). Or, conversely, is it from the giving of the Torah that the idea of absolute hospitality appears to us, appears in history?

(...) Did the Torah and God’s address concerning Elijah and the premessianic come, as a datable and dated event, to promise and command absolute hospitality? Or, conversely... has an unconditional law of hospitality as datability... come to make possible, to ensure a kind of ontological-transcendental and historial dwelling for what the Bible tells us...<sup>44</sup>

Derrida’s newer neologism “hospitadatabilité”<sup>45</sup> (“hospitadatability”) summarizes on a biblical basis this necessary openness to the absolute Stranger, the Messiah, which links the law of unconditional hospitality to the human law of welcoming

<sup>38</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, translated by John P. Leavey Jr. and Richard Rand, (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1986).

<sup>39</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Schibboleth for Paul Celan*, Translated by Marc Redfield, (New York City, New York: Fordham University Press 2020).

<sup>40</sup> Jacques Derrida, “The Eyes of Language: The Abyss and the Volcano”, in *Acts of religion*, Edited and translated by Gil Anidjar, (New York and London: Routledge Library Editions, 2002).

<sup>41</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Circonfession* translated by Geoffrey Bennington (co-author) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

<sup>42</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever, A Freudian Impression*, Translated by Eric Prenowitz, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

<sup>43</sup> Pierre Delain, *Les mots de Jacques Derrida, „Orlôlivre”: Comment ne pas étudier?*, Edition Guilgal, 2004–2017, accessed 14 Octobre 2023, < <https://www.idixa.net/Pixa/pagixa-0508281622.html> >

<sup>44</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Hospitalité*, p. 312. “...dans une hypothèse, il y a une loi inconditionnel sur le fond de laquelle l'événement du don de la Torah apparaît ; (...). Ou, inversement, est-ce à partir du don de la Torah que l'idée d'une hospitalité absolue nous apparaît, apparaît dans l'histoire ? (...) est-ce que la Torah et l'adresse de Dieu au sujet d'Élie et du prémissianique sont venues, comme un événement datable et daté, promettre et commander l'hospitalité absolue ? Ou bien, inversement,... une loi inconditionnelle de l'hospitalité comme databilité ... est-elle venue rendre possible, assurer une sorte de logement ontologico-transcendantal et historial à ce que nous raconte la Bible...”

<sup>45</sup> Op.cit. p. 314.

the here-and-now: openness to the Messianic coming, announced with certainty, arriving on a specific day and date, and to the one arriving, knocking at the door here and now, today – to the God who is arriving in his own time and in ours.

It seems that the time and spatial distance given until the certain coming, this time and space, which are the dimensions of our life on earth, are the preconditions of freedom, the freedom needed for true love, for the response to God's revelation of love.

The requirement of hospitality prepares God's people for the arrival of the Stranger, the absolute Other. The biblical commandments present a kind of archetype, an original way of showing hospitality.

#### **4.1. The origin of the other, the stranger, according to the Scriptures**

In the creation stories (especially the six-day creation), otherness and diversity are seen as a blessing from God, not a curse ("God saw that it was good"), and the diversity of the created world is a proclamation of God's overflowing love, goodness, beauty and intelligence. God himself, the very Other, created man to be like himself, to be the recipient of his love. Diversity was thus created in order to establish a relationship of love between God and man, and between human persons. Eve's creation out of Adam's open side expresses openness to the Other ("bone of my bone"), communion (rather than fusion) with the Other, the need and desire to complete the Other. The other as a stranger becomes a threat by the fall into sin, Cain realizes after the fratricide that "I must avoid you and be a constant wanderer on the earth. Anyone may kill me at sight" (Gen 4:14b). The Lord gives him a protective sign so that nobody dares to kill him, which is perhaps nothing other than the manifestation of human dignity, of belonging to God. With sin comes the hostile connotation of the other, the stranger. It is this rupture that will be healed by Christ's redemptive, liberating act and his new command to love radically (even in spite of sin).

#### **4.2. The commandment of hospitality in Scripture**

In several of the biblical texts on hospitality, we find an explicit command to welcome the stranger (Rom 12:13, 1 Peter 4:9). In several of them, the sacred author also gives the reason for this command. One of the explanations is the similar fate of the chosen people while in exile in Egypt, an event which each of them has to commemorate, to make present, as if this state of affairs would still be the case

today: “You shall treat the alien who resides with you no differently than the natives born among you; you shall love the alien as yourself; for you too were once aliens in the land of Egypt. I, the LORD, am your God” (Lev 19:34).

The other explicit reason is that while the people themselves may be strangers (immigrants or exiles), the arriving stranger may also be God himself through the agency of his angels: “Do not neglect hospitality, for through it some have unknowingly entertained angels” (Heb 13:2), as it happened with Abraham when he welcomed the three angels in Mamre (cf. Gen 18:1–16).

According to several commentators this latter story is an emblematic scene of hospitality<sup>46</sup>. Bellerose stresses the reciprocity and equality of the relationship between the characters (first the arrivals stand and Abraham sits, then vice versa, or each party presents the other with a gift), which is essential in a situation of genuine hospitality. Professor Monge, a committed promoter of Islamic–Christian interfaith dialogue, devotes the entire third chapter of his monograph on hospitality to this passage. Comparing the Mamre scene with a similar text in the Koran, he concludes that all three “Abrahamic” monotheistic religions consider hospitality sacred, that hospitality “is not only a matter of morality but always a place of revelation of God”<sup>47</sup>, since “in a certain way we are always welcoming a god or a mysterious other sent by God.”<sup>48</sup>

In the New Testament, hospitality is a corporal act of mercy, welcoming Christ himself in the person of the stranger: “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me” (Mt 25:35). Both the Old and New Testaments praise the one who practices hospitality: “People bless one who is generous with food, and this testimony to his goodness is lasting.” (Sir 31:23), (cf. 1 Tim 5:10).

### 4.3. The divine rules of hospitality

In the Old Testament, the divine rules of hospitality include welcoming the guest, washing his feet, serving him food and drink, even protecting guests and accompanying them when they leave (Gen 18; Job 31:31). Christ asks for a greater selflessness: “Rather, when you hold a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the

<sup>46</sup> Martin Bellerose, *La périchorèse pour penser l'hospitalité*, pp. 149–152.

<sup>47</sup> Claudio Monge, ‘Dieu hôte: rituels de l'hospitalité’ *Academia.edu*, 2014. pp. 1–11. accessed 21 September 2023, [https://www.academia.edu/6709468/Dieu\\_h%C3%B4te\\_rituels\\_de\\_l\\_hospitalit%C3%A9\\_2014](https://www.academia.edu/6709468/Dieu_h%C3%B4te_rituels_de_l_hospitalit%C3%A9_2014)

<sup>48</sup> Claudio Monge, *Dieu Hôte, Recherche Historique et Théologique*, p. 8.

lame, the blind; blessed indeed will you be because of their inability to repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.” (Lk 14:13–14). This is reinforced by the story of the Last Judgement, in which Jesus identifies himself with the destitute, whose inclusion is the criterion for salvation (I was hungry, I was thirsty, I was naked, I was a stranger, I was sick, I was a prisoner – cf. Mt 25:35–46). The person who has been excluded from or deprived of social roles is left with “only” his essence, his humanity, which is in his relationship with God.

Christ appears at the same time as a host (washing the feet of his disciples) and as a guest, a “neighbour”, a stranger to be welcomed, a guest who needs to be loved without means and selflessly. The reciprocity, humility and selflessness of hospitality between God and man and between humans are provided by this teaching.

The welcomed guest, on the other hand, must remain humble, gentle, so that he may be appreciated even more. The good guest is small, humbled and then will be exalted, as was the case with Jesus: “Rather, when you are invited, go and take the lowest place so that when the host comes to you he may say, ‘My friend, move up to a higher position.’ Then you will enjoy the esteem of your companions at the table. For everyone who exalts himself...” (cf. Lk 14:10–11).

#### 4.4. Who is the guest and who is the host?

##### 4.4.1. God’s people as strangers among other peoples

God the Father promises and gives a foreign land to his chosen people, so that the promised land becomes, it seems, their own land: “May God extend to you and your descendants the blessing of Abraham, so that you may gain possession of the land where you are residing, which he assigned to Abraham” (Gen 28:4). Yet God himself declares that they remain in a sense strangers even after the conquest. God is the owner, his people the welcome guests or tenants, “a wandering people in search of happiness”. Abraham is the prototype of the man always on a pilgrimage to the land of promise, who calls himself a stranger, a person in transit (cf. Gen 23:4). This basic human condition is what Monge calls “ontological strangeness”.<sup>49</sup> The Hebrew word itself means ‘wanderer’; in Philo’s Platonist interpretation, the Hebrew people are always “wandering from the sensible to the supersensible”,<sup>50</sup> from their earthly life to the world of God.

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<sup>49</sup> Claudio Monge, *Dieu hôte: rituels de l’hospitalité*, p. 1.

<sup>50</sup> Philon, *De Migratione Abrahami*. Translated by J. Cazeaux s.j., Cerf, Paris, 1965. Quoted by Bellerose in Martin Bellerose: *La péricorèse pour penser l’hospitalité*, p. 150.

Throughout the history of God's people, the stranger status is heightened when, as a result of their unfaithfulness to God, the Jews suffer captivity in Babylon. Here, however, it is this very vulnerability that will affirm their identity: they belong to no one but God. "As you have abandoned me to serve foreign gods in your own land, so shall you serve foreigners in a land not your own" (Jer 5:19b). The fate of a people in a foreign land is one of suffering and humiliation:

Whether little or much, be content with what you have: then you will hear no reproach as a parasite. It is a miserable life to go from house to house, for where you are a guest you dare not open your mouth. You will entertain and provide drink without being thanked; besides, you will hear these bitter words: "Come here, you parasite, set the table, let me eat the food you have there! Go away, you parasite, for one more worthy; for my relative's visit I need the room!" Painful things to a sensitive person are rebuke as a parasite and insults from creditors. (Sir 29:23–28)

The foreigner status, the loyalty to identity and thus the guarding of their difference provokes hostility on the land of a foreign people, the price of loyalty necessarily being the cross.

#### 4.4.2. God's people as hosts who do not welcome God

God gives the promised land to his people in a wonderful way: "I gave you a land you did not till and cities you did not build, to dwell in; you ate of vineyards and olive groves you did not plant" (Josh 24:13). But the people remain faithless before and after their Babylonian captivity experience. Yet God prepares his people for welcoming him by extending hospitality, even though they do not recognise his arrival, from his birth in Bethlehem to his crucifixion: I was "a stranger and you gave me no welcome, naked and you gave me no clothing, ill and in prison, and you did not care for me" (Mt 25:43). Even after his resurrection his own disciples fail to recognize him, except by an intimate, personal reminder: "Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know of the things that have taken place there in these days?" (Lk 24:18b)

In the Holy Land, it is a stranger who gives thanks to God and not someone of his own people: "Has none but this foreigner returned to give thanks to God?" (Lk 17:18) For God's people, who are already quite at home as guests, the Lord remains a stranger until this one stranger recognizes him as a fellow stranger, the unwelcome God.



### 4.4.3. God is man's host

Already in the Old Testament God is shown as man's host:

Wisdom has built her house, she has set up her seven columns; She has prepared her meat, mixed her wine, yes, she has spread her table. She has sent out her maidservants; she calls from the heights out over the city: "Let whoever is naive turn in here; to any who lack sense I say, Come, eat of my food, and drink of the wine I have mixed! Forsake foolishness that you may live." (Pro 9:1–6)

This is a rich passage of Scripture; it contains the physical and spiritual fulfilment that goes with God's love, the fullness of the Truth that Wisdom offers.

In the Gospel of Matthew, the king (God) invites special guests to the wedding of his son, but those invited prove to be unworthy. So he sends out his servants to call people from the crossroads, but tests whether they are prepared (cf. Mt 22:8–11). God the host invites all people into his house – those who hear and accept his invitation are allowed to enter. He prepares a festive meal for them, even a wedding supper. According to Christian exegesis, this is the heavenly wedding feast between Christ, the Bridegroom God, and God's Follower, the Church, a feast which God planned from the very beginning of man's creation.

God the host welcomes man with the same gestures of hospitality he commanded us. In the Last Supper described by John, Jesus washes the apostles' feet as the slaves did, thus setting an example of true humility and self-emptying love. He commands his disciples, his guests, to do the same. Here is a meaningful reversal of places on either side of the threshold: the Lord, who acts as a slave, the Host, who asks his guests to become hosts, servants of one another. It is in mutuality and equality that the gesture of hospitality becomes authentic.

### 4.4.4. The adoption of man, man finds a home with God

Finally, God the Father adopts his unfaithful people in Christ, giving them an ultimate and eternal home with himself: "So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the holy ones and members of the household of God" (Eph 2:19). When he leads them all out, he goes before them as a good shepherd, and the sheep follow him, because they know his voice (John 10:3–4).

Throughout history, God's people have had to recognize that they are far from their true homeland; they are not at home yet, but on a pilgrimage on the way home. In the Gospels, Christ is also presented as a stranger who has no home among

men, neither in his human nor in his divine identity. Who is the stranger in this situation? Is God the stranger and we are at home here, or vice versa? Are we God's guests here in the Garden he created, albeit already somewhat damaged, guests who feel too much at home, who have forgotten their true home, their identity? And thinking of our future, are we – as God's adopted children – more at home with God, and therefore strangers down here; or have we been undeservedly and lavishly hosted in Heaven, we who as creatures belong to this world after all?

The incarnate God has crossed our boundaries: the boundary of our race (he embraced our humanity when he became man), the boundary between the Creator and the creature, the boundary between soul and body, life and death. He also crossed our geographical boundaries by sending the apostles to preach the gospel in every country. Through his Holy Spirit he entered our souls and finally, in an unexpected turn, through the Eucharist, he crossed the boundaries of our physical bodies.

#### **4.5. The relationship between man and God in the light of the Eucharist and the *perichoresis***

In the Holy Sacrament we receive God; we are united to Him in our bodies, while we are the ones who are received into the mysterious Body of Christ, which is the Church. The boundary between the physical and the spiritual sphere is opened, which only the Creator has the power to accomplish, but by this opening He has also made man capable of coming to Him, of entering into the world of God, His home.

Derrida mentions the Holy Eucharist as the Body of Christ during the fifth lecture, though not in an explicitly Christian sense, yet in an understandable parallel with the burial of King Oedipus' corpse in a foreign land, which violates the law of hospitality (since it is part of one's identity to be able to rest in the motherland after death):

Eudipus asks that he not be forgotten (...) for if he were forgotten, everything would go wrong, and he addresses this injunction to the xenos, to the stranger or the most beloved host, to the host as friend, but to a friendly and allied host who then becomes a kind of hostage of the dead, a hostage held as victim of the gift that Eudipus (a little like Christ) makes of his dying or abiding, "demourance": this is my body, keep it in memory of me.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Hospitalité*, pp. 155–156. "Eudipe demande qu'on ne l'oublie pas (...) car si on l'oublie tout irait mal, et il adresse cette injonction aux xénos, à l'étranger ou à l'hôte le plus aimé, à l'hôte comme ami, mais à un hôte ami et allié qui devient dès lors une sorte d'otage du mort, un otage retenu est victime du don qu'Eudipe (un peu comme le Christ) fait de sa mourance ou de sa demourance, demourance : ceci est mon corps, gardez-le en souvenir de moi."

We can identify distant parallels with Christ here: indeed Christ also dies “abroad”, outside the walls of Jerusalem, the city of God’s peace and glory. The suffering and death of Oedipus was more an atonement for his own sins, while that of the Son of God was for the real redemption and salvation of mankind. After Christ’s resurrection, He remains with us in the Eucharist (in a sense a stranger, not in God’s home, but ultimately transforming us into it). His body remains here in its own state, as nourishing bread (Eucharistic miracles bear witness to his bodily reality in the bread), and He “also” commands His disciples to “do this in remembrance of me” – if they forget, all would indeed go wrong. This remembrance, however, is not a painful or nostalgic recollection of the past to maintain anger at an injustice suffered, but the making present of the Christ-event in the sacrificial offering by the Holy Spirit, who, by the very act of forgiveness, wipes away the grave consequence of sin.

It is the coincidence of two dimensions, the timeless present of God’s “time” and the linear time of man, in which the boundary between the two “worlds” is crossed. Here it is difficult to grasp how the earthly and the heavenly are actually intertwined, how the spiritual reality without space and time permeates this four-dimensional world of ours. In any case, without this intersection, human hospitality is also endangered, and the selfishness inherited and protected by structures in our world soon leads to colonisation or assimilation, depending on whether the guest or the host is stronger.

Martin Bellerose suggests that a model for the practice of hospitality could be the relationship between the Persons of the Trinity, which St John of Damascus tries to capture with the concept of *perichoresis*, primarily to illuminate the unity of the three Persons (the dogmatic concept of which is the unity of the one essence).<sup>52</sup> This intimate image thus illuminates not only the relationship between the divine persons, but also between human beings and between God and man. The early Christian expression can be understood in both static and dynamic terms, the Latin *circuminsessio* expressing rather the static interpenetration, dwelling in one another, while the term *circumincessio* expresses the mutual interpenetration, which can also be understood as a circular dance. These two models are both validated in the social dimension of hospitality: reciprocal dwelling in each other creates a real community between host and guest. Instead of unity, the term ‘communion’ implies plurality. Notice that it is a celebrated plurality, the joy of dancing in the love of the difference of the other and of this very difference (if there were no difference it would still be only self-love). Plurality requires space, and in this “space” between Father and Son, love is personified, a Third is realized, the relationship itself, the fruit of the

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<sup>52</sup> Martin Bellerose, *La périchorèse pour penser l’hospitalité*, pp.158–162.

selfless self-giving of both in love. On a human level, it is precisely for this “third”, the novelty of the relationship which transcends both parties that it is worth taking the risk of love. It is interesting to observe here the “spatial” difference between love and its opposite (indifference, hatred, sin): while true love sets us free, gives us space to form, sin restricts our thinking and action, closes us off from a broad perspective, closes us in space and time (hell is a very narrow “space-experience”).<sup>53</sup>

“Perichoretic hospitality”<sup>54</sup> works only under certain conditions at the social level. It needs to occur between sensitive or even irritable persons (interpersonal and not social encounters) who allow themselves to be touched. It is necessary that they have sufficient self-awareness, self-love. To allow differences to emerge (and not be subsumed), we need to give each other space in mutual love, not only accepting the difference, but supporting each other to be fully ourselves, without telling each other what we need to become. It is the reciprocity of hospitality, the equality of the parties, their self-knowledge, their self-love, the value of their particularity in building community, which is evident to both parties, that creates true communion, whether within the Trinity, in the Church or in society.<sup>55</sup> Finally, Bellerose concludes by calling hospitality the essence of society, because without mutual acceptance, community cannot exist and cannot function.<sup>56</sup>

However, the perichoretic conception of hospitality in human relations needs to be complemented. The relationship of the persons of the Trinity is a picture of ideal hospitality, but on a human level we know that, although we may well strive for the ideal, in reality sin and suffering impede us. The cross is therefore still missing from the picture and interpersonal hospitality involves suffering for the sake of the other, and we receive from God the strength to bear and to be faithful to love precisely because of his Holy Hospitality. His welcome enables us to welcome our fellow human beings and ourselves. Christ has already borne the cross of our reception, our hospitality; now He knocks on our doors as a Holy Guest (*Sacrum Convivium*) awaiting His reception in the Eucharist (*Hostia*, the other name for the Eucharist, is also a derivative of the word *hospitalitas*), in which, in the words of St. Thomas, “Christ is received, the memory of his Passion is renewed, the mind is filled with grace, and a pledge of future glory is given to us”.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>53</sup> János Pilinszky, “Spaces” in *Crater. Poems, 1974–5*, Translated by Peter Jay, (Vancouver: Anvil Press Poetry, 1978), p. 17.

<sup>54</sup> Martin Bellerose, *La péricorèse pour penser l’hospitalité*, p. 161.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *O Sacrum Convivium*, a Latin prose text honoring the Blessed Sacrament. It is included as an antiphon to the Magnificat in the vespers of the liturgical office on the feast of Corpus Christi. *The Aquinas Prayer Book: The Prayers and Hymns of St. Thomas Aquinas*, by Johann Moser, (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 2000), p. 116.

## 5. Conclusion

The attempt to summarise and reflect on Derrida's associative reflections on hospitality has led me to the conclusion that the commandment of hospitality is an ontological, sociological and theological principle of our humanity: for our humanity, for our development, for our community life and for our salvation, we need the reception of the other in the right dose, i.e. not being assimilated or assimilating into ourselves. The key word that sums up these levels could be the word "other" with meanings both of 'stranger, different, often even incomprehensible' and at the same time vital, delightful, valuable and worth celebrating (beloved guest). It is not, of course, the otherness of sin, but the value of the otherness of beings other than myself that enriches me and the community. The positive turn towards the other, the (perhaps incomprehensibly) different from me, is the goodwill that presupposes goodness on the arrival of the unknown, the stranger, maintaining this attitude perhaps even at the cost of one's life – the fruit of this attitude (as the angels taught on the first Christmas Eve) is peace.

So what is the answer to the question in the title? Who is the guest? On reflection, we find that we can be both a guest and a host in relationships, both roles enriching and necessary, though fraught with human dangers. In a relationship with God, only for Him are these two roles dangerous, but out of His unfathomable love and infinite power, He has undertaken for us the suffering that comes with our welcome and hospitality. Moreover, in our fellow human being we receive Him or He receives us, and in us our neighbour may receive Him or we may receive the other in union with the Heart of Jesus. In the encounters and relationships of our lives, God teaches us the ecstatic, liberated, mutually joyful perichoretic relationship in which He lives in His Trinitarian Community, drawing us into this dance, giving us the strength and impetus to dance with Him in the dance of love, freeing ourselves from the grip of the many-layered concave or flying over the shards of sin scattered on the dance floor.

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