

# Grandma, Grandpa and St. Benedict

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My grandparents always lived in the same ethnically homogenous Mennonite community in south-central Kansas. They were members of the congregation they grew up in. They spent most of the married life on the farm where Grandpa was born and raised until, in their later years, they moved into town. Yet my Grandma and Grandpa's world was much larger than their small corner of the county. Not that they traveled much, since they were people of modest means. But Grandma and Grandpa were enthusiastically hospitable to the world. I don't know if they knew of the Rule of St. Benedict, with its directive that "all guests that happen to come be received as Christ." But Grandma and Grandpa most definitely lived it.

When visiting them as a kid, I encountered a family broader than just that of my mother's siblings and cousins. There were Fiona and Petua, refugees from Idi Amin's Uganda; Andrea, the exchange student from Germany – my grandparents were the host family for all three while they were studying at nearby Bethel College – and Tina, the Dutch Mennonite Central Committee "trainee." It was an exercise in international relations of the most basic kind. Rather than addressing matters of national security or trade around elegant conference tables in exotic locations, we talked and joked around the utilitarian dining room table filled with Grandma's scrumptious meals or games of Monopoly. We learned to know each other, not as victims of civil unrest or curiosities from far-off lands but as people not quite so different from ourselves.

Grandma and Grandpa's relationship with Fiona, Petua and Andrea didn't end after they left Bethel. Petua considered my grandparents her American parents so much that Grandpa walked her down the aisle at her wedding. Andrea, who worked for years in the United States before returning to Germany, became a family member in all ways except biological. Fiona, who has remained in the area, still attends the family's Thanksgiving dinners.

My grandparents' hospitality demonstrates what's unstated but inherent in St. Benedict's instructions: Welcoming others means welcoming diversity. Guests will not always be like the hosts. When Taiwanese friends of one of my aunts, all Bethel students, made a meal for the family, my grandparents warned everyone that they will be eating unusual foods – this was more than 50 years

ago, well before Asian cuisine made it to rural Kansas – and they should try all the dishes without making “yucky” faces. Everyone had to be open to the unknown.

Such openness demands humility and vulnerability on the part of the host. “Whenever guests arrive or depart, let Christ be adored in them – for Him indeed we receive in them – by bowing of the head or by full prostration,” wrote St. Benedict. (Laying yourself out on the floor in front of a stranger is unquestionably an act of humility.) Hosting others means acknowledging that the spirit of Christ can be evident in a myriad of ways by a myriad of people. My grandparents did that. They wholeheartedly welcomed a niece’s African-American husband, even as other members of the family struggled with the interracial marriage. Grandpa said on more than one occasion that we’ll be surprised at who were find in Heaven, meaning that our narrow understandings of love and mercy are not the criteria for entering the Pearly Gates. (I wonder how surprised Grandpa was after he died 15 years ago.)

Receiving others, however, is only one facet of faithful discipleship. I propose a corollary to St. Benedict’s injunction: Those who receive guests should also be considered as Christ. The potential to encounter the Divine doesn’t happen only when we host but can also occur when we are hosted. Peter J. Dyck, the famed Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) worker and storyteller, would advise new MCC workers to be like Moses and remove their shoes, at least in spirit, when starting their assignments, because where they had arrived was holy ground. God was already there, ready to receive newcomers.

But like hosting guests, being one can require us to accept that which we cannot control, and to do so graciously. It’s something that many of us are uncomfortable with because it often generates feelings of utter powerlessness. Extending hospitality is still, ultimately, a choice. We decide to do it or not do it. If we do it, we can stipulate how we do it. But as a recipient of others’ hospitality, we often don’t have that freedom. Like my grandfather, I don’t drink coffee. The only cup I have ever consumed was in a small, crude house built literally on a mountain of garbage in San Salvador. When offered coffee, I certainly couldn’t refuse. All I could do was take the cup with appreciation. Circumstances compelled me to drink, and in doing so I had to consider my hosts not as poor, ostracized slum-dwellers but as generous providers of hospitality, doing unto me what I’m supposed to do unto others.

Dorothy Day intimately knew the two-way street of hospitality in the Catholic Worker movement. She wrote that each Catholic Worker house, with its hosts and guests, “is a family with its faults and virtues, and above all, its love. We can all look at each other and say, ‘You are bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh,’ we are all members one of another, since all are members or potential members of the Body of Christ.”

That is a crucial understanding for Christians, who claim both the power and powerlessness of Jesus Christ. The love of God doesn’t discriminate. That was my grandparents’ belief, and it was one they passed on to their children. My aunt Charlene had that attitude when she left her white, ethnically Mennonite enclave to be a guest at a historically black college in Atlanta. She was a student at Bethel in the racially explosive 1960s when the school began an exchange program with Spelman College. With the full support of my grandparents, Charlene was the first Bethel student to go, even though some in the community questioned the wisdom of her decision. Like me and my Salvadoran coffee conundrum, Charlene had to recognize that God was already in Atlanta, spurring the hospitality she received.

My grandparents’ hospitality wasn’t limited to the cross-cultural. Family members tell of the times Grandma and Grandpa provided transportation for strangers. And everyone who came on their farmyard was welcomed, usually for a meal. Grandma, like many of her peers, was a wizard in the kitchen. She said she actually preferred surprise guests for meals, because then they would have to be satisfied with what she could whip up with what she had on hand. There wasn’t the stress of planning and preparing.

The reason for their hospitality and corresponding broad worldview was their bedrock Christian faith and the centrality of love. Grandma and Grandpa especially practiced Christ’s commandment to love their neighbors, wherever they may be and even if they never met. That also explains their solid commitment to pacifism, not as an absence of violence but as the fullest expression of love and peace. How can people kill those whom they are supposed to treat as Christ? St. Benedict understood this. His rules include loving the enemy and prohibitions on killing and hatred.

St. Benedict lived 1,500 years ago. Grandma and Grandpa have been gone for more than a decade. But their legacies of hospitality are timeless.