

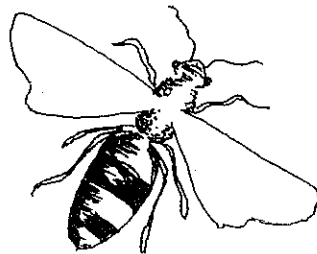
Yours, O God, are the earth and its inhabitants,
The riches of the seas and the wealth of the lands.
On the mountains we stand in your holy place,
In the valleys we dwell in your domain.

You have fashioned the oceans from shore to depth,
You brought forth continents and clothed them with forest.
The buried riches of the earth are yours,
The oil and the ore, the slate and the marble.

Your lightnings flash and you give electricity.
You let us harness the power of the sun.
Yours are the outer spaces and the heavenly spheres.
You order the forces of our universe.

Who can stand in your presence and be at peace?
Only those who are attuned to your wisdom and command.

(adapted from Psalm 24)



Monika Hellwig, Guests of God:
Stewards of Divine
Creation

1. CREATION AND HUMAN EXISTENCE

We are all the guests of God's hospitality. The world in which we live is pure gift. Our own existence, our human nature, our essential human consciousness, intelligence and creativity are all gift. The companionship of other human beings like ourselves is gift. So is the presence on earth of plant and animal life, of water and air and mineral resources, of light, of the firm earth beneath our feet and the blue sky overhead. We did not make any of these things nor cause them to come into being. Moreover, we would not exist for one moment if all these things were not around us to sustain our existence. Living as we do in the industrialized, heavily automated and computerized world, we may not be as constantly aware of this as are preindustrialized peoples who live simpler lives more directly in touch with nature. But reflection can make it very clear how utterly dependent we are on the hospitality of the Creator. We exist as guests enjoying God's hospitality in many ways that are basic and essential to all we are, do and enjoy.

Further reflection also shows that the world in which we live is not simply the world of God's creating but is the original gift of

creation modified in many ways by human ingenuity and industry. It is inherent in God's creating that we creatures come to be at certain moments in time and leave the world again at certain moments in time. We acquire a sense of who we are, what we can do, what others expect of us, how the world works and so forth from our encounters with people and with things, from our experience of the rhythms of day and night, hunger and eating, waking and sleeping, from the passage of the seasons, from rain and sunshine and storms. We are not simply dependent on the world of God's creating but on all that other people before us have done in and for and also against that world. Those who come after us and those who live simultaneously with us are similarly dependent on what we do in and about the world in our own corner of it. Often the ripple effects of what we do, consume, produce, enjoy or organize go much further through the network of human and wider ecological relationships than we realize.

This interdependence of all creatures is a crucial component in our relationship with God our Creator and our host. As human beings we are mediators of God's hospitality in three important ways. First, we ourselves are unfinished creatures who are entrusted with our own becoming. We have immense possibilities and are faced with many choices. It is possible to squander time and opportunities and talents by failing to make commitments and efforts, or by making poor choices in one's commitments and efforts, or by living so unreflectively that time goes by and there is no direction to one's life, or by failing to take charge of one's life and being wafted or pushed into directions one would never have chosen. If we believe in the doctrine of creation, we know that we are brought into existence purposefully and can only find true happiness and personal fulfillment to the extent that we shape our lives to fulfill the purposes of the Creator. This is one way in which we mediate

God's hospitality—by the way we focus and shape what we ourselves become.

Second, we human beings mediate the hospitality of God by the interventions with which we shape our universe, its ecology, the exploitation of mineral resources, the interdependence of the living species of animals and plants, what we do with their habitats, how we domesticate and breed, how we hunt and fish and farm. We mediate also by building and paving, crossing the oceans and continents and skies with our inventions for transportation. If we believe in the doctrine of creation, all these activities that modify the earth and the universe are not morally or spiritually neutral. They cooperate by good uses of the divine hospitality, or they abuse that hospitality by cruelty or waste, or by fashioning an oppressive or inhospitable environment, and especially by destruction of nonreplaceable resources. Of course, as people have lived on the earth in the course of the millennia they have also made mistakes that caused unintended suffering or destruction, just as they have inadvertently happened upon happy and helpful discoveries. Not every disaster or destruction is the result of evil deeds, and not every helpful development is the outcome of virtuous effort. But the more we develop scientific knowledge and technical competence, the larger the range of developments in the world and the universe that becomes our human responsibility and calls for moral and spiritual scrutiny.

A third way that we mediate the hospitality of God is by our associations with one another, by the laws and customs we establish, by the way we regulate access to decision making and to the enjoyment of natural resources and human products, by the way we do or do not allow others to associate and act. In other words we mediate in greater or lesser measure by everything we do or accept in our human cultures, civilizations and

economies. Though it is not always immediately apparent, the situation in which each of us is placed is only partly constituted by the will of God. It is also largely constituted by actions, assumptions, regulations and arrangements of those who have gone before us. Moreover this is true not only of what was done in past generations. The situation in which each person is placed is also constituted by all of us in the contemporary world who accept these arrangements and take them for granted. At the same time it is always being shaped in new ways by those who object, criticize and try to change things. In many ways both the existing arrangements and the efforts to change them tend to be a balancing of competing self-interests rather than thoughtful concern for the common good. But that is the point at which creation faith has an important insight and task to contribute.

Those who have faith, who know themselves to be more than chance occurrences in a blind universe, must reflect on the purpose of our existence, the meaning of our freedom to think critically and shape our lives, and the implications of the multiple interdependencies of our several freedoms and the ways we use them. A good way of doing this is through the paradigm of hospitality. This is a way of thinking that is proposed in the first chapters of the Book of Genesis. God the Creator is at work there with "word" and "spirit," with speaking and breathing or blowing. With large and generous gestures, God makes a habitable world, and at the center of it a garden, a place of harmony and delight in which people are placed. Though the Genesis narrative puts only one couple in the garden, the story is about all of us. And it is a story not only about some long-lost time in prehistory, but about the continuing present, about now, about every now in which human beings exist. We are all invited into the harmony of God's creating, which is at the same time an unfinished creation, an unfinished world filled

with unfinished people. We are called to collaborate with God in continuing the task of creation, to exercise stewardship of our own lives and of the unfinished world. We are God's guests, invited to make the most of the divine hospitality and to mediate it to one another and to the rest of creation.

Reflecting on this image of God's hospitality we can come to a very clear vision of what constitutes a good life well lived. A first aspect of appreciating hospitality is to enjoy it, and to enjoy it in the ways in which it is intended. The hospitality of a banquet is appreciated by eating the food served, savoring it, observing good table manners and those courtesies and attentions that help to make the occasion pleasant for fellow guests and for the host or host family. One can apply this to the hospitality of God in creation. As both guests and stewards we are called to appreciate all that is good, beautiful and true, to savor it, not wasting or squandering. And we are called to observe that kind of respect for and attention to others that would be the equivalent of good table manners. Most of all, as courteous guests we are called on to make sure that the needs of all are noticed and met, and that all are drawn into the conversation so that none feel excluded or unwanted and that all can contribute to the occasion. If we reflect for a moment on the world of today as it is brought to us through newspapers, radio and television reports, research findings and statistics, it is clear that the way we are mediating God's hospitality to our fellow guests is very selective. It by no means reflects the breadth and evident intent of God's hospitality.

The point of such an observation is not to make any of us feel guilty. For the most part we have not personally done anything to create the enormous inequities, sufferings and exclusions that define the large-scale problems of the world, or even of our own country or city or neighborhood, though we may be guilty of

petty exclusions of our own. The purpose of looking at the large picture of what we are doing in the world with God's hospitality is not to impose guilt. It is, rather, to stress critical analysis and creative responsibility. We are gifted not only with rational intelligence and free will, but also with the precious faculties of imagination, empathy, hope and creative projection of future possibilities. In a world in which much has miscarried, whether through malice or blundering thoughtlessness or sheer ignorance and accident, we are not doomed to perpetuate oppressive or destructive patterns. We are gifted both by our nature and by the constant interventions of saving divine grace to take stock, evaluate and respond anew to God's hospitality with a better sense of gratitude and stewardship.

The plan of this book is to lay out from a number of different perspectives questions about what stewardship of God's hospitality might mean for us in our times and in our circumstances. Any reader who did not skip the introduction will know that it is not the intent to supply all the answers; that would be a foolish and unjustified claim. Many of the answers must be shaped by consensus and cooperation in the creativity of many groups, some small face-to-face communities, some large organizations. But all of us have to begin where we are and with the resources we can tap when we link forces with like-minded people. It is the author's hope that this book will offer a stimulus, a common text, a takeoff point for small Christian communities in parishes and elsewhere to share prayer, critical reflection and strategies for changing patterns in the world and in society at any level where there is suffering, exclusion, oppression, contempt or indifference to the needs of others and the stewardship of the treasures of the earth. It is with this hope that each chapter ends with questions that provide a basis for such sharing.

Questions for Group Discussion or Personal Reflection

1. What ideas, if any, were new in this text? Do you agree with them?
2. Consider situations in which you have felt excluded, devalued or unjustly treated. Try to remember and describe your feelings and the criteria by which you spontaneously felt that this situation was wrong.
3. What do you think are the worst injustices in your place of work, in your city, in the world? Is there any way that you individually or the group discussing the question can help to change this?

