Columns
Horizons
Ministry



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by Jennifer Wilson

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My sister was helping me make Mercy Bingo cards with words that had to do with religious life and the Sisters of Mercy. She asked "What is a charism?" except she pronounced it in a way that was funny. I have heard people say it wrong. This was a new pronunciation, and it sounded like the first part of charcoal when actually the h is silent. I didn't want her to feel bad since she was helping me, so I just said the word correctly. However, I was laughing to myself. It was a bit late in the evening, and I was grateful she didn't ask me what it meant.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines charisms as "graces of the Holy Spirit which directly or indirectly benefit the Church, ordered as they are to her building up, to the good of men, and to the needs of the world" (Article 799). In everyday language, a charism can be understood as "the gifts from God that allow a person or group to live out the Gospel in relation to the world around them." Essentially it is how a person or group puts the gospel into action.

When people do ask me about the charism of the Sisters of Mercy, I often talk about hospitality and that part of how we live out being Sisters of Mercy is by being with those on the margins or edge of society. Our foundress, Catherine McAuley, did this in her time as she welcomed those servants who were being abused by those for whom they worked in the 1800s in Ireland.

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Today Sisters of Mercy worldwide provide hospitality to many people. Mercy Sr. Marilyn Sunderman says this about hospitality, "A matter of the heart, hospitality lends an ear and extends a hand. In essence, hospitality mirrors God's welcoming, cordial, tender care." This past summer I had a few experiences of hospitality that have provided beautiful reflection for me since coming home.

The little boy next to me at the Catholic Charities Humanitarian Respite Center in McAllen, Texas, was about 3-years-old. This center welcomes people who have crossed the border from Mexico into the United States. They stay for a few days as they make plans for where in the U.S. they are going. I sat at the coloring table with him and started coloring a picture. In a language I didn't understand, he started talking to me. It became obvious that I was to color a picture together with him.

As we colored, he chatted on, and when I stood up to talk with someone, he yanked on my shirt and pointed at my shoes. I kept talking, but he persisted. My shoelaces were untied, and he stopped when I tied them. We continued our coloring, and he got up and left the table. Assuming he had tired of the coloring and of me, I started coloring with another child. He came back and this time had chocolate. He made it clear that he was giving it to me. That small act brought tears to my eyes because here was this small boy offering hospitality to me, a stranger to him. Here was a little boy in a situation not of his making and very difficult to say the least.



Mercy Sr. Jennifer Wilson with Arise Adelante staff and youth on July 12, 2024, the last day of the Arise Adelante summer youth retreat. (Jennifer Wilson)

I also helped with a service trip at ARISE Adelante, also in McAllen, Texas, a ministry of the Sisters of Mercy, and watched as they welcomed the students on the trip as if they were family and not strangers.

A few weeks before meeting that little boy, I had visited Guyana, South America. Guyana is a familiar place to me as I lived there as a Mercy Volunteer Corps member

years ago. The people of Guyana are amazing in their hospitality and will always share whatever they have with someone who is not from there. The boys at the orphanage that is run by the Sisters of Mercy often welcome many different people into their lives. Although they welcome others often, they always make me feel as if I am the most important visitor. Their antics and the noise that 50 boys produce does not overshadow the welcome they offer.

Back at home in Buffalo, New York, due to circumstances beyond my control, I had to move in a short amount of time from the local parish convent to the Sisters of Mercy large living center. Forty sisters who are not strangers to me have welcomed me with open arms. Their immediate welcome and kindness made me smile and helped me to be grateful that I have a place to go where I am loved and welcomed.

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These collective experiences of welcome in places where I am known and places where I am not made me pause and reflect on the ways I am ministered to and the ways that others welcome me. I naturally reach out to others. I am good at connecting and making sure others are not left out. Hospitality as part of my charism is my way and the sisters' way of living out the gospel. It is my way of being in the world. This is for me the easy part. What becomes more difficult is to let myself be welcomed.

The experiences I had this summer led me to the following reflection. Why when I offer hospitality to others do I end up being on the receiving end, and is that okay? Of course, it is okay, and it does point out that I am more comfortable being the minister, not the one ministered to.

When Sister Marilyn says, "hospitality mirrors God's welcoming, cordial, tender care," it is a reminder to me that God is reaching out to me in this way. This calls me to stop, to listen, and to pay attention to the way God is welcoming me through others. In what ways recently have you reached out to others and God has stepped in to love and welcome you?