

MY CONNECTION NO 11 "HOSPITALITY

by Roland Laneuville, p.m.é.

"رولاند (Roland), get ready! Tomorrow morning we're off to visit my mother." It was Sadiq talking to me, all happy. Feverish even. I was in An Nahud, Sudan, studying Arabic. To do so, I was sharing a room with a group of students who were studying business administration in this small town in the middle of the desert in northern Sudan. We set off at the appointed time, in a cargo truck on desert tracks. We sat comfortably on flour sacks. I guarantee it's solid, but not very soft. A good three hours later, we arrived in Janina Jadida, the village of Sadiq, an oasis lost in the desert, dotted with some thirty mud houses.

The afternoon is devoted to my introduction to riding a camel. Sadiq's cousin Mahmoud has come to lend a hand. With a student as gifted as me, he surely needed an auxiliary trainer. They congratulated me and agreed that I was a quick learner, but that, for a future lesson, I'd better keep the ropes in hand so as not to let the camel pick up speed, in which case it might well dump me one way or the other. I realized I'd avoided the worst.



On the way back, the sun has just set. Sadiq's mother is waiting for us. Or rather, she's prepared a boiled meal for us in the men's hut. As soon as we've eaten, three straw mattresses await us. Weary after hours of truck and camel riding, our backs are very grateful for the rest.

At sunrise, behind the hut, Mom has set out a bucket of tepid water, with a bowl, for me to shower in. It feels so good! Life is reborn. Just as I was about to put on my shirt, Mom sat me down on a stool and approached me with a bottle. "What is this? I say to myself. Surely not apple juice!" Nope. She doesn't offer it to me to drink, but with care and delicacy, almost like a prayer, she pours it over my head. Not a few drops, the whole bottle of perfume! And Sadiq, astonished, is quick to interpret his mother's gesture: "This is hospitality in my village!"

In a refugee camp

Several years later, I represented the Archbishop of Khartoum on a tour of refugee camps. I arrived in Gedaref. The years hadn't given me the opportunity to make much progress in camel racing, but I managed to get by a little in Arabic. In fact, in the camps, I had to deal with Eritreans who didn't know much Arabic themselves. They did, however, know a thing or two about hospitality.

When I arrived late at night in Gedaref, I had to drink the welcome coffee. I can guarantee that this coffee was not decaffeinated. All the guests watched as the beans were selected, roasted on a small grill, percolated and smelled the bewitching aroma. Two or three small cups of black coffee, you won't believe it, but I'm telling you, it makes for a good night's sleep.

Early the next morning, we have a kilometer or two to walk through the sand and brambles to reach the refugee camp where I'm expected for mass. So off we go. When we arrive, a hundred or so people are in the community gathering tent. I get ready to put on my alb and chasuble. They stop me: "No, no, not yet. Not yet." They sit me down and bring me a nice glass of water. Very good idea, I thought. Then a woman approaches with a big bowl and a jug. "She looks like she wants to wash my hands. No, the hand washing is for later in the service. She untied my shoes, took off my socks and washed my feet thoroughly. So good! It's obvious to me that her name was Mary Magdalene. Looking for a towel, she couldn't find one, so she untied her head veil and wiped my feet with it. "It can't be! It's too much!



In Japan too

In Japan too, it was too much. I was visiting my confreres in Misonoguchi. After Sunday mass, my companion Florent whispered in my ear, "This parishioner would like to come and say hello to you this afternoon." "Of

course," I say, "I'll use you as an interpreter." "No need," says Florent, "she told me it would be without conversation".

At the appointed hour, a little puzzled, I arrive at the parish salon, but don't recognize the lady from the morning. She's all dapper now, dressed in her ceremonial kimono. Florent shows me where to sit. Ayako had already laid out all the cups and objects needed for the tea ceremony. A whole ritual for me alone! For her, I was the distinguished guest to be welcomed, not just with a smile or a bow, even a deep and prolonged one, but with an elaborate ritual in which I would have all the time in the world to appreciate the beauty of the gestures and the grace of "communing" with the tea. After thirty minutes of silence and elegance, followed by a deep bow, she tiptoed away. It was real, authentic. All the hospitality was in the ritual. No words.

As in the Gospel

Sadiq's mom, my Mary-Magdalene, Ayako, all three had understood that "hospitality allowed some people, without knowing it, to welcome angels into their homes". Had they read it in Hebrews 13:2? Probably not. Did they understand it? Perhaps not. But they knew it. They did.

Hospitality, welcoming foreigners, is experienced differently in different cultures. In Cuba, Pepe lived it when he greeted me on the doorstep in Jibacoa: "Alina," he said to his wife. Rolando has arrived. Prepare a good coffee". A few minutes later, it was done. It didn't take as long as in Japan, but the heart was in it.

I also think of my older sister, Suzanne, in Haileybury, Ontario. She too experienced the welcome when she greeted her new parish priest, a good Congolese: "You don't have any family here. My brother is alone in Africa. So I'm going to adopt you like a brother, knit you some woolen stockings and bring you some sugar pies.

Thank you for the perfume. Thank you for the foot washing. Thank you for the tea ceremony. Thank you for the cafécito... and the wool socks! What hospitality!