



## *Deeper Waters*

### **I was a stranger and you welcomed me. . .**

“Deeper Waters” column for October, 2007

By Julie McCarty

As my husband Terry and I parked the car at the Benedictine monastery, I felt just a pinch uneasy. A married couple staying a couple of nights with the monks? Just how would that work?

Strolling through the entrance courtyard, a large statue greeted us with open arms. “Let all guests be received as Christ” was inscribed along the base. My fears evaporated.

### **Welcoming Christ**

Since that day, I’ve observed Benedictine hospitality in action on several occasions. This attitude of welcoming the stranger is found in the “Rule of St. Benedict,” written approximately 1500 years ago. St. Benedict’s understanding of Christian hospitality is based on his reflections on the biblical story about the separation of “sheep” and “goats” at the end of time. Jesus speaks of feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned, and welcoming the stranger. Christ teaches us “whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me” (see Matthew 25:31-46).

Because of this, St. Benedict taught the monks to greet guests with humility, prayer, bowing of the head, or even prostration. Guests, he wrote, are to dine at the abbot’s table. If the guests are poor or on pilgrimage, they are to be shown even more kindness, because “in them more particularly Christ is received.”

*I was a stranger and you welcomed me.* In his earthly life, Jesus must have known what it was to be a newcomer. As a child, he spent time in a foreign land (Egypt) and would have had to make new friends when they moved to Nazareth. As a single man, he must have felt an “outsider” when others wanted him to just “settle down” (read that get married and raise a family). Traveling from town to town to preach, Jesus observed that although foxes have dens and birds have nests, “the Son of Man has nowhere to rest his head” (Mt. 8:20; Luke 9:58). Jesus’ experiences must have given him special sensitivity to those considered “strangers” by others.

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## Contemporary Strangers

*I was a stranger and you welcomed me.* Who are the “strangers” in my life? I think of co-workers whose political views differ from mine. There are the Catholics attending the Spanish Mass at my parish, and the people I know who travel many miles to a Latin Mass. I think also of those who have become *estranged* from their families.

*I was a stranger and you welcomed me.* These words of Jesus have led me to learn more about the official Catholic teachings about migrant workers and immigration. As I write this, the U.S. government has not yet reformed legal immigration policy, but I am working on reforming my heart.

*I was a stranger and you welcomed me.* I encounter newcomers everyday—how do I treat them? I have new neighbors from Turkey and Southeast Asia. I know priests and seminarians from African nations. I encounter Somali women draped in colorful clothing when I shop or travel. How do I treat them?

*I was a stranger and you welcomed me.* Help me, dear Jesus, to truly welcome *all* other people. Remind me to smile, to offer an outstretched hand, to learn from these “others” who you have called your brothers and sisters. In loving them, may I also discover and adore you, hidden within their depths.

## Reflection questions

Who are the “strangers” in my life? How might I reach out to them?

## To explore Catholic teaching on immigration/migrant workers:

--“Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope,” the pastoral letter written by Catholic bishops of Mexico and the United States (2003). Text online at <http://www.usccb.org/mrs/stranger.shtml> .

--“Welcoming the Stranger Among Us: Unity in Diversity,” a pastoral statement approved by the US Bishops in 2000. Text online at <http://www.usccb.org/mrs/welcome.shtml> .

--“Dying to Live: A Migrant’s Journey” (DVD)—This award-winning film puts a human face on those who cross the US/Mexican border. Free reflection guide available. See <http://www.nd.edu/~latino/dyingtolive/> .



## About the columnist:

*Julie McCarty is a syndicated columnist and freelance writer from Minnesota with a master’s degree in theology. Readers can contact Julie through her website [www.juliemccarty.com](http://www.juliemccarty.com) .*