

## Lecture Eurodiaconia, 8 June 2016

### Hospitality, the heart of society and the church

Ladies and gentlemen,

Hospitality - to me, that is *the* key word to take to heart in society and in the churches of Europe in the next decade. It is key because it is and should be leading in our efforts to close the social, economic and cultural gaps that have opened up over the past forty years and are still growing deeper. Closing gaps, and resocialization instead of desocialization; that is hospitality, and that is the operative word for the next few years in our communities and in our churches. Why and how this should take place is a subject I would like to broach with a view to the Dutch situation, and particularly the diaconal centre of the Reformed Church of Saint Paul in Rotterdam, where I work.

It is Friday night, around eight o'clock. It is raining, the wind is blowing and it is cold. In front of the Church of Saint Paul, I see a man. He is tired, soaking wet from the rain, and weighed down with two large, heavy, bulging tote bags. We welcome him into the centre, and once he has had a good helping of bread and hot coffee and has taken off his wet coat, he starts to tell us his story, in fits and starts, and in broken English. He is from Egypt and had been given his marching orders by one of the immigration detention centres, in the form of a letter saying that he had to leave the Netherlands within 48 hours. An officer had given him some cash for train fare and told him to go to the Church of Saint Paul: 'The people over there will know how to take care of you.' And so we did, of course. Bed, Bath and Bread is what he received; the minimum support needed to sustain people's existence, regardless of who they are and what their status is. This has been the leading motto for our Church in the past few years.

I am telling you this heart-wrenching story for a reason. This is a daily recurring situation; in Rotterdam but also in many other cities in the Netherlands. In my view, this story contains all the ingredients of what hospitality entails, and what diaconal work can accomplish in the Netherlands and in Europe. More and more countries in Europe, including my own, seem to display a lack of hospitality. We prefer to turn our backs on the rest of the world and particularly on the plight of the less fortunate, hiding behind the walls of Fortress Europe. One single value has become prevalent: that of money and possessions - the belief in Mammon. As a result, we see a widening gap between rich and poor, an ongoing greedy pursuit of personal gain at the top; and increasing destitution and exclusion at the lower end, both in the Netherlands and on a global scale. Consider, for a moment, the news that we heard in recent months about the Panama Papers, presenting shocking revelations about the very rich and corporations enriching themselves at the expense of society. The consequences are disastrous to us all, but even more so to the

marginalized, the people on the fringes of society. On an international level, this means refugees, and on a national level, this concerns our 'own' people - running up greater debts, becoming impoverished and losing their homes.

In 2007, the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk wrote an absorbing book entitled *Im Weltinnenraum des Kapitals*, translated into English as *In the World Interior of Capital* and into Dutch as *The Crystal Palace*. The metaphor of the Crystal Palace expresses exactly what Sloterdijk wants to convey. Dostoevsky was the first to use this metaphor for modern capitalism in his days. The famous Crystal Palace was built in London in 1851 for the Great Exhibition; the first World Exhibition. For the first time in history, the achievements of Western technology and the power and wealth they entailed were proudly displayed under one single glass roof. To Sloterdijk, this represents the picture of the modern Western world and its global dream of never-ending affluence. It expresses the world as a comfortable bell glass, spreading ever further around the globe like an endlessly growing amoeba, where modern Western people would love to live. The only problem is that billions of people - on an international as well as national level - do not live under this bell jar and are knocking at the door in vain, trying to get in. This reflects exactly what is going on in Europe at the moment, especially since the European Union and Turkey have signed a deal on Syrian refugees. The deal will not work, as turning your back on the rest of the world and living in the comfort of a bell glass of so-called prosperity offers no hope for the future - neither for refugees nor for us Europeans. This metaphor of the world as a Crystal Palace expresses not just the global situation but also the national situation in the Netherlands. There are so many people who are born here and constantly feel that in the eyes of the self-proclaimed dominant political and social elite, they do not really matter - and who toss in the towel and drop out. And who can blame them?

Rotterdam is a beautiful city. According to Lonely Planet, it is one of the 'places to be'. At the same time, it is a city struggling with huge long-term problems, one of them being the fastest growing poverty rate in the Netherlands. Moreover, the poverty is deepening as more people spend more time below the poverty line. Over 100,000 citizens of Rotterdam have fallen below the official poverty threshold. Many of them are children. The number of people living on benefits has risen dramatically, to a staggering current total of almost 40,000. Rotterdam has the highest benefit claimant rate and count in the Netherlands. As many as 144,000 people have to claim additional benefits, and today, over 7,500 families depend on food banks to survive. This means that approximately 1 in 5 people in Rotterdam lead dismal lives, without any prospects of ever making a decent living. They become increasingly isolated socially - essentially sidelined. In addition, Rotterdam is home to between 15,000 and 20,000 foreigners without a residence permit, in the Netherlands between

100.000 - 140.000 together. On the other hand, I come across a lot of people in Rotterdam who are willing to fight inequality and injustice, including young adults, residents, professionals in a wide variety of fields, artists, and entrepreneurs. They all agree that this is an outrage and try to find ways to take responsibility, swim against the mainstream, and build a kinder, more hospitable city of Rotterdam. If we look at the Netherlands as a whole, we see more or less the same picture. The tenth wealthiest country on earth has 1.4 million people living below the official poverty threshold, 30% of its families struggling with long-term debt repayment problems, and growing rates of homelessness.

Poverty means a lot more than just not having enough money. It is mainly a social issue. It is a lack of inclusion in society. Everything that you are, and everything that you might be able to contribute simply does not seem to matter. Not being included, being denied in your existence is the worst thing that can happen to people. Doing that to a person is the reverse of hospitality. Research has shown again and again that social exclusion affects health and resilience, and is linked to unhappiness and depression. Furthermore, exclusion will eventually pose an enormous threat to social cohesion in the city and, consequently, to democracy.

Please allow yourself a moment to digest that. In my view, there are two core issues at the heart of most of our European societies today, both of which revolve around hospitality. One is the issue of migration and diversity, the main drawback of globalization. The other is the issue of poverty and social exclusion, which affects society on a more national level. In our task at hand, it is of the utmost importance to address these issues in tandem and to avoid competition for attention between the two. They are two sides of the same coin - the Crystal Palace. One privileged group lives under the glass bell, and the other, much larger group lives outside the bell jar. This inequality creates a social, economic and cultural gap that should not and need not exist, neither on a global nor national nor local level. Hospitality is the heart of the solution to this issue in the long run - for society as a whole and for the diaconate! Before we can address ways to contribute to the solution, please allow me to explain three essential, fundamental principles of the diaconate.

First fundamental principle. If we look at the position of the diaconate within the church, we see that things run awry in many instances. The importance and power of the diaconate are often seriously underestimated. 'The Church's deepest nature is expressed in her threefold responsibility: of proclaiming the Word of God, celebrating the sacraments, and exercising the ministry of charity. (...) For the Church, charity is not a kind of welfare activity which could equally well be left to others, but is a part of her nature, an indispensable expression of her very Being,'

according to Pope Benedict in his first encyclical letter, 'Deus caritas est'. These lines really strike a chord with me, as they give the diaconate its justified position, the position I feel it should have on Biblical grounds. It is not something extra on the side, something you do because as a Christian, you are bent on doing good to your neighbour. It is the essential responsibility of the church. Without the diaconate, there *is* no church.

Second fundamental principle. This concerns two words at the heart of Christian tradition: charity and justice. They mean hospitality, but only if they are combined. Why? Many people, both inside and outside the church, mainly associate diaconal work with charity: relieving distress in individual cases. Let me give you an example. Increasing numbers of people in the Netherlands depend on food banks to survive. Many people, including church members, volunteer in food banks to help them. This is commendable in itself, of course. The problem arises when we rely on individual help - charity - alone. It is not fate that determines that these deprived people, at the lower end of our society, have to rely on charity services. It is a 'man-made' situation. It is the result of decisions made by the upper class, who refuse to build an inclusive society that is accessible to all. It is a deliberate attempt to design society to benefit predominantly rich people, large corporations, and banks rather than 'ordinary' *people*. As the Accra Confession of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) of 2004 states: 'Therefore, we reject any ideology or economic regime that puts profits before people, does not care for all creation and privatizes those gifts of God meant for all.' It is the responsibility of the diaconate, especially where hospitality is concerned, to address this challenge with greater emphasis on the element of justice, both in the community and in the church. While the church is not a political party, it does act in the political arena. Hospitality means standing up for the interests of the *people* in our cities, particularly those people whose voices are hardly ever heard, if at all, and who do not make the decisions that matter but who are always left holding the short end of the stick due to all kinds of rules and regulations of the past thirty years, such as rules concerning immigration policy, social security, and healthcare.

Third fundamental principle. Solidarity is fundamental to Christianity. The Golden Rule taught by Jesus in his Bible is: 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. This is the essence of the Law and the prophets.' Many churches and church members show a tendency to spiritualize their religion: trust in God is what it is all about; or to privatize their religion: it is all about God's relationship with me. A notorious example is the often misconstrued text of Paul's 1<sup>st</sup> letter to the Corinthians, chapter 11: 'But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body.' In this letter, Paul is not talking

about the salvation of one's soul. Instead, he is talking about supper with friends on the free day of the week. The rich did not have to work on that day. They were the first to sit down at the table and to feast on the food and drinks. By consequence, the poor, who *did* have to work on the free day, would often go hungry. This is the kind of social injustice - about food of all matters! - that Paul wanted to expose. If it is every man for himself, then what is the point in participating in the Lord's Supper? That is not the idea at all! I am not talking about a minor detail here. This touches upon the core of Christian worship. Can you feel the enormous consequences and the dramatic social criticism packed into this pivotal moment in Christian worship in a society - our society - which is based on meritocracy rather than solidarity and sharing? There is room only for those who know how to play the game and therefore 'merit' their place. The prophets, Jesus, Paul have always seen such a society - for theirs was the same - as being dominated by death. This will eventually destroy humanity. And they call for reform. Life is not created until people share their money and worldly possessions. When people share their livelihood, no one will suffer distress or deprivation: society as the Lord's Supper.

What does hospitality mean to the diaconate in practice in the Netherlands, in Rotterdam, if we go by my experiences in the Church of Saint Paul? In my view, five essential responsibilities can be defined.

1. We should consciously create sanctuaries of silence, prayer, openness to God, in public spaces in the city. All diaconal work begins in silence. In the middle of the busy hustle and bustle of city life, where life is ruled by the clock every minute of the day, we should be hospitable to citizens and give them ample space to find silence, God, and dispense with their day planners, watches and cell phones. At the same time, this means fighting the misconception that silence, and seeking contact with God, would turn people into escapists who avoid reality. All great mystics, silence seekers, God seekers, Jesus, Paul, Hildegard von Bingen, Saint Francis of Assisi, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, without any exception, showed social commitment. They interpret their experiences with God as wholeness as an appeal to create wholeness in society. 'The hunger for unity and oneness is not the longing of weak, frustrated, self-despising individuals, but rather the growing desire that naturally ensues from a full life,' as Dorothee Sölle wrote in her book *Death by Bread Alone*. A relationship with God, mysticism, is, therefore, a way to get closer to humans and animals; hospitality, never a way to escape.

2. We should leverage all of our contacts and relationships with marginalized people to help cure society of illusory concepts of man. Our societies believe in heroes, in people, bankers, businessmen, athletes with superhuman powers. We are on an endless, vain quest for the perfect human being. Hero worship

leads to dehumanization and is, therefore, extremely dangerous. People, we, are vulnerable. And precisely in this vulnerability lies their power, as our darling Christianity has proclaimed for centuries. Peter Sloterdijk calls *Joseph and His Brothers*, the novel by Thomas Mann that was first published in 1943, 'the secret main text of modern theology'. In nonreligious language and outside of the Biblical realm, Mann investigates how religion can help in achieving the goal of 'humanizing the myth'. This concerned the Nazi myth of race and nation that prevailed at the time. Our own myth, today, is the myth of people without failure the possibility of superperfect human beings. Humanization always begins with the realization of our own vulnerability. 'Rather than the expression of the hubris of the self-perceived omnipotent human subject, the divine is the ever-changing name for that part in or about the subject - you and me - that allows it to experience that it does not stand alone, or indeed, stand at all, for that matter, without running the risk of falling again and again, and to learn to appreciate itself as an imperfect being,' according to the comments to the novel. All hospitality springs from the awareness of our vulnerability as human beings, the awareness that we are all the same, without exception, and that we all, essentially, depend on one another and on what we have to offer one another.

3. In our cities, we should build local safety nets that provide accommodation, assistance and medical care to those who cannot manage on their own, people who are isolated socially, medically and spiritually; homeless people, substance abusers, young adults at a great distance from the labour market, debt-ridden people, independent contractors, asylum seekers, refugees without residence permits. And we should do this under protest! Because the safety nets that were in place have been phased out or removed by design by the government. Every human being is entitled to basic minimal sustenance, to Bed, Bath and Bread. Society no longer guarantees this basic rights, without conditions. In the first place, this is of critical importance to society itself. Hospitality means that you can rest assured that society will not turn a blind eye, and that your dignity as a human being will be respected when things go wrong. Another aspect is important in this respect. If you deal with the marginalized and the downtrodden, and learn to empathize with their plight, you will start to shift your perception of society to a bottom-up view. You will start to see what society looks like from their angle. This is essential. It is essential to widen the group of people who, besides the people concerned, understand what it is like to be poor, to be excluded, who understand that poverty and social exclusion are not the result of fate or destiny. Instead, their plight is the result of decisions made by other people, the dominant group, who, intentionally or unintentionally, refuse to share the wealth and prosperity we have built up together with people who are less fortunate. Adopting a bottom-up view and ensuring that this view becomes the subject of discussion, of

efforts to influence matters, a driver of resistance and change in our societies; that is the third contribution that the diaconate can give to the city, in a kind and hospitable manner.

4. We should launch projects to give people access to meaningful daytime activities. People who are forced to live on the fringes of society often live empty days. Empty days and empty lives can lead to depression, hopelessness, and a sense of helplessness. This affects the victims, but also the city itself and the process of integration. So many people are sidelined while they have so much to contribute. For this reason, the Church of Saint Paul has launched a project entitled 'Meaningful daytime activities and building dignity'. In a wide variety of ways - and successfully - we invite our visitors to break free from the downward spiral they are trapped in and restore their energy, by engaging in arts and crafts as well as social and cultural activities, such as metal work, carpentry, and designing and making clothes. On a larger scale and in partnership with other organizations, we do the same in Rotterdam, particularly for refugees who have recently arrived in the Netherlands - with the same objective in mind: to build a kind, hospitable city for all.

5. Build catalyzing platforms for change in your cities. This is yet another essential responsibility. The citizens of Rotterdam display enormous drive and energy when it comes to helping people in need, including asylum seekers, appeals rights exhausted and homeless people. The potential for success is magnificent, as we have experienced with our Bed, Bath and Bread campaign, in Rotterdam as well as in the rest of the Netherlands. BBB eventually became a motto that we now use on a nationwide scale. What started out as a small-scale campaign, with a small team of professionals and a relatively low budget, funded by a large national Fund, developed into a significant social campaign of substantial proportions. Increasing numbers of people, including entrepreneurs, professionals, and volunteers, devoted their energy, time and expertise, without financial consideration, to the greater cause of guaranteeing minimum sustenance to people without residence permits. Many of the participants told us: 'I do not believe in God, I do not go to church, but what I see happening here is marvellous. This is what it is all about, that is Christianity in action !' Such platforms for positive change, and the dedicated citizens who participate in them, are able to create 'solidarity in the city', a city without poverty and social isolation, as well as a new, more humane economy in a 'sustainable and circular city'; an economy that serves the city instead of exploiting and oppressing people. Here, too, the diaconate can play a vital role as an initiator and a platform.

I would like to conclude with a final remark. The main criterion, in my view, for the question as to whether a society - Europe, the Netherlands, Rotterdam - is a *just* society, depends on the answer to the question as to who are excluded from full participation in

that society; and by consequence the question as to whether this society is hospitable or not. Hospitality is about closing gaps, reducing distance, building a closer rapport. With its time-honoured tradition, the diaconate can contribute tremendously to building a kind and hospitable Europe, and kind and hospitable cities. A hospitable society is a society where everyone counts, and everyone has the opportunity to make their own, valuable contribution. Building kind and hospitable cities by closing gaps, advancing the Kingdom together, right here, right now, that is what we need to focus on when it comes to hospitality.

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