

Sacred Hospitality: Badaliya - The Way of Mystic Substitution

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God does not dwell in bodies that are whole - Hildegard of Bingen

Hospitality, welcoming the stranger, and by extension, the other (any other) and the unknown, lies at the heart of the Abrahamic traditions. Hospitality always awaits and expects the stranger—every stranger—with open heart. It extends home, hearth, gifts, and ultimately even life itself to the other, whether invited or not. A true host is ready to give his life for the guest and conversely, for host and guest are interchangeable.

"Sacred" hospitality may be defined as "the experiential discovery of the sacred in others and, in response, of holiness in oneself." It puts hospitality at the center of our spiritual lives. Louis Massignon, whose phrase it is, writes: "This experiential knowledge is not a ready-made science; it is an understanding, an interiorization, which cannot be communicated by external means, but by acceptance through the transfer to ourselves of the sufferings of others." Sacred hospitality is a call to go out of ourselves toward others, to love outside our own milieu and relationships.

The rediscovery of this path is a little-known twentieth-century tale, enacted in turbulent souls in the darkness of religious conflict. It is a tale told in human actions. The protagonists are four *Zaddik* or Righteous Ones. These "hidden pillars" are Father Charles de Foucauld, founder of The Little Brothers and Sisters of Jesus; J.K. Huysmans, the symbolist novelist who converted to Catholicism; Louis Massignon, the scholar, mystic, and Islamicist; and Mary Kalil, an Egyptian Christian woman. Above and before these, as patrons, exemplars, and inspirations stand St. Francis and the Mary the mother of Jesus, to whom it was said, "A sword will pierce your soul too."

The story opens with Charles de Foucauld (1858-1916), a French aristocrat, orphaned at an early age and brought up by grandparents. Overweight, lazy, self-absorbed, given to debauchery, he wished only to live as he chose. Called to military service in North Africa, he took his mistress. Forbidden to do so, he abandoned the army, returned home, and set up house with her. A year later, hearing his regiment was at war in North Africa, he rejoined it. In Africa, he fought bravely. The first flickering of faith returned, discovered "in the wound of a divine compassion between fighters who had become brothers." Above all, he saw the desert and heard its call.

He sought permission to travel east—unsuccessfully. He resigned his commission. He began to study Arabic, and set out to explore the unmapped areas of Morocco. Since he could not do so as a Frenchman, he disguised himself as Jew, wearing a red skullcap and a black silk turban. He called himself Rabbi Aleman, exiled from Russia by recent pogroms. The report he wrote and published was a masterpiece of geography and philology (he would meet Louis Massignon through it), but his true discovery was the Abrahamic world. He learned the meaning of hospitality (Jews saved his life on several occasions, Moroccans, too), and met people whose faith in God was absolute.

Back in Paris, the process of conversion continued. He began to frequent churches, praying: "Lord, if you exist, make yourself known." He sought out the famous spiritual director, the Abbé Huvelin who, with the directness of true discernment, simply told him to kneel, make his confession, and go to communion. From then on, Foucauld aimed only to fulfil the great commandments: to love God all with all his heart, and to love his neighbor as himself. He determined to imitate Jesus, to love him beyond measure. Three events set his course. He heard a sermon in which the phrase occurred: "You took the last place and no one wanted to take it from you." He visited a Trappist monastery, where he met a brother, whose tattered dress shocked and fascinated him. Finally, he visited the Holy Land. After Christmas in Bethlehem, he meditated the places Christ had walked. From that moment on, he knew that he would seek poverty—the simple life of Nazareth.

He joined the Trappists at their most austere house, Our Lady of the Snows, the highest monastery in France. Winters lasted six months. But it was not yet the life for which he yearned. Transferred to a still more primitive monastery in Syria, he formed the idea of a different kind of community. The vision would shape his life: a community of manual laborers, supporting themselves, living the hidden life of Jesus in the simplest way among the poorest, most ordinary people. "All of our efforts will be dedicated to show to others charity, compassion, tenderness, and the infinite goodness of our Master." The authorities' response was two years in Rome. He obeyed. Again and again he obeyed, dying to himself. At last, his wish was granted. Not yet his order, it was a start. He would go to the Holy Land, work as a servant, hidden and solitary. He would lead the secret life of Nazareth at Nazareth itself.

He became the servant of the Poor Clares. Living in the tool shed, he served Mass and did whatever was asked. He read the Gospels constantly. One day, after reading the passage where Mary visits Elizabeth, he imagined Jesus saying: "Work to sanctify the world, work for it as my mother did—without words and in silence. Go live among those who do not know me. Bring me to them, establish an altar, a tabernacle. Bring the Gospel to them, preach from example, not telling the Gospel but living it."

Ordained in June 1901, Foucauld determined to live his vision—and form his community—among the Moroccans, who had first taught him about God. He would create a center of hospitality, a place where God and bread were equally present and he could pray for and welcome strangers as brothers. He went to Béni Abbès and built a chapel consisting of four palm trunks supporting a roof of woven twigs and branches. A board served as an altar. He slept on the floor, ate dates and barley cakes. His only icon was a large drawing of the Sacred Heart "holding out its arms to embrace, hold, and call humans and giving itself to them by offering its Heart." His neighbors called his place the *khaoua*, or brotherhood. He became "Brother Charles." "I want to accustom everyone—Christian, Muslim, Jew, or pagan—to look on me as a brother, a universal brother."

Massignon wrote:

Foucauld was not constituted to evangelize vocally by propagandistic sermons. ... He came to share the humble life of the most humble, earning his daily bread with them by the "holy work of his hands," before revealing to them, by his silent example, the real spiritual bread of hospitality that these humble people themselves had offered him: the Word of Truth, the bread of angels, in the sacrament of the present moment. Beneath the tissue of empirical facts he would have them divine the transcendent act. Already his contemplation saw the temporal torn aside by the invasion of the eternal.

He stayed on in Beni Abbés for several years, serving the poor. He turned no guest away. War broke out around him. He felt called to go south, to the Tuaregs, where there were no priests. He wished to serve them, learn their language, and translate the Gospels. He set out, living the life of Nazareth, treating the sick in each village he passed through. Finally, he came to Tamanrasset, "twenty poor huts scattered over two miles," "the heart of the strongest nomadic tribe in the country." There he stayed, alone, working and serving, forever hoping that others would join him in establishing a little order to take this poorest of lives into the poorest of places.

He died on December 1, 1916, consecrated to his Moslem brothers and sisters, without a struggle, an innocent victim of routine violence in a meaningless conflict between local tribes. Before he had died, he had founded an association, a Union, of those who believed as he did. He had met and corresponded with Louis Massignon and hoped Massignon would continue his work. Massignon wrote: "Foucauld was given to me like an older brother . . . He helped me find my brothers in all other human beings, starting with the most abandoned . . ."

Massignon now takes up the story. In October 1906, barely twenty, agnostic, already a scholar, he sailed from Marseilles for Morocco. On board, he met a young Spanish aristocrat, Luis de Quadra, returning to Cairo. De Quadra, a homosexual, told how him he "had quit Christianity for Islam so as to continue adoring God without remorse for his life, in the manner of Omar Khayyam." The two formed a bond that would last until Quadra's suicide in 1921. By then the friendship had long become a practice of compassion in which Massignon offered himself (pledged his life) as a "voluntary hostage" for the saving of his friend's soul. In its early stages, however, his relationship with Quadra (and others) threw him into a profound moral crisis.

Embracing Arab life, dress, and customs, Massignon pursued his studies with ferocious brilliance, while suffering anguish at his private life. The only light in the darkness came from Sufi mystics whose texts he was discovering and reading with new eyes. One day in Cairo, in March 1907, de Quadra pointed out a verse by the tenth century mystic, Al-Hallaj: "Two moments of adoration suffice in love, but the preliminary ablution must be made in blood." This was the Al-Hallaj (later the subject of Massignon's *magnum opus*) who was crucified in Baghdad in 922 for asserting "*Ana'l Haqq*. I am the truth" (or "My "I" is God.") Massignon wrote: "The meaning of sin was given back to me, and then the piercing desire for purity read on the threshold of a cruel Egyptian spring." Al-Hallaj was the hook that would turn his life around.

On December 19, 1907, seeking his life's meaning, Massignon reached Baghdad. He was introduced to the elite. He made friends with a leading Muslim family, the Alussy's, who had access to a rich library of manuscripts. They rented a house for him in a neighborhood where no Westerner lived and cared for him spiritually and morally with exquisite grace. Speaking of Hajj 'Ali Alussy, Massignon wrote: "I was his guest. He took me as I was and tried to make me reach my destiny."

Living as an Arab among Arabs, Massignon drew suspicion. Was he a spy? What was he doing? To dispel any doubts, he decided to continue his explorations outside the city. On March 22, 1908, disguised as a licensed Turkish offer, he left Baghdad with a small caravan. Before he left, the Alussy's persuaded him to let them engrave his name on a small crystal seal above the word *abduhu*, "his servant."

It was an exciting venture. He was attacked by Bedouins, but remained undeterred. Then things began to come apart. On April 28, he had an argument with a servant, who had been spreading rumors about his "effeminate manners." Massignon responded angrily. The servant ran off with the purse. Undaunted, Massignon pressed charges. Meanwhile, doubts had arisen about his identity and his mental stability. He decided to turn back. "Brokenhearted," he boarded a Turkish steamer to take him up the Tigris to Baghdad, the only European on board. He felt suspect, isolated. For the first time in his life, he was moved to pray. "It was in Arabic that I made my first prayer to him. '*Allah, Allah, as 'ad du'fi*' (God, God! Help my weakness!)"

He surrendered his revolver to the captain, who had grown concerned with his passenger's increasingly erratic behavior. It grew worse. Massignon broke into the captain's cabin, seized his revolver, and pointed it at the captain. He placed Massignon under observation. Physically constrained, Massignon despaired:

I began to suffer from myself. Examination of conscience: look at how I was ending up after four and a half years of amorality, justly wiped out for the greediness of my science and my pleasure. Dying in a terrible situation; my family would be happy to forget me . . . I decided to put an end to myself.

With a small knife, he struck at his heart, making a superficial wound.

Bandaged, he became more agitated, even delirious. He ripped off the dressing, shredding his shirt. He threw himself about. His face grew red. He cried out, "I want to die." Again, he was forcibly restrained. In this condition, between continuing bouts of agitation, the Stranger visited him. "Shortly after the knife thrust, I submitted to another stroke: interior, extraordinary, torturing, supernatural, ineffable. As if the very center of my heart were burning and my thoughts wrenched apart . . ."

The *Stranger* is the God of Abraham, of Mohammed, and of Mary's *Fiat*. He is the welcoming God whom we welcome, the great Yes that unites two in one. "God at once guest, host, and home." His approach is announced "by an internal break in our habits" or "by the acknowledgement of sin."

Responding to a questionnaire, Massignon replied, "the discovery antecedes the theory, commotion precedes denomination." "Before the Lord who has struck the blow, the soul becomes a woman, she is silent, she consents . . . She starts only to commemorate in secret the Annunciation, viaticum of hope, that she has conceived in order to give birth to the immortal." Like the Virgin, the soul does not ask why or how but only says Yes. "The frail guest that she carries in her womb determines thereafter all her conduct. It is not a made-up idea that she develops as she pleases according to her nature, but a mysterious Stranger whom she adores and who guides her."

The Stranger who visited me one evening in May before the Taq, cauterizing my despair that He lanced, came like the phosphorescence of a fish rising from the bottom of the deepest sea; my inner features revealed Him to me, behind the mask of my own features . . . The Stranger who took me as I was, on the day of His wrath, inert in His hand like the gecko of the sands, little by little overturned all my acquired reflexes, my precautions, and my deference to public opinion. By a reversal of values, He transformed my relative ease as a propertied man into the misery of a pauper . . .

The transformation continued. A second peak occurred (May 8) in Baghdad, in hospital.

Taken up for the second time into the supernatural, I felt myself warned I was going to die: a burgeoning spiritual dawn, a serene clarity inciting me to renounce everything. I clung to a beloved name, repeating it to myself, declaring to myself: "If he has betrayed me, I want to be sincere for two and carry his name with me always." The serene clarity increased in my soul: what is a name in the memory? Does not God possess this creature infinitely more than I? I abandon him to God.

The "beloved name" was de Quadra's, but there were others. "I felt with certainty a pure, ineffable creative Presence suspending my sentence through the prayers of invisible persons, visitors to my prison, whose names disturbed my thought. The first name was my mother's (she was at the time praying in Lourdes), the fifth was the name of Charles de Foucauld . . ." The second would be de Quadra, the third, hazarding a guess, Al-Hallaj, the fourth perhaps Huysmans.

Greater things would follow, but not before a third supernatural event: "A harrowing sensation, suddenly the presence of God, no longer as a judge, but as a father inundating the prodigal child. I quietly locked the door of my room and [prostrated myself on the tiles, finally weeping my prayer all night long, after five years of a dried up heart." Over the next sixty years of incomparable scholarship and service, under the sign of Al-Hallaj, to whom he attributed his saving, Massignon's faith would deepen and ripen, gradually finding its true form under the continuing intercession of Charles de Foucauld, Al-Hallaj, and J.K. Huysmans. To these would be added St. Francis of Assisi.

There have always been souls whose burden of sickness and suffering has been so extreme that it has seemed disproportionate, almost obscene. In his last work, Huysmans tells the story of one such figure, St. Lydwine of Schiedam (1380-1433). Lydwine was one of the great sufferers. Her suffering taught her the capacity to assimilate the ills of the earth and consume them in the furnace of her love for the Stranger in her own being. She lived at a time of great spiritual darkness. Until her fifteenth year, she was a pretty girl with a deep devotion to Mary. Then came an illness that left her disfigured, ashen, corpselike. Her suitors fled like flies from a plate washed clean. That winter, persuaded by her friends, she went out skating. She fell and broke a rib. Carried home, she was laid on her bed, which she never again left. Her pain was enormous. She abscessed. Pus poured continuously from her mouth. She became gangrenous. Huge worms lived in her body. She developed stones. Her lungs and liver decayed. A cancer devoured her flesh. Her body separated into different sections held together by only the flimsiest of connecting tissue. If these had been natural afflictions, she would have been dead many times over. But they were not. Rather than stinking, her wounds gave off an indescribably sweet scent, " like the smoke of cinnamon and spices."

At first, Lydwine believed herself damned. She could not pray. God was her enemy. Then a priest, Jan Pot, explained that she had not sufficiently meditated Christ's Passion. She had not learned to complete his work in herself. "Accompany him to the Garden of Olives, to Pilate, to Golgotha, and say to yourself that when death prevents his further suffering, you must, like a faithful widow, accomplish the last wishes of your spouse and supply by your sufferings what are still necessary to his." Jan Pot taught her the meaning of her suffering and "she gave herself without reserve as a beast of burden to carry the load of sins." Her bodily torments increased, but now with extraordinary generosity she accepted that her sufferings were not her own, but those of others. They were not called; she was. She understood—the pedagogy

of her suffering taught her—that each of us can put ourselves in the place of another and that she was called to put herself in the place of many.

Huysmans was a close friend, the only Christian friend, of Massignon's father, the sculptor Pierre Roche. Massignon, then seventeen, "the most charming young man you could wish to meet," had visited the old novelist. The Lydwine biography was about to appear. They talked for six hours. What Massignon heard became the cornerstone of his life. When he learned that Huysmans, on his deathbed, had prayed for his conversion, it was inscribed in his being. Huysmans' deed—he had already learned of the reality of mystic substitution through his study of Al-Hallaj—confirmed for Massignon efficacy of such intercessory substitution and atonement for the sins of another.

In 1912, in Cairo, frequenting high society with Luis de Quadra, in the salon of the Countess Howenwaert, the wife of the Austrian consul, Massignon met Mary Kalil, a wealthy young Egyptian Christian of twenty-five. They saw each other frequently over a short period during which Massignon confided that he had offered himself to God for Quadra to bring about his return to Christianity. Then Quadra fell deathly ill with typhus. Massignon asked Mary Kalil to join him in his mystical substitution. She agreed, impelled less by the thought of his conversion than by that of his recovery. A year later, Massignon stopped seeing her for fear that she was becoming emotionally attached to him.

In January 1934, they met again. Nothing had changed; yet everything had changed. "Both of us were remnants." Soon afterward, Massignon wrote: "This meeting, after what will soon be twenty-one years, pierced my heart right through to the burning wound of my conversion . . . and revived within me in a wrenching manner my promises to belong to God alone, in holiness, forever." He asked Mary what she was doing. She told him she was working with Muslim service organizations. Massignon noted that they shared the vocation to live in Islam as Christians and seek for God. As they talked, this common bond grew swiftly into a mutual devotion—a true spiritual friendship like that of Francis and Clare or Francis of Sales and Jeanne de Chantal. Mary took Massignon for her spiritual director. He answered (as she put it) "a silent call, un hoped for, from the depths of myself." The commitment was reciprocal, resulting in a huge thirty-two year correspondence covering almost fifteen hundred pages. It is one of the treasures of twentieth century spiritual literature. In their silences as in their words, Massignon felt their "Angels were communicating." "How wonderful (he wrote) the perfume of incense is, the mute prayer of my Arab sister, of Maryam, which rises toward God and reaches here by a supernatural delicacy of grace . . ."

Two years previously, Massignon became a Franciscan tertiary after meditating deeply on Francis' experience in Islam during the Fifth Crusade. He felt the saint provided a model of Christian-Muslim relations. Francis objected to the whole idea of the crusades, believing it unchristian. He taught that Christians should go among the "Saracens" as servants, not warriors. They should not engaging in disputes or arguments, but be "subject to every human creature for God's sake." When asked, however, they should confess their faith. In 1219, at Damietta, on the Nile Delta outside Cairo, Francis inwardly prepared for martyrdom left the defeated Christian encampment to seek out the victorious Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil. The two men talked long and intimately. At one point Francis offered to enter a furnace of fire to prove his love of the Sultan and the truth of Christ, but the Sultan gently declined the challenge. The conversation, now debate, now communion, continued. Profound admiration blossomed between them, but no conversion. Francis' love needed no translation. The sultan's hospitality, humanity, warmth, and nobility were likewise universal. They prayed together—

and for each other—in a mosque, then parted, Francis to live the Gospel, the Sultan to serve God in his way.

On February 9, 1934, Louis Massignon and Mary Kalil returned to the ruined Franciscan church at Damietta. There they vowed to offer their lives for their Muslim brothers and sisters, "not so that they would be converted, but so that the will of God might be accomplished in them and through them." They called their offering *badaliya*, after the Arabic word for substitution: to take another's place in battle.

We entered the Franciscan church with three great windows looking out over the Nile and palm trees swaying behind them. I prayed with intense devotion and a kind of magic that are hard to explain. I told Massignon how sad I was to see this town, where so many Syrian Christians had come, where my ancestors had lived, of which nothing remained. I clung to the pillars of the altar. Massignon said, "You are marked for a vow. Make a vow" — "But what vow?" — "The vow to love them." I said, "That's impossible." He said nothing is closer to hate than love. "Vow to give your life for them." I was in a state of exaltation that I could not relive. I made the vow. I vowed to live for them, to give my life for them. I vowed to stand beside the throne of Jesus for them, in place of them, to represent them. Throughout my life and for all eternity, I vowed to pray for light for them. Massignon took my hand. *He had made the same vow.* We made this vow in a state of fervor and illumination I no longer know. Leaving the church, I was transformed. I was no longer myself. I was like a life of flames. Walking along, I found an immense carpenter's nail. I picked it up and gave it to Massignon. He said, "Why this nail?" I said: "To pierce your heart." He put it in his pocket.

This was the beginning of what would become an Association, or "sodality of prayer," called *Al-Badaliya*, whose members would offer themselves in mystical substitution—as "hostages" "paying their ransom in their place and at our expense"—for the salvation of the Muslim community. They would become "other Christs (like living Gospels)," perfecting and completing Christ's Passion viewed as the epitome of hospitality. "Our *Badaliya* is a reminder for everyone, and first of all for us, of the first, sweetest Christian duty: welcoming the other, the stranger, the neighbor who is closer than all our close ones, without reserve or calculation, whatever it cost and at any price." The statues for the Association were written in 1943; in 1947, it was formally recognized. In his 1956 Christmas letter to the members of the Association, Massignon wrote:

. . . If "substitution" is primarily a thought, our heart's wish, we cannot really accomplish it unless we assume bodily in our lives and hearts the sufferings of others, their bloody wounds. We must do this first in non-violence, by compassion and inner tears, then by counseling others . . .

Our statement of commitment specifies that "Badaliya demands penetration in depth, out of fraternal understanding and attentive kindness, into the family life of generations of Muslims past and present." Each of our immortal souls can thus assume a legacy of graces to cultivate and infidelities to expiate.

By "substitution" . . . we enter, in the place of the absent guests of the parable of the wedding feast, into the continuous chain of chance witnesses, gathered by grace, among the passers by at the crossroads, "witnesses" of divine mercy suddenly promoted to turn away evil. Torn from our fleshly relationships, suffering, affiliated by virtue of this "virginal" privation to the

angelic privilege of guardian angels, we are enabled to go beyond even the limits of their angelic incorporeity to complete humanly what is lacking in our brothers and sisters . . .

Charles Williams spoke of "co-inherence"—"He in us and we in him"—as the "very pattern of Christendom." We are called, he said, not to be merely inheritors, but "co-inheritors of name of salvation," of the "Adored Substitution." He tells the story of Felicitas, a Carthaginian slave, who, imprisoned for her faith, bore a child, screaming in pain, When asked how she would endure being torn by lions. She replied: "Now I suffer what I suffer. But then another will suffer for me as I shall suffer for him." We are all one body. A desert father said: "It is right for us to take up the burden for our neighbor, whatever it may be, and, so to speak, put our own soul in his or her place, becoming, as far as possible, double, weeping and mourning with our neighbor. Finally, it must be as if we had put on our neighbor's actual body, and acquired his or her countenance and soul. We must suffer for them as we would for ourselves. For, as it is written, *we are all one body* . . ."

Huysmans, when asked by a sick woman "to throw a little light, however uncertain, upon the dark and terrifying mystery of suffering," wrote:

It is quite certain that two laws, of which it knows little or nothing, govern humanity: the law of solidarity in evil and the law of reversibility in good; solidarity in Adam, reversibility in our Lord. In other words, everyone is responsible to a certain extent for the sins of others and must to a certain extent expiate them; and everyone can also attribute the virtues they possess those who possess none or can acquire none. God was the first to submit to these laws when he applied them to himself in the person of his Son. [...] He wished Jesus to give the first example of mystical substitution—the substitution of one who owes nothing for those who owe everything. Jesus in turn wishes certain souls to accept the legacy of his sacrifice and, in the words of St. Paul, complete what is lacking in his Passion. For in fact Christ could no longer suffer by himself after his Crucifixion. His mission was fulfilled with the shedding of his blood. If he wishes to continue suffering here on earth, he can do this only in the members of his mystical body...

In the words of Dostoievsky, so loved and so often quoted by the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas: "We are all responsible (or guilty) in relation to each other, and I more than all the rest."

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