It is crucial that we rediscover the virtue of hospitality. This is particularly true when looking at today’s youth who have become increasingly like foreigners in their own societies. Adults do not try to understand the youth, do not provide opportunities for them, take out debt in their names without their consent, and stand idly by watching the degradation of their spaces, especially schools. The world is rapidly changing and if, as adults, we clearly see the end of a system, it’s not difficult to imagine how absurd and awkward the status quo would seem to a young person in their teens or twenties. History has shown us that some generations decay faster than others; ours is one of them.

“It works but it didn’t give us money”, a boy around ten years old cried out in a metro station in Rome. He was intentionally correcting his mother who with a rough “no” had answered a man’s inquiry: “does the ATM work?”. The fact is the mother and the boy were both correct concerning the machine, from their own perspective: an instrument for getting cash (mother) versus a colorful touch-screen with plenty of buttons (boy). In the civil sphere similar dialogues happen far too often at school and work with much greater consequences. In these interactions, mutual understanding, communication, and respect for one another don’t come easily. Records are straightforward in pointing to the fact that young people are strangers and foreigners in their own land: the youth unemployment rate is 43%. This is a number that should prevent us from sleeping, but we sleep soundly since we’re so used to such negative news. Above all we’re forgetting that a young person is more than one family’s child; they are society’s responsibility as well.

This sort of universal filiality (and brotherhood) is the essence of the golden rule of hospitality, present in the historical roots of our culture, where guests and foreigners were considered sacred and offered gifts. The great civilizations of the past believed that no one is actually a stranger nor a foreigner. Terence is famously quoted describing this truth by proclaiming: “I am a human being, I consider nothing that is human alien to me”. There’s something of me that lives and resides in every human being and, to some extent, in the whole of creation; the same goes for something of them in me. It’s as if in every genome of a living creature there are traces of all the others. I think this relates to what St. Francis wanted to tell us through his uniquely beautiful and moving “Canticle of the Sun”. The true nature of hospitality isn’t altruism, but reciprocity: “Remember that you were once foreigners” (Book of Exodus). Apart from everything else, strangers (who as such are fragile and vulnerable) should be treated with hospitality owing to the simple fact that we all are strangers at one point or another. Our grandparents were once strangers and likely so will our children; it’s part of the human condition. Our culture is in dire need of hospitality-reciprocity and the younger generations suffer the most from its current absence. Just as the elderly, young people too need it to live well or, now more than ever, to simply stay alive.

Today youth entering the labour market share the experience of when Ulysses met Polyphemus. The latter was the Cyclops, which Homer used to represent barbarism as he was hostile as opposed to welcoming. Instead of offering gifts he gave stones instead of bread and scorpions instead of eggs; then he devoured his guests. We are watching too many young people be devoured by years of unemployment. This idleness is neither chosen nor deserved and day by day it consumes their finite youth and human capital acquired through study. Others are devoured by the type of work, imposed by huge companies, banks, and capitalist consulting groups that abandon the graciousness of hospitality when hiring young people. Young employees are used, squeezed, and deprived of the time need to develop; they receive no gifts, only obligations. They are devoured bit by bit.
The “lucky” ones who make it to one of these jobs, like in a cave end up obstructed by enormous boulders. The heaviest stone is the crisis we're living in. It coerces them to accept or not to abandon - once the true nature of the job is revealed - perverted jobs in order to live and avoid hunger. Thus, instead of “welcoming gifts” it's considered normal for large companies to offer long term contracts that require young workers to work a certain number of years in exchange for the “gift” of a master degree paid by their employer. These practices are almost a kind of slavery.

I'm certain that with this sort of servitude, tying people to a company through a degree, human dignity will not flourish. It cannot grow without the water of freedom and the light of graciousness. Without free and flourishing people the complex economy of today and the future will be one where not even enterprise profit and growth will be reachable. A new working culture based on hospitality must be constructed. Enterprises should seriously invest in the first years of their young employees and they, after receiving so much, will learn how to give as well. In times like these when the “citizen's income” is constantly and, in many cases, appropriately mentioned, we should not forget that institutions and civil society owe the gift of work to the youth of the world. We must offer them better studies and give them the opportunities to work and, if possible, work well.

Translated by Cristian Sebok