

# Sacred Hospitality “Middle Eastern Style”

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The famed Middle Eastern custom of elaborate and generous hospitality is known the world over. This is particularly true of the Bedouin, whose hospitality is deservedly famous as anyone who has experienced it can witness. For the guest, nothing is too good and nothing too bothersome or difficult. And the Bedouin host does all in his ability to convey the honoring impression that the entertainment of his guest is the greatest happiness he has ever known.

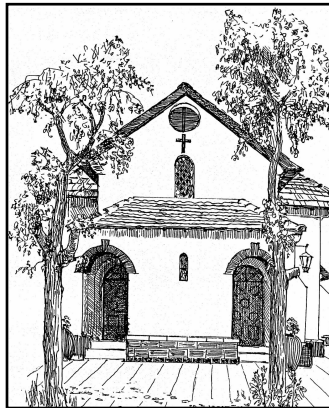
“The guest is a guest of God” is a well-known Arab Muslim proverb that reflects the theological depth of their view of hospitality. Experienced Islamicists, such as the 20<sup>th</sup> century late Christian French scholar Louis Massingnon, repeatedly address the spiritual importance of hospitality to Muslims. Their model being Abraham, the patriarch, who welcomed the three mysterious strangers who came to him in the desert. For as in Abraham’s experience, in welcoming the stranger, we are welcoming God among us. As another popular Arab proverb says, “God comes to us in the person of a guest”. Massingnon, in his lifetime study of Islam, termed this *l’hospitalite sacree*--“sacred hospitality”. Hospitality pre-figured for him the stance of God himself toward human beings—the sacredness of the guest. Paradoxically, this Islamic code of hospitality enabled Christian expansion to penetrate parts of the Muslim world considered today by some as the least receptive to Christian work (such as the Gulf countries of Oman, the UAE, and Kuwait), and establish the few historic Christian posts that still exist there today.

Today, the Anglican/Episcopal Church throughout the Middle East and North Africa plays the critical role of “sacred hospitality”. In some Arab countries, due to historical reasons, the local Anglican Church, serving English-speaking internationals, is the only official non-Roman Catholic or Orthodox Church present. In this regard, the unique legal status of these Anglican churches in the Muslim-majority Middle East and North Africa cannot be overemphasized. In many of these countries, other international Protestant church communities are not able to obtain official legal status and as a result are not able to secure permission to build their own church buildings. And consequently the only place for them to legally meet for worship is in the local Anglican Church building. This special situation puts many Anglican Churches throughout the region into the role of serving as hosts of other congregations, thereby stewarding the building and property God has given them. And not only does this require them to be hosts par excellence, but often to do so on a grand scale. Holy Trinity Church in Dubai, in the United Arab Emirates, is one such example, with over 30 different non-Anglican international congregations using their property on any given weekend—from South Asians to Africans to Filipinos to Latin Americans.

One of the most extraordinary examples is The Church of St. John the Baptist in Cairo, Egypt, part of the Episcopal Diocese of Egypt & North Africa. Since 1931, St. John’s has served the international community of Maadi in southern Cairo as a place for worship and solace. An active church, St. John’s English-speaking congregation welcomes Christians from all denominations. And many nationalities are represented—from American diplomats to Egyptian intellectuals to some African refugees. The church also has an Arabic-speaking congregation. Having been in this community for many years, St. John’s is both known and respected by the Islamic authorities. All of this gives The Church of St. John the Baptist a unique platform for its ministry.

In the church's early days, it served a largely British community. During World War II, St. John's served thousands of troops from Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. When the British had to leave Egypt in the late 1950's due to political tensions, St. John's began to open her doors for other international church communities that were not able to have their own buildings. Today, St. John's is a host to over 10 other different international churches and Christian groups. The church property is made available to diverse congregations and groups such as a Sudanese refugee church, the French Reformed Church, the Korean Presbyterian Church, the Scandinavian church, a West African fellowship, etc...even another English-speaking non-denominational church. For countless numbers over the years, St. John's has been a "spiritual home away from home".

While not without its challenges, it is a special opportunity for ecumenism, showing our unity as Christians from diverse traditions, emphasizing our respect and love for each other. As a Christian church in a Muslim-majority country, it is also an important opportunity to demonstrate the spirit Christ through our unity. As Christ said, "By this everyone will know you are my disciples, if you love one another." And for many, these official churches are the only face of Christ they will see. This indeed makes the role of Anglican hospitality in the Middle East and North Africa truly *sacred*. When someone visits, Arab Muslims often say, "The Prophet [Mohammed] visited us". For St. John's Church and the other Anglican churches in the region, in welcoming and hosting other Christian groups, we see "Christ among us."



*The Church of St. John the Baptist  
Maadi, Cairo, Egypt*