

Spiritual Friendship: Bond of Christian Charity

Seven Principles of Authentic Christian Friendship

All believers, through Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist, are formed into "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" (1 Pt 2:9) and so share "a common dignity of members deriving from their rebirth in Christ, a common grace as sons and daughters, a common vocation to perfection, one salvation, one hope and undivided charity" (LG, no 32). "And so this gift in turn becomes a mission that must shape the whole of Christian life" (NMI, no. 30). For, by its very nature, a life of holiness involves a dynamic openness and movement toward others. -- Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord, USCCB, 2005

Principle 1: We all need association with other people. By God's design we are made for interpersonal union -- to love and be loved, to give ourselves to others and to receive the gift of others. Sharing in the life of others is integral to our fulfillment and happiness.

God is not a solitary being. God is a trinity of persons. According to the Book of Genesis, human beings were created in God's image. This means "we have an inner life; we are not merely objects, we are subjects. We have an intellect that enables us to reason. Hence we can know. We can know what is good and we can know the origin of that good. This inner life that is ours is also marked by a certain *striving* or *aspiring*. We *desire* the good; we desire to be and to possess goodness to the fullest. We want to be fulfilled. We *choose* to pursue that which we perceive to be good, and we do so freely. This is free will. All of this is what makes us *persons*. There is a likeness, a similarity between God and us, and that similarity is found in our personhood. We have *personhood* in common with God; and persons, because they are persons, seek interpersonal union."¹

The desire to live in union with other persons is a natural movement of the human heart. Because we are created in God's image, we sense, long before we can express it in words, our need for association with others like ourselves, as well as a built-in aversion to being cut off from others or being forced to live apart and separate from others.

The Second Vatican Council Document *Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World) expresses this beautifully:

"Furthermore, the Lord Jesus, when praying to the Father "that they may all be one ... even as we are one" (Jn. 17:21-22), has opened up new horizons closed to human reason by implying that there is a certain parallel between the union existing among the divine persons and the union of the sons of God in truth and love. It follows, then, that if man is the only creature on earth that God has wanted for its own sake, man can fully discover his true self only in a sincere giving of himself" (24).

Additionally, "things" alone cannot, and do not, fulfill this need for interpersonal union. This is because "things" -- even possessions of great importance, value, or sentimentality -- cannot love us.

Principle 2: Virtue and good character are necessary for authentic friendship. We cannot have the one without the other two -- they are inseparable.

This second principle states that virtue and strength of character are essential for authentic friendship. The ancient philosophers Aristotle and Cicero both had much to say about the important role of virtue and character in what they considered "true" friendship. More than identifying emotionally with a person with whom one has things in common, friendship, for these ancient thinkers, was a way of *habitually* relating with another, of *habitually* seeking the good of another, of *habitually* acting in ways that help make that good possible.

It is the good qualities -- the inner attributes -- of a man or woman that constitute strength of character. Fr. Philip Halfacre in his book *Genuine Friendship* explains it thus:

“Particularly virtuous people have many such qualities. We say of people that they are men or women of *character* when they habitually act in an upright and virtuous manner. Virtues are good things we do *habitually*. Some people *want* to be good, but very often fall short. We say their character is weak. Some habitually make choices that are inconsistent with what we normally think of as upright living. We say of these people that their character is poor or even awful. But we say of those who consistently seem to live good and upright lives that their character is strong, good, or even unquestionably good. Of course, only God can judge what is in a person’s heart, but as Jesus said, we can tell a tree from its fruit.

“So why is this important to friendship? Genuine friendship -- by definition -- requires such traits as honesty, trust, loyalty, goodwill, and sacrifice. These are qualities that are consistently found in men and women of good character. It is the presence of these qualities, along with others, that makes them good.

“To be a friend, one must be good -- a man or woman of virtue, of character. Aristotle says inner goodness is what makes people appealing.”²

Yet, it isn’t just the possession of virtue and good character that cements authentic friendship. It is the fruit of virtue and good character which creates the true bond. Desiring good for another person, if it is to be virtuous, is more than a type of well-wishing. Behaviors and actions must consistently demonstrate a willingness to do what is in one’s power to bring about the desired good for the other. Professor John Cuddeback explains this in his book *Friendship: The Art of Happiness*.

“To say to another person: ‘I want what is best for you’ is one thing. To mean it is another. And to be able to help him or her achieve it is yet another. Anyone can say it. It takes some virtue to mean it. It takes much virtue to truly do it.”³

Trust is essential for authentic friendship. Sometimes a person says, *I feel I can trust that person*. This may imply that trust is a feeling, while in reality trust “is a general disposition we have toward someone that is based on the degree that we believe in someone’s virtue. We count on our friends to tell us the truth, to keep our secrets, and to carry out their commitments. Like all the elements of friendship, trust will increase over the years as the friend rings true year after year, as we experience his or her honesty and dependability.”⁴

Principle 3: In an authentic friendship, two people share great intimacy and similarity in their interests, activities, and outlook on life. At the same time, however, each possesses his or her independence and the right to retain his or her own opinions.

In Principle 1 we established the human need for association with other people. In Principle 2 we established that authentic friendship requires both persons to habitually pursue virtuous living. This third principle demonstrates that in authentic friendship the two persons pursue together that which is “good.” It is a kind of “walking side-by-side,” sharing joys and sorrows, hopes and dreams, accomplishments and disappointments, as well as sharing one’s deepest secrets. Thus, there is great intimacy here, but in an authentic friendship the friend is not the primary focus of the other’s life, at least not in the same way a husband and wife might relate to one another.

This difference calls for an accurate understanding of “intimacy,” a term which is a point of confusion in our present society. Intimacy is most often equated with “sex,” while in its truest meaning, intimacy is a matter of *really connecting* with another person and deeply sharing one’s inner self. Intimacy often takes place between close friends, and it should be an integral part of the relationship between a husband and wife.

Principle 3 calls for an “ethic of distinction” regarding authentic friendship and intimacy, and this is explained by Fr. Philip Halfacre:

“If two people wish to keep their friendship at the level of friendship, several safeguards need to be in place. They should not say or do things that are likely to elicit an erotic response. And if they notice an erotic response developing in themselves, they should not pursue it -- not even in their own minds. This is what spiritual writers mean by the phrase “keeping custody of one’s heart.” If they do not want a romantic relationship to develop, they should not daydream about what a romantic or erotic relationship might be like.”⁵

Fr. John Harvey, OSFS, co-Founder and longtime Director of Courage, often included in his counsel how important it is to stay in reality and avoid fantasy. Therefore, both men and women should strive for “chaste” friendships -- deeply connected relationships with those of their own gender, as well as those of the opposite gender -- while strictly maintaining the necessary safeguards to prevent intimacy from slipping into an erotic attraction. Prudence and chastity are virtues that, with refinement and healthy common sense, can make such friendships not only possible, but also ordered to one’s true happiness and fulfillment.

As the ***Catechism of the Catholic Church*** states:

“The virtue of chastity blossoms in *friendship*. It shows the disciple how to follow and imitate him who has chosen us as his friends, who has given himself totally to us and allows us to participate in his divine estate. Chastity is a promise of immortality. Chastity is expressed notably in *friendship with one’s neighbor*. Whether it develops between persons of the same or opposite sex, friendship represents a great good for all. It leads to spiritual communion” (CCC 2347).

Additionally, in authentic friendships, a healthy level of independence is a necessary fruit of the relationship. While close friends share great intimacy (understood here in its truest sense), and while they also share great similarity in interests, activities, and outlook on life, authentic friends retain their individuality and freedom to pursue interests and activities outside the friendship and do not feel compelled to maintain an identical outlook on all of life’s most pressing issues. In other words, their lives are very parallel to each other, but neither person is “swallowed up” by the other.

Principle 4: Authentic Christian friendship requires the virtue of charity. Loving others authentically requires loving them virtuously, and for love to be virtuous it must be rooted in truth and humility.

St. John the Evangelist told us “God is love.” Genuine love, then, has its roots in God, yet our society calls many things “love” which are not rooted in the divine. The kind of love required in authentic Christian friendship is one that sees the friend “as the person is in himself or herself, which is to say that the person really understands the other. And second, the person seeks what is good for the friend, or in other words loves the person for the person’s own sake.”⁶

Love produces insight into another. One who loves, who truly cares about the other person for the person’s own sake -- not primarily for what the person can do for him or her or what the person can give to him or her -- is willing to take the time to get to know that person as he or she really is. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* refers to this as “disinterested” friendship (CCC 2359). “Disinterested” does not mean “uninterested” but rather, “free from selfishness.” In the language of the Catechism, disinterested friendship is an unselfish relationship in

which each person seeks the good of the other, not personal interest or advantage. True friendship develops from this spirit of mutual generosity and charity. As Professor John Cuddeback says:

“One interested in friendship of utility or pleasure might make an effort to get to know you, but since the person’s primary desire is for his or her own advantage, he or she will not really have an ‘eye’ for you yourself, but rather for what you can do for him or her.”⁷

“Using” another person for one’s own purposes is not always a deliberate and conscious choice, as one may not be aware of one’s own unconscious motives. Eventually, however, by the grace of God and through prayer, one comes to see that a friendship built on a foundation of “utility” does not meet the criteria of authentic friendship.

Authentic friendship has its roots in “truth.” An authentic friend is especially capable of showing the other person truths about himself or herself that one is not capable of seeing on one’s own. Authentic friendship takes time to grow and develop. The inner life of each person is not revealed all at once. Over the years the friends discover various patterns of behavior, getting to observe each person’s best and worst. A true friend will not approve those habits of thought and behavior that are detrimental to the other’s “good.” The virtue of humility is necessary here, for it is not easy to accept constructive criticism, even when it comes from someone who has one’s best interest at heart.

Let us recall, however, the words of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew:

“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly (humble) in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Matt. 11: 28-29).

It should be pointed out that humility is the one virtue Jesus points to in himself and instructs us to imitate in him. The great theologian St. Thomas Aquinas calls humility the “mother of all virtues.” It is essential, he says, for our relationship with God and with each other, because it is the virtue of truth. It disposes us to see and accept reality.

Therefore, having observed the best and worst in each other in countless circumstances through many years, true humility is demonstrated when, although shortcomings are not approved, the friends still accept each other as lovable persons in spite of them. This is love as “acceptance.” It is a humbling kind of love because a person realizes he or she is valued and accepted despite his or her imperfections. The most essential truth mined from authentic friendship is founded upon the virtue of Christian humility: I am, in fact, a “lovable” person, while still being an “imperfect” person.

In other words, an authentic friend looks beyond present shortcomings, forgives past weaknesses, and envisions what a person can be. In its highest form, we see this kind of love brought to perfection in God’s love, for this is how God loves us.

“... Every person is created in the image and likeness of God, and has been loved, in all of his or her particularity, by God from all eternity. Jesus Christ is the Good Shepherd who gives his life for his sheep, each and every one of them. Perhaps the most fundamental truth that a human person needs to see about him or herself is the reality of God’s love for him or her.”⁸

How does this realization come about? It is brought about through a mysterious, but wonderful, aspect of divine providence. “In the natural course of events, a person normally discovers first that he or she is loved by other

human persons. This is the natural foundation for the much greater discovery, through the assistance of supernatural grace, that he or she is loved by God himself.”⁹

Human love, then, is central to knowing and experiencing God’s love. As a matter of course, by God’s design, human persons usually discover that they are lovable through the love of others. Authentic friends convey one of the most powerful messages a person can receive: *It is good that you exist! I am grateful that you are part of my life. I can’t imagine my life without you in it, imperfections and all.*

Professor John Cuddeback sums up this principle when he states:

“We can say that God has put a great ‘burden’ upon the shoulders of humans, that they must in a very real way show one another their lovable-ness, or, show one another that they are loved by God. But what a precious burden this is! In God’s providence human persons are the conduit, the instrument God uses to show other human persons how much HE loves them!”¹⁰

Principle 5: Authentic Christian friendship demands a willingness to sacrifice.

The sacrifice required here is a “giving of self” or a “dying to self.” We cannot truly know other people without first looking beyond ourselves. Without genuine interest in the life of another person, we cannot possess insight into him or her. If we look at another person without love, without genuine interest and care, we miss their inwardness -- the heart of the individual -- and see only the outside, the mere form and expression of the person. Authentic Christian love, and thus, authentic Christian friendship, calls us to see every other person as sons and daughters of God, to place the needs and desires of others on equal footing with our own, and to see and interact with others in a way that says, “Your life is important, as important as my own.”

Seeing with the heart, rather than with the eyes alone, is a necessary dimension of authentic Christian friendship. Seeing another person in this manner is known as “other-centeredness.” At its height in human relationships it can be recognized as described below:

“For the friend says to the friend: It is as important to me that you are happy as that I am happy. When you flourish, when you are blessed, I rejoice with you, for it is as though it is my flourishing and blessedness. When you fail or suffer, I fail and suffer. All that you enjoy or endure, we enjoy or endure together.”¹¹

Authentic Christian friendship calls us to bear crosses for those we love, sometimes suffering on their behalf, sometimes sacrificing our own pleasure and satisfaction, sacrificing our time and resources -- really being there for them.

Blessed John Henry Newman emphasized sacrificial love in everyday life, but the way he emphasized it carried with it a promise. This sacrificial love for our friends, he told us, will change everything.

“It will change the way we relate to and with others. It will bring us closer to God. We’ll start to see life as the Saints see it. Such friendship will sanctify us, if we devote ourselves to it with patience and care. And the holiness that it fosters in us will not be an aloof, abstract removal from the world -- which is really no holiness at all. It will be, rather, the perfection of charity -- the perfection of Christian love -- within us and among us. These are small basic steps; but they can lead us toward God’s Kingdom. These small steps

will put us on the path to a love that encompasses the entire world: a love that is truly “catholic,” in the sense of being “universal.”¹²

Principle 6: Human friendship prepares us for friendship with God.

St. Thomas Aquinas drew upon the wisdom of the ancient Greeks, and following the lead of Aristotle, perceived and developed a theology of friendship that elevated it to a virtue, the virtue of charity. For Aquinas, charity signified not only love of God, but also a certain friendship with him. As we saw in Principle 2, God is not a solitary being, but a trinity of persons. The love that exists in the triune God is the foundation for authentic human love. God loves us because love and friendship already exist in the Trinity.

For Jesus, both love of God and love of neighbor were realities that underscored his earthly mission. These were not merely abstract ideals. Out of love for his friends -- for each of us -- Jesus laid down his life.

During his last heart-to-heart discourse with his Apostles, Jesus said:

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you (Jn. 15:12-15).

What does this mean for us? It means something awesome and stunning: God intends friendship with his creatures. We have been called to friendship with Christ.

“It is clearly part of God’s providential plan that for the most part, humans will first discover and exercise friendship with other human persons. This means that what we know of human friendship, and more importantly, how we live out human friendship, is a critical preparation for the most important “relationship” in our life: friendship with God.”¹³

Friendship with God, when lived in its fullness, is a deeply penetrating and rich relationship. More than simply Creator and Judge, God, by his own revelation, leads us to understand that he “desires to be our Father, our Savior, our Teacher, our Friend. Jesus did not come to us simply to give us information. He came to heal the relationship with the Father that was broken by sin.”¹⁴

Jesus revealed the love of the Father, not just in his words and teachings, but in his actions and deeds. An invitation for an intimate relationship -- a real and living friendship -- has been offered to every person God has created.

Fr. Philip Halfarce offers this description of the invitation to friendship with God:

Because of the nature of intimate relating, because it involves self-revealing and self-giving in a deeply personal way, it is always a fruit and an expression of freedom. No one can make me do it -- I do it freely, and I do it by degree. Looking at the relationships we have with the people closest to us, we see how our lives become intertwined. Growing in holiness means our lives are increasingly intertwined with God’s life, and intertwined with each other through, with, and in him. At any given moment in our lives, we can discover the beauty and desirability of such a relationship. By accepting, embracing, and fulfilling the will of God in all things, our lives -- individually and collectively -- come together as a marvelous tapestry. And

to the extent this happens, we become powerful instruments in the hand of God. Jesus is the vine, and we are the branches, bearing much fruit for the Kingdom.¹⁵

Principle 7: Jesus is our truest, most authentic friend.

Based on all that has been said in the first six principles about authentic Christian friendship, we can examine Jesus' actions to see if his friendship fulfills the requirements set forth by these principles.

- ◆ **Virtue and Strength of Character:** In the third year of Jesus' public ministry it became increasingly evident that his life was in danger. Jesus, knowing that the Jewish authorities were plotting against him, had several choices:
 - He could skip town, taking refuge in a foreign land, perhaps never being heard from again.
 - He could resort to the use of his divine power to defeat his enemies.
 - He could remain faithful to his mission of revealing God's love, stand firm in the face of persecution in its most extreme form, and place his life into the hands of his Heavenly Father.

Of course, we know the choice he made. His love for us was so great and his strength of character so unrivaled, he permitted himself to fall into the hands of his enemies, confident in the power of his Father, including the Father's power over death.

- ◆ **Interpersonal Union:** St. Thomas Aquinas asserts that charity itself is a friendship between human persons and God. He calls forth Aristotle's assertion that every friendship is based upon a shared life. By becoming a man like us in all things but sin, by sharing in our human existence, "God has deigned to share his life (and here St. Thomas literally says 'his happiness') with us. Charity is nothing more than the mutual love between a human person and God that is based upon this shared life. (S.t. II-II 23.1)^f¹⁶

In sharing with us "all that he heard from his Father," Jesus desires his joy to be our joy, his happiness to be our happiness. Not simply the love of a creature for an all-powerful creator, or a servant for a master, this is a love made possible because God has shared his supernatural life with us. The highest of all virtues, this sharing in the the supernatural life of God is what endures when all else has passed away.

- ◆ **Virtuous Love is Rooted in Truth and Humility:** In this principle we established that a true friend is someone who sees the friend as he or she truly is, has great insight into the friend's heart, looks beyond present shortcomings, forgives past weaknesses, and envisions what a person can be. This type of virtuous love is brought to perfection in Jesus Christ, for this is how he loves each of us.

Jesus said of himself: "I am the way, the truth, and the life!" He modeled the way of love and fidelity to the very end. He told us the truth about God, about his love for us, and the "Good News" of salvation. He not only gave his life for us, in him we possess eternal life!

In humility he refused to resort to the use of his divine power to defeat his enemies but rather, he humbled himself, stood firm for our sakes, and freely accepted death, even death on a cross. In Philippians 2: 3-11 we are told:

"Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born

in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

- ◆ **Willingness to Sacrifice:** In speaking earlier of the choices that Jesus could have made when his death was imminent, we acknowledged that he freely and lovingly chose to become the Lamb of Sacrifice. This willingness, this fulness of love, this unparalleled charity of Jesus to fulfill his vocation, his mission and life’s work, even though its fulfillment would bring about his death, was what pleased his Father, not necessarily the death itself. The Father responded by raising him from the dead! We who call ourselves his disciples must take Jesus’ example as a guide for our own lives as we each live out our particular mission and vocation. Living faithfully may fill us with satisfaction, even joy, but it may also result in persecution and suffering. The difficulty of a faithful life often lies in the fact that while Jesus promises a hundredfold to those who sacrifice for his sake, or for the sake of the Gospel, we will not receive our full recompense in this life, but only in the next.

- ◆ **Friendship with God:** A loving friendship with God manifests itself in the handing over of one’s life to God. It is seen in those who make a free-willed decision to trust God. It is modeled by those who throughout the centuries, in a spirit of abandonment to the good, holy, and perfect will of God, have entrusted themselves to his loving friendship. This is what we see in Jesus who often spent time in prayer with his Heavenly Father, and who, on the night before his death, trustingly handed over his life for the sake of those he now called “his friends” -- us! Jesus offers us the most perfectly unselfish friendship of all. *“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.”* (Jn 15: 12-13).

Endnotes

1. Philip C. Halfacre, *Genuine Friendship: The Foundation For All Personal Relationships, Including Marriage and the Relationship With God*, Midwest Theological Forum, Woodridge, IL, 2008, p. 6
2. Ibid. p. 59
3. John Cuddeback, *Friendship: The Art of Happiness -- Timeless Wisdom on How To Forge True Friendship*, Epic Publishing, Freeley, CO, 2003, p. 34
3. Philip C. Halfacre, *Genuine Friendship*, p. 60
4. Ibid. p. 117
5. Ibid. pp. 3-4
6. John Cuddeback, *Friendship: The Art of Happiness*, p. 48
7. Ibid. p. 49
8. Ibid. p. 50
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid. p. 51
11. Ibid. p. 39
12. Bishop James D. Conley, *Friendship and the New Evangelization in the Thought of Blessed John Henry Newman*, Courage/EnCourage Conference, Mount St. Mary's University, Emmitsburg, MD, July 19, 2012
13. John Cuddeback, *Friendship: The Art of Happiness*, p. 19
14. Philip C. Halfacre, *Genuine Friendship*, p. 188
15. Ibid. pp. 188-189
16. John Cuddeback, *Friendship: The Art of Happiness*, p. 107

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Note: Scripture verses are taken from the Catholic Edition of the Revised Standard Version of the Bible.