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I Have Called You Friends (V): See What Good Friends They Are

A new article in the series on friendship. "Friendship is one of the 'divine paths on earth' that God has opened up by becoming a man, a friend of his friends."

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In the late second century, Christians living in the Roman Empire were being violently persecuted. A jurist

named Tertullian, who had embraced Christianity not long before, wanted to vouch for his brothers and sisters in the faith, whom he now knew much more about. He does so through a treatise to inform the governors of the Roman provinces about the true life of those who were being unjustly accused. He himself had admired Christians even without being one, especially the martyrs. But now, repeating the opinion of many citizens, Tertullian sums up what people are saying about these small Christian communities: “See how they love one another!”[1]

We have many testimonies of the friendships between the first Christians. At the beginning of the same century a bishop, Saint Ignatius of Antioch, who was being brought to Rome for martyrdom, wrote a letter to the young bishop Polycarp. Among other pieces of advice, he exhorts

Polycarp to treat “with meekness” those who are far from the Church, since it would have no merit to love only “good disciples.”[2] Indeed, we know that Christ makes himself present in history through his Church, through his sacraments and Sacred Scripture, but also through the charity with which we Christians treat those around us. Friendship is one of the “divine paths on earth”[3] that God has opened up by becoming a man, a friend of his friends. We sense here in a special way the mysterious cooperation between God’s initiative and our correspondence.

Hence for Christ to reach others through our relationships, we need to grow in virtue and in the art of friendship; we need to develop our capacity to love others and to love *with* others, with an eagerness to share our life with others. We want to form our character – or reform it –

so that we can truly love others and develop strong connections with them. We want even our gestures, our way of speaking and working to help others to draw close to us. And always with an awareness of our own way of being and our personal limitations, since there are infinite ways to be a good friend.

Side by side

As C. S. Lewis remarked: “Lovers are normally face to face, absorbed in each other; friends, side by side, absorbed in some common interest.”^[4] Friends not only love their friends; they love *with* them. Friends take an ardent interest in the activities, projects and ideals of their friends. A friendship often springs up simply from sharing in the effort to achieve a true common good, and thus friends grow together in the virtues required to achieve it.

Therefore, how much it helps to be enthusiastic about good goals, to have noble ambitions. This can be a professional or academic undertaking; a cultural, educational or artistic initiative such as reading books or listening to music in a group, or promoting activities for the general public. It could also be a social or civic service project, or a formative initiative, such as a youth or family club, or an activity aimed at spreading the Christian message. Friendship is also strengthened by sharing in household tasks such as decorating and cooking, do-it-yourself projects, gardening or practicing sports, excursions, games and other hobbies. All these activities are an opportunity to enjoy another person's company, where mutual trust and openness to other dimensions of one's own life grow little by little.

In contrast, anyone who faces life in a merely functional way, viewing everything from a purely practical point of view, will see their capacity to make friends greatly diminished. They will have, at most, collaborators in certain useful tasks or accomplices to pass the time. Then friendship is “instrumentalized,” since it is put at the service of a project centered on oneself.

“This is what it should be like”

But friendship is not just *doing things together*. It needs to be “*personal* friendship, self-sacrificing and sincere: one to one, heart to heart.”^[5] Although among friends words aren’t always needed, friends often have good conversations. And it is an art to learn how to have a good conversation, with one or more people. Those who want to grow in friendship need to avoid a hectic activism and seek suitable times to

spend time together, without looking at their watches or mobile phones. This personal exchange can be greatly assisted by the appropriate place and environment. Saint Josemaría attached great importance to the material installation of the centers of the Work, so that their good taste and family air would foster an atmosphere that facilitated friendship.

Inviting someone to join a group of friends, in order to share an inspiring experience or their reflections on an interesting topic, often helps to improve the level of conversation. The reading of books in common can also be helpful, since it involves taking part in the great debate with the authors of the past and the present, where many new fellow travelers can congregate. No less important – and it reflects a deep human truth – is the fact that friendship often brings people

together around a table, to enjoy together good food and drink that uplifts one's spirit. Often in these long conversations we experience an anticipation of heaven: "it suddenly seems clear to us: yes, this is what true 'life' is – this is what it should be like."[6]

But true friendship is not satisfied only with the exchange between those who form a group of friends. It also asks for moments of solitude, of a certain intimacy, where one can speak "heart to heart." Good friends understand this need and seek space for it without envy or jealousy. Thus the propitious context is created for "discreet indiscretions,"[7] for mutual advice, for speaking in confidence. God also makes use of these moments to draw closer to souls and "open up unexpected horizons" [8] for their zeal, including sharing in a divine mission in the world.

Friendship in a hectic world

It is also good to consider, with realism, some features of our contemporary culture that can pose a challenge to friendship. First of all, we need to realize that these obstacles are not insurmountable, since we can always rely on the strength of God's grace. And where friendship is less frequent and strong, it is even more needed and more intensely sought by the hearts of men and women. Paraphrasing Saint John of the Cross, we could say: "Where there is no friendship, put friendship, and you will find friendship."

For example, the excessively competitive tone of some professional environments can lead to a distrustful and self-centered mentality, even if clothed in external good manners. It might seem as though working in any other way

will result in others taking advantage of us. Certainly, we can't be naïve, but such an environment needs to be purified from within, by showing people the possibility of a different approach to life. One doesn't have to pressure, shout at, cheat or take advantage of others to achieve one's goals at work. A Christian always keeps in mind that work is service. Hence he or she aspires to be a boss, a colleague, a client or a teacher with whom people can become a good friend, without failing to respect the ethical norms of each profession.

We can also help foster an environment conducive to friendship by not spreading an atmosphere of excessive stress, activism or dispersion. In our hectic world today, it is sometimes difficult to achieve the serenity needed to make new friends; also, even when resting, the daily hustle and bustle can often lead to paths of "disconnection." But this

is an opportunity, with humility and awareness of our own fragility, to offer others the attractive example of a person who “reads the life of Jesus Christ”[9]: a person who doesn’t rush around, who smiles, who enjoys the present moment, who has a contemplative outlook, who rests with simple things, who has the creativity to make alternative plans, etc.[10]

Trusting in what unites us

As Saint Josemaría recommended, maintaining “a positive and open attitude towards the current changes in society and in ways of living”[11] facilitates friendship with many people, even when there is a generation gap. We need a deep love for the freedom of others, rejecting a rigid attitude when something admits of being viewed in many ways. “Certain ways of expressing oneself,” the Prelate of Opus Dei tells

us, “can disturb or hinder the creation of an environment of friendship. For example, being overly emphatic in expressing one’s own opinion, or giving the impression that we think our own viewpoints are the definitive ones, or not taking an active interest in what the others say, are ways of acting that enclose a person in himself.”[12]

In many places, a vision of life has spread that is inimical to basic principles of the moral law. This could sometimes even lead a person to deny the possibility of a benevolent love: desiring the good of the other person for him or herself. Perhaps this person finds in human relationships only a calculation of utility or superficial feelings of sympathy. This, of course, can become a source of misunderstanding and even conflict.

In this situation, it is important not to confuse the dialogue in friendship with a philosophical, legal or political argument. Dialogue between friends doesn't come down to trying to convince the other person of our own ideas, even when these ideas are true according to classical philosophy or the Church's magisterium. This doesn't mean "not calling things by their name" or losing the ability to discern good from evil. What it means is that that our arguments have value within a dialogue only when we share some common principle or authority with the other person.^[13] Although friendship can also lead to a personal conversion, it is usually better to seek points of agreement rather than emphasize what separates us from a friend; we need to offer our own experience, without elaborate intellectual arguments, with all the strength of someone who shares with another person their own worries,

sorrows and joys. And it is always important to listen since friendship, as Saint Josemaría said, more than in giving consists in understanding.[14]

It may be helpful to keep in mind that most people, most of the time, are motivated by the deepest desires of the human heart: to love and to be loved. This strong desire for unity and a fulfilled and meaningful life, even though it can be dulled for a long time for many different reasons, always manifests itself again. A good friend – although not always finding the hoped-for response – knows how to wait. We need to wait patiently until our friends, possibly because of a crisis in their own life, open their heart to the light they have sensed in our affection.

An image of God's patience

Saint Paul, in his famous hymn in praise of charity in his letter to the Corinthians, insists that “charity is

patient” (1 Cor 12:4). As the Prelate of Opus Dei reminds us, “the birth of a friendship comes like an unexpected gift, and for that very reason it also requires patience. Sometimes certain bad experiences or prejudices can mean that it takes time before the personal relationship we have with someone close at hand turns into friendship.”[15]

Saint Josemaría always encouraged us to go “at God’s pace.” In his own life we see his undeniable apostolic daring, the courage – also human – with which he went out to meet people, even when they were far away, sometimes putting his own life in danger. For example, his conversation with Pascual Galbe, a judge who was a good friend of his, whom he knew from his university days. Amid the intense religious persecution, as a priest he risked many dangers by going to see him in Barcelona with the sole intention of

spending time with his friend. In a previous conversation, while walking along the streets of Madrid, Galbe had asked him: “What do you want from me, Josemaría?” The founder of Opus Dei replied: “I love you. I don’t need anything. I just want you to be a good and just man.” And he repeated this to him in Barcelona when he went to visit him during those difficult times in Spain, while also leading him towards the truth.[16]

The founder of Opus Dei saw patience as the virtue “that moves us to be understanding with others, for we are convinced that souls, like good wine, improve with time.”[17] We should try to have the same patience with others that God has with us. As Benedict XVI said: “The world is redeemed by the patience of God. It is destroyed by the impatience of man.”[18] Being patient doesn’t mean that we don’t

suffer sometimes because of the lack of response on the part of others to our affection, or because we see friends take a path that imperils their desire for happiness. But we need to suffer with the heart of Jesus, identifying ourselves ever more fully with Christ's sentiments, and never give in to sadness or hopelessness.

The experience of a friend's forgiveness is a cause for hope in the darkest moments of life. The certainty that a friend awaits us, despite our mistakes, is for us a living image of God: the first Friend who waits for us to return to his arms of a Father and who always forgives us.

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[1] Tertullian, *The Apology*, XXXIX.

- [2] Cf. Saint Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to Polycarp*, II.
- [3] Saint Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 314.
- [4] C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*.
- [5] Saint Josemaría, *Furrow*, no. 191.
- [6] Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Spe Salvi*, no. 11.
- [7] Saint Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 973.
- [8] *Ibid.*
- [9] Saint Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 2.
- [10] Cf. Francis, Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'*, nos. 222-223.
- [11] Saint Josemaría, *Furrow*, no. 428.
- [12] Monsignor Fernando Ocáriz, *Letter*, 1 November 2019, no. 9.
- [13] Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Quodlibet IV*, q. 9, a. 3.

[14] Cf. Saint Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 463; he is speaking here in the context of living charity with our neighbor.

[15] Monsignor Fernando Ocáriz, *Letter*, 1 November 2019, no. 20.

[16] Cf. Jordi Miralbell, *Días de espera en guerra*, Palabra, Madrid, 2017, pp. 75; 97 and ff.

[17] Saint Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 78.

[18] Benedict XVI, Homily, 24 April 2005, Mass for the beginning of his pontificate.

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