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Saint Josemaria on Friendship

An article from the "Diccionario de San Josemaría." "Friendship – along with filiation – are the key relationships in Christian life, not only with other men and women, but especially with God."

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1. Nature of friendship

For the Greek philosopher Aristotle, friendship is the human relationship par excellence, since it provides the

conditions for a free and fully reciprocal relationship between human beings. Thus friendship is seen as an essential condition for a happy life.

According to Aristotle, friendship is the most necessary thing in life: “the happy man needs friends” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, IX). No one would want to live without friends, even if they had many other possessions, since prosperity is useless if one is deprived of the possibility of doing good through the help of one’s friends (cf. *Ibid.*). Besides being necessary, friendship is also beautiful and noble: “it is not only necessary but also noble; for we praise those who love their friends, and it is thought to be a fine thing to have many friends; and again we think it is the same people that are good men and are friends” (*Ibid.*, VIII).

Hence friendship requires reciprocity. Without some form of reciprocity, friendship is impossible. The reciprocity proper to perfect friendship lies in loving. The virtue of the friend is to love. That is why Aristotle insists that friendship is accompanied by virtues, and that it does not really exist without them.

In the Gospels, Christ speaks clearly about the importance of friendship. The New Testament books contain many examples of the love of friendship between the first Christians. The disciples first tell their friends about Jesus; the Gospel is preached to the friends of the first Christians.

The Fathers of the Church incorporate the teachings on friendship found in Greek and Roman thinkers in their Christian vision of man and society. But the true novelty, even for Judaism, is the

insistence that friendship between God and men and women is possible, which Jesus gave clear example of in his earthly life.

The classical authors stress that what distinguishes friendship from other forms of love is a similarity in virtues, in the qualities friends possess. But between God and us human beings there is the greatest possible dissimilarity. How is a love of friendship possible if the distance between God and us is so immense? The key is found in the words and deeds of Jesus, God made Man: God who loves with a human heart, and a Man who shows us God's infinite love.

Christianity endows friendship with a meaning hitherto unknown in both Jewish and Greco-Roman culture: we can truly have a relationship of friendship with God. By its very nature, the love of friendship entails

benevolence and mutual love. The lives of the saints offer a clear testimony of the newness of the experience of faith that comes with realizing we are a friend of God.

Saint Thomas Aquinas insisted that friendship with God is possible: “Charity is the friendship of man with God” (*S.Th.*, II, q. 23, a. 1). The Spanish mystics present marvelous examples of this friendship with God the Son made man, which satisfies the deepest yearnings of the human heart. Mystical literature reveals facets of love in writings that are now found in many poetic anthologies.

It is in this clear Christian tradition – based above all on the experience of the mystics – that Saint Josemaría’s understanding and experience of friendship is situated. In commenting on the Gospels, he discovers in Jesus the model of a

friend and the example of sincere friendship. Friendship – along with filiation – are the key relationships in Christian life, not only with other men and women, but especially with God.

As Bishop Alvaro del Portillo says in the foreword to *Friends of God*: “Children of God, Friends of God: that is the truth Saint Josemaria Escrivá de Balaguer wanted to engrave on the hearts of those around him. Sonship and friendship are two inseparable realities for those who love God.” The goal of Christian life is to “be united in friendship with God” (*Furrow*, 665).

2. Friendship between God and mankind

Saint Josemaría is very aware that all love comes from God, since He loved us first (cf. *1 Jn* 4:19). Our friendship with God is simply a response to God’s initiative, to the friendship He

offers us. As Benedict XVI said, loving God “is no longer just a ‘commandment,’ but the response to the gift of love, with which he comes to meet us” (*Deus caritas est*, 1).

But God does not impose his love; each person needs to freely respond to the initiative of divine friendship. We can freely decide “to live as God’s friend or as his enemy. This is the beginning of the path of the interior struggle which is a lifelong undertaking” (*Friends of God*, no. 36). “God’s love for us is fundamental for our lives, and it raises important questions about who God is and who we are” (*Deus caritas est*, 2). For Saint Josemaría, this truth simplifies the life of a Christian: “The main thing we are asked to do, which is so much in keeping with our nature, is to love ... holding back nothing for ourselves. This is what sanctity is all about” (*Friends of God*, 6).

Without freedom we cannot love, and “only when one loves does one reach the fullest freedom” (*Friends of God*, 38). Freedom and love nourish one another. “Freedom can only be given out of love” and “freedom renews love” (*Friends of God*, 31). Saint Josemaría places all his trust in freedom, since only our freedom – not our personal qualities – makes friendship with God possible. If, as we have seen, friendship between human beings isn’t possible without virtue, the reverse is true of our friendship with God. God first offers us his friendship, and if we open our heart and accept his offer, He helps us to grow in virtue.

“We will never fully understand Jesus’ freedom. It is immense, infinite, as is his love” (*Friends of God*, no. 26).). Christ “gives himself up to death with the full freedom of Love” (*The Way of the Cross*, Tenth Station). Saint Josemaría states

forcefully: “there is nothing better than recognizing that Love has made us servants of God. From the moment we recognize this we cease being servants and become friends, sons” (*Friends of God*, 35).

“I cannot see how anyone could live as a Christian and not feel the need for the constant friendship of Jesus in the Word and in the Bread, in prayer and in the Eucharist (*Christ is Passing by*, 154). The Gospels show us Jesus, the Incarnate Word, the Son of God made Man, having a deep friendship with the Apostles, and with other disciples such as Lazarus, Martha and Mary. “The Word of God has worked with his hands, and experienced friendship and obedience and suffering” (*Christ is Passing By*, 112). “He is our friend, the Friend: ‘I have called you friends,’ he says. He calls us his friends; and he is the one who took the first step, because he loved us

first. Still, he does not impose his love – he offers it. He shows it with the clearest possible sign: ‘Greater love than this no one has, that one lay down his life for his friends.’ He was Lazarus’ friend. He wept for him when he saw him dead, and he raised him from the dead. If he sees us cold, unwilling, rigid perhaps with the stiffness of a dying interior life, his tears will be our life – ‘I say to you, my friend, arise and walk,’ leave that narrow life which is no life at all” (*Christ is Passing By*, no. 93).

Saint Josemaría sees in the Eucharist the expression of Jesus’ infinite love, and the clearest sign of his friendship (cf. *Christ is Passing By*, 83). Aware of the poor response that the offer of Jesus’ friendship in the Eucharist sometimes meets, he calls Him “the great Lonely One.”

“It’s true that I always call our Tabernacle Bethany. Become a friend

of the Master's friends: Lazarus, Martha, Mary. And then you won't ask me any more why I call our Tabernacle Bethany" (*The Way*, 322). Since "the only real love is God's Love!" (*The Way*, no. 417), we need to respond to his offer of friendship with our whole heart, showing Him great trust: "Our Lord will not be our judge, but our friend" (*Christ is Passing By*, no. 187). He is "the Friend" (*The Way*, 422; *Christ is Passing By*, no. 93), "my Friend" (*The Forge*, 913), "the great Friend" (*The Way*, 88). We need to speak with Jesus in our prayer as we would with "our brother our friend, our father" (*Friends of God*, 245; cf. *Christ is Passing By*, 116). "A friend is a treasure. But what about the Friend?... For where your treasure is, there is your heart" (*The Way*, 421).

Our Christian life is a friendship not only with the Incarnate Word but also with the Third Person of the

Trinity, with the Holy Spirit: “A resolution: to ‘keep up,’ without interruption as far as you can, a loving and docile friendship and conversation with the Holy Spirit. *Veni, Sancte Spiritus...!* — Come, O Holy Spirit, and dwell in my soul!” (*The Forge*, 514).

We can also develop a relationship of friendship with the saints. In *Friends of God*, speaking about how to pray, he advises: “to follow in the footsteps of Christ, try to become a friend with those who knew him well during his life on earth” (*Friends of God*, 252). He also strongly recommends that we do likewise with the guardian angels and the souls in purgatory (cf. *Friends of God*, 315; *The Way*, 571).

3. Friendship with other men and women

Since God became Man out of love and seeks our friendship, Christians should strive to bring souls closer to

Christ, to make Him present to others by offering them their affection and friendship: “Charity towards our neighbor is an expression of our love of God” (*Friends of God*, 232). But we first need to receive charity as a gift. As Benedict XVI wrote, man “cannot always give, he must also receive. Anyone who wishes to give love must also receive love as a gift. Certainly, as the Lord tells us, one can become a source from which rivers of living water flow (cf. *Jn* 7:37-38). Yet to become such a source, one must constantly drink anew from the original source, which is Jesus Christ, from whose pierced heart flows the love of God (cf. *Jn* 19:34)” (*Deus caritas est*, 7).

God’s universal love for mankind shows us that that our apostolate must also be universal: “Charity with everyone means, therefore, apostolate with everyone” (*Friends of God*, 230). A deep unity exists among

all the Church's members: "There is only one race, the race of the children of God" (*Christ is Passing By*). "All the baptized, men and women alike, share equally in the dignity, freedom and responsibility of the children of God. In the Church we see that radical unity which St Paul taught to the first Christians" (*Conversations*, 14).

Saint Josemaría sees Jesus' friendship with us as the model for our own apostolate with other men and women. In Jesus, friendship is revealed in its fullness. Jesus reigns by loving, serving, giving his life for his friends. He brings the law of love. "Have no enemies. Have only friends: friends on the right—if they have done or have wished to do you good; and on the left—if they have harmed or tried to harm you" (*The Way*, 838). "Through your friendship and doctrine—or rather, through charity and the message of Christ—

you will move many non-Catholics to help in earnest and to do good to all men (*Furrow*, 753). “In a Christian, in a child of God, friendship and charity are one and the same thing” (*The Forge*, 565).

Saint Josemaría sees friendship as the foundation on which a just social order can be built. Friendship is already the exercise of a fuller form of justice. It is a justice that appreciates the other person not only for their qualities, but that also requires loving them with their defects (cf. *The Forge*, 954). The harmony and understanding that exists between friends creates a space for justice and mutual help, in which no other law is required than that of love. This higher form of justice is the one that Jesus inaugurated with his disciples, and that must reign among Christians. For Saint Josemaría, sincere and loyal friendship is capable of

overcoming all the obstacles and difficulties that prevent a just coexistence and, above all, that distance people from God. Sincere friendship always leads to joy, love, dedication, fidelity (cf. *Furrow*, 733, 746; *Christ is Passing By*, 49).

Friendship should be the true basis of all human relationships. “For this world of ours to set its course in a Christian direction—which is the only one worthwhile—we have to exercise a loyal friendship with all men, based on a prior loyal friendship with God” (*The Forge*, 943). Saint Josemaría points to a deep unity among all the human and supernatural virtues: “By living charity – Love – you live all the human and supernatural virtues demanded of a Christian. These virtues form a unity and cannot be reduced to a mere list. You cannot have charity without justice, solidarity, family and social

responsibility, poverty, joy, chastity, friendship be lived...” And he concludes: “You can see immediately that the practice of these virtues leads to apostolate. In fact it already is apostolate” (*Conversations*, 62).

Christian friendship is a relationship based on virtue and accompanied by virtue. Just as Saint Josemaría taught that human virtues are the basis of the Christian virtues, that we can only love God with the same heart with which we love our fellow men and women, he presents friendship as a key element in both one’s human formation and in the ascetical life. In the advice he gives to grow in Christian life, he often mentions the importance of friendship. “It is impossible to love God with perfection, and at the same time to let yourself be ruled by selfishness – or by apathy – in your dealings with your neighbor” (*Furrow*, 745).

True friendship also presupposes a cordial effort to understand, help and serve one's friends (cf. *Furrow*, 730, 731, 740, 746). Following the model of The Friend, he says that being a friend entails being willingly to “give our lives for each other, when heroism is needed and throughout our ordinary lives” (*Furrow*, 750).

When Saint Josemaría lists the key virtues for developing a strong spiritual life, besides poverty, joy and chastity he stresses the importance of friendship (cf. *Conversations*, 62). He insists that we need to “care for” and “cultivate” our friendships (cf. *Christ is Passing By*, 36). Friendship must be loyal and sincere (cf. *The Forge* 454; *Furrow*, 747; *Christ is Passing By*, 149).

Our friendships are called to grow but they can also be undermined by disloyalty and a lack of fortitude (cf.

The Way, 160). Our friendships with both God and those around us can be spoiled by our self-seeking.

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