

Friendship

Excerpt from a book by
Francisco Fernandez Carvajal,
"Pasó haciendo el bien,"
Madrid, Palabra 2016.

05/30/2024

Christ Jesus, image of the merciful face of the Father and model for Christians, is the best example of what a friend is. Saint John, in the scene of the Last Supper, records for us our Lord's words: "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" (*Jn 15:12-14*). Jesus' crying over the death of his friend Lazarus, his sadness at the refusal of the rich young man, his dialogue with Judas in the Garden of Olives, are all clear examples of Jesus' friendship, of his closeness to his friends.

An incalculable price

A friend is someone who arrives when everyone else has left – someone who is close especially in times of need, and closest when the need is greatest. A friend never abandons a friend in compromising circumstances. How noticeable is this presence of the friend!

Friendship creates strong bonds of trust and loyalty. For classical philosophers, friendship is the natural human relationship par excellence, since it provides the

conditions for free and reciprocal interactions. Hence it 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.”^[1] No one would want to live without friends, even if they possessed many material goods, since prosperity is useless if one is deprived of the possibility of doing good. And this involves friendship: “it is proper to a friend to do good.”^[2]

Good communication and spending time together, sharing efforts, mutual confidences, growing appreciation, admiration and respect for one another, gradually create strong bonds that distance and time can't break. The eagerness to accompany, help and console a friend is always present. And doing so without self-interest, out of a generosity that isn't daunted by difficulties. “We praise those who love their friends because

the appreciation shown to friends seems to us one of the noblest sentiments we can harbor.”^[3] —

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry once wrote to a friend: “I need your friendship; I thirst for a friend who, above the disputes of reason, respects the pilgrim in me. I can enter your house without dressing up in uniform, without needing to recite any Koran, without giving up what belongs to my inner world. At your side I don’t have to apologize, I don’t have to defend myself, There I can relax and find peace. I see you are always ready to accept me as I am. My friend, I need you like a mountain summit on which to breathe. And I in turn need to help you live.”^[4] —

Friendship requires strength, determination, a self-sacrificing spirit, generosity, time. There are

many ways for friends to show their loyalty:

- Defending one's friend when circumstances require it and even if it means losing something important.
- Always showing interest in a friend's concerns.
- Accompanying one's friend in the midst of troubles and misfortunes.
- Responding to their requests.
- Talking to a friend honestly about the things they do wrong and helping them to improve.
- Sharing worries, sorrows, joys with our friend.
- Respecting a friend's privacy and never revealing to others what they have confided to us.
- Keeping promises.

Friendship needs patience on both sides: with a friend's defects, obsessions and obstinacy, sometimes

with long silences, or with anger and mistakes, with all human limitations.

Envy is essentially at odds with friendship; as is jealousy, the cause of so much harm. The good of a friend should never make me sad. My friend's appreciation for other people does not detract from the trust he has in me when he is truly a friend.

Kindness, sympathy, humor, benevolence, flexibility, understanding, generosity, joy, forgiveness, affection, and compassion should be present in dealings between friends. And also in the very special and unique friendship between husband and wife. All these ingredients safeguard friendship when conflicts arise.

I probably won't be friends with the street sweeper I see one day as he picks up papers as I pass by. But I can treat him with kindness and cordiality and wish him a good day.

Maybe I will never see the person who asks me for directions on the street again, but I still need to try to put myself in their place and be friendly. If someone calls on the phone, interrupting my work, to ask a question, I might respond a bit abruptly/ But I can control my impatience and try to be kind.

Someone who requests my attention without knowing me and who receives a friendly response (perhaps also accompanied by a smile), is grateful. They realize they are not alone and that life is not so cold. And they recognize in this voice, in this face that they may soon forget, the goodness in every human being. And perhaps they are helped to regain trust in life.

Companionship can be seen as a lesser form of friendship. It is a bond and a relationship that arises between people who share the same

work, project or studies. And from this common goal that brings them together day after day and from sharing difficulties and achievements, bonds of sympathy and affection are formed that can lead to friendship.

It is useful to remember here that mutual dealings within a group or a team should be marked by the characteristics of friendship: appreciation, loyalty, service, support, interest in each other, a spirit of cooperation.

As a 20th century French philosopher once said: “We need to enter the hearts of others, to put ourselves in their place. We need to be ‘at home’ with our neighbor, to speak to each one in their own language.”^[5]

“True friends are tested in adversity, because in prosperity everyone appears to be faithful.”^[6] An old and

wise saying is that good springs of water are proven in times of drought, and sincere friendship in times of difficulty.

Charity strengthens and enriches friendship; it makes it more human, with a greater capacity for understanding others, for being open to everyone. Since Christ is the best friend, we will learn from Him how to strengthen a relationship that may have grown weak, to uproot an obstacle, to overcome our own selfishness and the comfort of staying confined in our own little world.

True friends

True friendship is not self-seeking, since it consists more in giving than in receiving. It doesn't seek its own benefit, but that of one's friend. It needs to be loyal and sincere, and demands renunciation, an upright intention, and a noble and lawful

exchange of services. A true friend is strong and sincere.

For there to be true friendship, affection and benevolence need to be mutual. Friendship always tends to become stronger, and doesn't let itself be undone by envy or suspicion. Friendship grows in the midst of difficulties. Then joys and sorrows are shared naturally.

Friendship is a great human good and, at the same time, an opportunity to develop many other human virtues.

A good friend never speaks ill of a friend or lets him be criticized when absent, and comes to his defense. Friendship requires sincerity, trust, sharing sorrows and joys, encouraging, consoling, helping.

Alec Guinness, a British actor who converted to Catholicism, ends his memoirs with these words: "If I can

boast of anything in this life it is this: I don't think I have ever lost a friend.”^[7]

Friendship entails the desire to give our friend the best we have. Our highest value, without any possible comparison, is having found our Lord. We would not have a true friendship if we did not want to pass on the immense gift of the Christian faith. Our friends need to find in us support and strength, and a supernatural meaning for their own lives.

The security of finding understanding, interest, attention, will spur them to trust us, with the security that they are appreciated, knowing that we will do all we can to help them. And doing so while we carry out our normal daily tasks, trying to be exemplary in our profession or studies, being open to

dealing with everyone, spurred by charity.

Friendship protects one from loneliness

Many people today experience a loneliness that seems irremediable. Perhaps they have lost the ability to listen to and dialogue with God. They find themselves dangerously alone and without a goal in life.

Probably in no other era has there been so much talk about loneliness and “lonely crowds,” when our time is also called the “age of communications.” We can communicate quickly with someone anywhere in the world with a minimum of effort.

The terrible evil of loneliness can only be overcome, first of all, with the company of the One who never abandons us and, as a perhaps inseparable and necessary

complement, with the generous openness to others that makes true friendship possible. An old proverb says that “a man without friends does not live a full life.”

We have been created by God to give ourselves, and when we fail to do so our life loses any meaning, and we die.

It would be wonderful if we could call the people with whom we work or study friends, the people with whom we live and interact most frequently. Friends, and not just colleagues or neighbors. This would mean that we have really tried to practice the virtues that foster and make friendship possible.

Friendship protects a person from loneliness because friends are the only ones who can enter the personal sphere where life may become burdensome and we can be hurt. The communication that friendship

allows opens the door that is almost always closed, and allows friends to enter the interior space where we truly exist. Friends can enter there because we let them in. We need them to enter our world in order to break out of our loneliness: the loneliness that is compatible with a busy life and interaction with many people.

Alexander the Great, when close to death, was supposedly asked repeatedly by his closest relatives: “Alexander, where have you hidden your treasures” “My treasure?” he replied. “My treasure lies in my friends.”

Recovering friendships

We can recover lost friends, and regain friendships that were broken for a reason that, perhaps, was not very big.

People can change, and what happens in each one's hearts is often mysterious.

Saint Bernard advised: "When you see something bad in your friend, don't rush to judgment. Rather seek an excuse for them in your heart. At least assume that the intention wasn't bad, that they acted out of ignorance or surprise or misfortune. If the mistake is so clear that you cannot excuse it, then think that the temptation must have been very strong."^[8]

Keeping friends is a great good, and an even greater one is restoring friendships that have weakened or broken.

God loves us as we are, also with our defects, and to change us He relies on grace and time. In seeing our friends' defects, charity should lead us to always try to be understanding and helpful.

And the virtue of simplicity will enable us to rise above any grievances that were not intentional.

^[1] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, IX, 1170 b 15-19.

^[2] *Ibid.*, IX, 1171 b 14-25.

^[3] *Ibid.*, IX, 1171 b 14-25.

^[4] Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Letter to a Hostage*.

^[5] J. Guitton, *Learning to Live and Think*, pp. 64-65

^[6] Saint Ambrose, *On the Office of Ministers*, III, 127.

^[7] Alec Guinness, *Blessings in Disguise*.

^[8] Saint Bernard, *Sermon on the Song of Songs*, 40.

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