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Very Human, Very Divine (V): To Be a True Friend

All genuine friendship involves an effort both to enter the lives of others and to allow them space in our own life. In this fifth article we look at some virtues that make friendship easier for us.

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When someone is approaching the end of their life, when they are about *to depart out of this world to the*

Father (Jn 13:1), their thoughts tend to focus on what is essential, on what needs to be finished: writing a few affectionate words to loved ones, taking a quick balance of their life, trying to reconcile with that person...

We also see this in Jesus' life. The preamble to his final hours is a ritual dinner with his closest friends. The Gospels allow us to be present during those moments through the moving “pages of friendship” in John’s Gospel, in which our Lord leaves us as an inheritance the testimony of his love. “In the intimacy of the Cenacle, Jesus tells the apostles: *I have called you friends (Jn 15:15)*. And in them he has said this to all of us. God loves us not merely as creatures but as children to whom, in Christ, He offers true friendship.”[1]

A meeting of intimacies

Friendship is a two-way relationship that grows through giving and

accepting. Jesus offers his friends the greatest gift that exists: *I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor (Jn 14:16)*. But He also asks for our response. He asks us to accept his gifts: *Abide in my love (Jn 15:9)*. No friendship involves only one party. All genuine friendship requires an effort both to enter the lives of others and to allow them space in our own life.

This mutual drawing close to another person is not always easy; and even less so if the social environment, or our own inertia, lead us to count little on others, to guard our inner world from possible intrusions, or to consider others only insofar as they can be useful to us. To make friendship possible, we need to be willing to open the doors of our heart. This surely makes us vulnerable, but it also makes us more human. Who hasn't experienced moments of deep sharing with

another person, when the meeting of two inner worlds takes place? We could think that these situations, full of candor and intensity, are typical of youth. However, anyone who loses the fear of opening up their interior world and welcoming others into their heart is capable of making deep friendships at any age: whether with their parents, brothers and sisters, children, husband or wife, those living with them or colleagues at work.

Benevolence and tenderness

Since ancient times people have realized that “friendship is a virtue, or involves virtue; and it is also one of the most indispensable requirements of life.”[2] For a friendship to strengthen and grow, friends need to foster some dispositions that make possible the interchange of interior worlds. Friendship involves “concern for the

good of the other person, reciprocity, intimacy, warmth, stability and the resemblance born of a shared life.”[3]

Seeking the true good of the other person, also known as benevolence, is perhaps the main disposition required for friendship. This means being concerned not so much about *a specific good for the other person*, but about *the other person in his or her totality*. I want them to be happy. Benevolence is a sign of authentic affection for our friends, which involves “seeing and affirming them just as they are, with their problems, their defects, their personal history, their social surroundings, and their own times for drawing close to Jesus. Hence to build a true friendship we need to develop the capacity to look at other people with affection, to be able to see them with the eyes of Christ.”[4]

Improving our ability to open ourselves to others also requires growing in tenderness. Contrary to what is sometimes thought, tenderness “is not the virtue of the weak but rather a sign of strength of spirit and a capacity for concern, for compassion, for genuine openness to others.”^[5] Tenderness is a fertile field that requires daily tilling, in which the ability to share and trust can grow. “Each one of you has a heart full of tenderness, as I do,”^[6] Saint Josemaría said. This tenderness, which can be present both in people who find it easy to express their affection and in more introverted temperaments, is shown in many different ways. In the intimate moments of the Last Supper, Jesus rebukes Peter, who doesn’t want his feet to be washed (cf. *Jn* 13:6-11); but He also allows John to rest his head on his chest (cf. *Jn* 13:23). The tenderness of a friend understands the needs of the other

person, and respects their intimacy, their way of being; it avoids any unwelcome intrusion, and offers its silent presence.

Continuity and harmony

Another necessary component of friendship is the continuity of the relationship, because two interior worlds do not suddenly open up to each other. Important things need time to take root and grow in the human heart. Sometimes we can think we've just found a new "best friend," but in reality the relationship still has to grow a lot. "A lot of time is needed to converse, to spend time together, to get to know one another. That is where a friendship is forged. Only with patience can a friendship be real."[7]

Friends want to see each other, to spend time together, to share what each finds valuable. The apostles liked being with Jesus, not only

because they knew He was the Messiah of Israel, but because they were good friends with Him. They didn't follow Him only out of intellectual conviction, but because Jesus had become an essential part of their life: *I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you (Jn 16:22).*

Spending time with friends and getting to know them better strengthens a friendship until it becomes durable and even distance-proof. Then a special harmony is forged between friends, because each one spontaneously communicates to the other the goods that give meaning to their life. One comes to value what the other person values, to enjoy what brings them joy; and also, as is only natural, to be saddened by what causes them to be sad. Friends are drawn to each other sincerely; one doesn't win a

friend by deception or by disguising other interests as friendship.

Virtues needed for getting along with others

Saint Thomas Aquinas says that “among the goods of this world none can rightly be preferred to friendship, since it is what unites the virtuous, and preserves and fosters virtue.”^[8] The path of virtue is an ally to relationships of friendship. Those who cultivate the image of God in their lives easily recognize one another, and seek to share that inner beauty.

Certain virtues are more apt for preparing the path of friendship and helping it grow. These are the virtues needed to get along with others. The “environment of friendship, which each of us is called to carry with us, is the fruit of many efforts to make life pleasant for others. Growing in cordiality, joyfulness, patience,

optimism, refinement and in all the virtues that make living with others agreeable is important for helping people to feel welcomed and to be happy: *A pleasant voice multiplies friends, and a gracious tongue multiplies courtesies* (Sir 6:5). The struggle to improve our own character is a necessary condition for facilitating relationships of friendship.”[9]

In the context of friendship, it is not always easy to distinguish which aspects of one’s personality should be altered, and which should be tolerated—and even loved—by a friend. Perhaps it isn’t necessary to make too many distinctions here; the important thing is to try to work on oneself, which is what we have within our reach. If I am shy, I can try to be more outgoing; if I have strong reactions, I can endeavor to temper them; if I tend to be inexpressive, I can try to express my

feelings more readily; etc. What would never be helpful is to stubbornly affirm one's own ego. Saint Josemaría urged people to avoid this trap: "Sometimes you try to excuse yourself, saying that you are distracted or absent-minded, or that it is your character to be dry and reserved. That, you add, is why you don't even know very well the people you live with. —Listen, isn't it true that this excuse doesn't really satisfy you?"[10]

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All friendship is a gift that is received and, by accepting it, it becomes a gift for the other person. This is the key characteristic of love: love can only be given by those who have received it. Even the love Jesus offers his apostles is preceded by that which has been given to Him: *As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you (Jn 15:9).*

Hence, besides growing in all the virtues that help us to open ourselves to others, the most important thing to be a true friend is to grow in our love for God. As our intimate relationship with Him increases, our capacity to love others grows. “Love of God and love of neighbour are thus inseparable, they form a single commandment. But both live from the love of God who has loved us first. No longer is it a question, then, of a ‘commandment’ imposed from without and calling for the impossible, but rather of a freely-bestowed experience of love from within, a love which by its very nature must then be shared with others. Love grows through love. Love is ‘divine’ because it comes from God and unites us to God; through this unifying process it makes us a ‘we’ which transcends our divisions and makes us one, until in the end God is ‘all in all’ (1 Cor 15:28)”[11]

[1] Monsignor Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral Letter, 1 November 2019, no. 2.

[2] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1155a.

[3] Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Amoris laetitia*, no. 123.

[4] Monsignor Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral Letter, 1 November 2019, no. 8.

[5] Francis, Homily, 19 March 2013.

[6] Saint Josemaría, Notes from a family get-together, 15 September 1971.

[7] Francis Interview, 13 September 2015. Full text on the website of the

Argentine Catholic Information Agency.

[8] Saint Thomas Aquinas, *On the Government of Princes*, I, X.

[9] Monsignor Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral Letter, 1 November 2019, no. 9.

[10] Saint Josemaría, *Furrow*, no. 755.

[11] Benedict XVI, Enc. *Deus Caritas est*, no. 18.

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