

REFLECTIONS ON FRIENDSHIP

Before I start my talk, would you each please write down the first thing that comes to mind when I say “FRIEND.”

“Make a friend. Be a friend. Bring a friend to Christ.” How many times have we heard this favorite Cursillo saying? We know that this is what each of us is called to do as a Cursillista to be living the charism of the founder Eduardo Bonnín. And in fact, isn’t this exactly what our Holy Father Pope Francis is also challenging us to do as Catholics? But have we spent much time trying to understand what “friendship” really is?

In this talk we will look at some of the answers that philosophers like Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas gave to this question about friendship. Then, we’ll see how it might apply to us as Cursillistas.

I have especially relied on Dr. John Cuddeback’s excellent book *True Friendship: Where Virtue Becomes Happiness*. I also so dug out a copy of my MA dissertation that I wrote some 49 years ago. Now, that was a walk down memory lane!

Thinking about friendship on a human level is really important for us as Christians because “...an understanding of human friendship enhances our understanding of friendship with God....and even more pressing, human friendship is the natural preparation for entering into friendship with God.” [Cuddeback p. 18]

ARISTOTLE: TYPES OF FRIENDSHIP

Over twenty-three centuries ago, the great philosopher Aristotle answered the question, “What is a friend?” with this reply: “A single soul dwelling in two bodies.”

You know, we speak of friendship pretty casually today. If I were to ask you how many friends you have on Facebook, I bet many would answer, “Hundreds or even thousands!” Yet, you and I know very well that a person is very fortunate to have even just one true friend.

Aristotle gives us some other insights. He speaks of three different kinds of friendship: the first is one where people just enjoy one another. He calls that the friendship of pleasure.

We could ask these friends, “How did you become friends in the first place? What brought you together?”

They might answer, “We just like being with each other. We get along pretty well together. I like the way my friend is always so funny. And we both like the same TV shows and movies. I guess, we just think alike.”

Obviously, they share common interests, and they liked the same things pretty much.

“Mutual affection” would have to be part of the description of the friendship of pleasure, as well as having the same likes and dislikes. It’s just fun being together.

A second type of friendship according to Aristotle is the friendship of use. In this kind of friendship I am friends with someone else because they are useful to me. Maybe I’m a businessman and I can get a really good deal on some items because of my friendship with this other person. Or maybe I’m running for District Attorney or even President. The friendship of use can certainly come in handy at election time!

Neither the friendship of pleasure nor the friendship of use is inherently bad. As a matter of fact, both of these types of friendship probably play some role in a true friendship. They are not mutually exclusive. But a really true and noble friendship goes way beyond that.

In a true or “virtuous” friendship, which is the third kind Aristotle speaks about, I love my friend for his or her own sake, not merely as an object to be enjoyed or used and then discarded when no longer needed.

As I mentioned, true friendship goes beyond the two other types. True friendship exists when one is seeking what is really good for his friend, such as good health, stable living conditions, and especially wisdom and virtue—all of which Aristotle calls the “good life.”

He calls it the “good” life because what makes a person truly happy is living the virtues. Yes, that’s what makes for real happiness: to live a virtuous life and that is something my friend and I want for each other if our friendship is the noblest kind.

In this kind of relationship I actually look upon my friend as another self, another “me,” and I want what's good for him or her just as much as I want it for myself.

I am able to say to my 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.” [Cuddeback p. 39]

In the Bible, such was the friendship between Jonathan and David: “...the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul.” 1 Sam 18:1

And it’s reciprocal: In such a true friendship, my friend wants the same for me.

ST THOMAS: CHARACTERISTICS OF TRUE FRIENDSHIP

St. Thomas Aquinas, who bases his discussion on Aristotle’s ideas, states that some of the characteristics of this true friendship include the reciprocal love that the two persons have, a kind of “mutual indwelling.” This explains why friends want to spend as much time together as they can. They love to have conversations together, and to “break bread” together. [It sounds a lot like Cursillo to me.]

He goes on to say that a true friend goes out of his way to get what’s good for his friend. His zeal tries to remove anything that is in the way. Furthermore, since friends enjoy each other’s company so much, they miss being with each other when they are separated and really look forward to being together again.

WHAT DO FRIENDS DO?

Aristotle answers with these two important actions: Friends 'do good for one another,' and they 'live together.' [Cuddeback p. 60]

It's not hard to see that our friends profoundly affect who we are. They are a major determinant of our self-image [which is] a major part of who we are. Second, it is with friends that we form habits and develop our character. [Cuddeback p. 45]

Your true friend sees you 'as the person you are in yourself,' which is to say that he or she really understands you. And he or she seeks what is good for you, or in other words, loves you 'for your own sake.' He can because of having taken the time to get to know you—having broken bread together with you, as one expression says. [Cuddeback p. 48]

"One who loves you is willing to take the time to get to know you as you really are....[and] must be willing to look beyond your shortcomings. It is always a friend who is most forgiving. The friend sees failings precisely as falling short of what you can do. We can put it this way: the friend is willing and able to look beyond present shortcomings, to what you *can be*. (This points to a beautiful insight into how God loves us.)... But we can take this one step further. In a very profound sense, the true friend is especially capable of *showing me* truths about myself that I am incapable of seeing on my own, or through other that do not love me. [And] The first truth is that I am lovable." [Cuddeback pp. 49-50]

CURSILLISTAS AND FRIENDSHIP

What was the second thing Aristotle said friends do together? It was: They live together.

Now, this is not a matter of *where you* live; it is a matter of *how* you live. Friends want to do the same kinds of things, and they want to do them together; they want particularly to share the most important things in their lives. [Cuddeback p. 61]

“If two persons are really to be united in doing good for one another, they must share a vision of what life is all about.... True friends understand that the most important thing that they can do for one another is to help each other walk down the path of virtue. And, of course, as regards sharing their lives together, it can only really be a sharing of lives if they share a common vision of what they want to make of themselves in life” [Cuddeback p. 62]

And for us as Cursillistas, what is the most important thing in our lives?

In the rollo for Christianity in Action, we describe ourselves as “a group of Grace-filled Christians who live together in a climate that makes it possible for each one to live and spread the Gospel in the world.”

In order to live or journey together, we need to cultivate friendship among ourselves first. Now when we are doing this for real, when we are journeying together with one another and with Jesus, the rollo reminds us that differences among us tend to disappear. Whether someone is wealthier than another, or more educated than another, or from some other background, or you name it, it doesn't matter anymore.

Each of us can start to live in real and lasting joy. This is the way Jesus intended it. He is the Way to the Father.

Besides supporting each other in living a virtuous or good life, my friend and I help each other to live prudently. This is achieved especially through the good conversations we have as friends.

When the way to follow is not clear, my friend is there to help me discern the right path. When the way is clear, but will require much sacrifice, my friend is there to encourage me and even shoulder the load with me. When it is tempting simply to turn back, to give up, my friend is there to say: ‘You can do it; we can do it.’ [Cuddeback p. 64]

We have to remember that making and being a friend is something that involves action on our part—it has to be cultivated—It doesn't just happen.

SOME PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

In order to “make a friend,” there has to be some “common ground.”

I think at first I am drawn to someone else because of their personality. I know I like people who like to kid around, who are not always too serious. Maybe that’s because it’s easy for me to get too serious about things and not let myself just be myself and have a laugh or two. So I appreciate people like that. In fact, I admire them. There are definitely people right here in this room who fit this description. I’m sure you know who I mean.

Maybe it’s somebody who also shares the same concerns, especially about politics. Now I understand that that can be very tricky and no one really agrees with ALL my positions, I’m sure. But it is certainly easier being with someone who is on the same page as I am.

On the other hand, although it’s easier being with someone else who’s like me, sometimes it’s good to have a conversation with someone who does not agree with me about things that I consider important. It gives me (and him or her) the chance to think about things from a different perspective and maybe we each can have our understanding broadened and not become intransigent and likely unapproachable.

I suppose it comes down to sharing the desire for what’s good and true, even if we are still searching for the particular things that make up goodness and truth.

And of course, there has to be mutual respect. It would not be possible to be friends with someone I did not respect. Maybe the problem is with me and not the other person, but until I was willing to get in their shoes and understand where they were coming from, I would be unable to find any common ground for friendship. If I did let go of any prejudices that were there, I would be taking the first step. This desire to accept the other person would be the result of grace because I don’t see how it could happen any other way.

Besides personality, If I am trying to become someone's friend, I have to get to know them, where they are coming from. I want to find out what their interests are and maybe find some common interests. I am actually in the very process of doing this with someone I known for some time, although not very well. Jake was a former student of mine at a community college I used to teach at. He was always an inquisitive student and always respectful. I guess that's I liked him. It was always really fun having a discussion in class with him and two other guys who sat next to him.

Recently, I found out that Jake was experiencing some tough times. I was motivated to get in touch with him, just to meet with him again. I often pray for him and at our first lunch together I gave him a wooden cross from the Holy Land just like the one I have, which my pastor blessed saying that every time I look at it, I should remember how much God loves me. I was able to tell my new friend the same thing.

I must admit that after having lunch with him a few times, I discovered that I don't really have a lot in common with him yet, outside of his inquisitiveness about philosophical and religious questions and my desire to think and talk about them too. He is very knowledgeable about music and instruments, but I still have trouble connecting my iPad with the Bose bluetooth speaker my kids gave me for Christmas!

However, recently, he indicated an interest in learning Latin and that was good news. I taught Latin many years ago and although I've gotten rusty, I would like to try teaching him some of the basics. Who knows, maybe we'll end up learning some Gregorian Chant together.

My point here is simply that it seems to me that there has to be some basic common ground between persons in order to develop a friendship. Maybe it already exists, or maybe it has to be planted and cared for. Where it goes, only God knows, but if He is behind this friendship to begin with, then I can trust Him to guide me all the way.

Related to this common interest idea is the concern that one friend has for another. You've all heard the saying, "Real friends don't let friends drink and drive." That's true, of course, but it really goes beyond drinking and driving. It seems to me that as a friend I want only what's best for my

friend. I do not want him or her to get hurt in any way. If I am aware of some bad habit—say, smoking—I might give him some encouragement to break the habit. Just what I say or do depends on the situation, naturally, but I don't want to just ignore it.

Now this makes me think of another point: Sometimes friends do have disagreements. After all, no one is perfect. Sometimes I might let my emotions get control of me and I say something that does hurt my friend's feelings. I once heard someone compare emotions to an untrained dog on a leash. I know this first hand.

Our daughter and son-in-law recently gave us the privilege of taking care of their dog while they went to Costa Rica. Now, Abby the dog did go to training school, but I think she failed with flying colors! It does take a lot of work to train a puppy when it goes pretty much wherever it wants to. Sometimes the only thing I can do is try to keep a tight rein. And so it goes with our emotions.

So, if we let them get out of control, we have to work at setting things right again. This takes forgiveness on both sides. A few years ago, Carol and I attended a weekend conference given by Msgr. Esseff and Immaculée from Rwanda. As you may know, Immaculée's parents and other members of her family were killed by their own neighbors who happened to be members of another tribe. She herself was spared only because she and eight other girls were hiding in a minister's bathroom for 30 days.

The experience was horrendous, but thanks to God's grace and her devotion to Our Lady of Kibeho, Immaculée lived and was eventually able to forgive her family's murderers. She had first-hand knowledge of the fact that "To forgive is to love."

She and Msgr. Esseff really impressed all of us by their words and witness. During the Mass, after communion, Monsignor told us to look at Jesus in the face of the person next to us! What an experience!

Now, this makes me think of another fact: friends of Jesus should be friends with one another. After all, we have all the "common ground" that's necessary. We are already drawn to Jesus, because of His action and

grace, so it is only logical that we would want to be friends with one another.

And all the more reason to hurry up and set things right again if we mess things up. Jesus told us very clearly that if we bring our gift to the altar and realize that we have an issue with someone, we are to leave the gift there and make friends again and then return to offer our gift.

And this is the highest form of friendship—it's called CHARITY—the friendship we have with Jesus and His friends. In fact, there is no way that we could even dream of this kind of personal relationship on our own. Aristotle, by the way, said that it was not even possible! But he did not know about Jesus. We, as practicing Catholics and Cursillistas know the Truth!

Jesus said: "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....I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you." John 15: 12-15

Imagine that! Jesus has brought us in on the conversation He has with His Father. And just as talking with your friend is as important as it is pleasant, so having a conversation with Jesus and His Father is crucial in maintaining our friendship with God. And this is simply called "prayer."

Furthermore, we know that when we love God, we love everyone He loves. And there is actually no one outside of His love. In fact, charity—which is this friendship with God, this love of God for His own sake—is the only way we can love all our neighbors, even our enemies!

Now, the reason it was good for us to consider what human friendship is like is that it helps us to understand something of what friendship with God is like. It also helps us prepare for that experience we will have with Him and all those He loves in heaven. And it's beginning here on earth. Right now!

De Colores!