

FRIENDSHIP: A VIRTUE AND A MYSTERY

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Friendship in the Sacred Scriptures

Friendship has been mentioned and implied throughout the Sacred Scriptures with lessons and stories of both bad and good friends. In the Old Testament Book of Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), we find a compilation of materials that include moral and ethical maxims, folk, proverbs, psalms of praise, and lament, theological reflections, homiletic exhortations, and pointed observations about Jewish life and religious mores in the second century BC. For example, “There is nothing so precious as a faithful friend, and no scales can measure his excellence” (Sirach 6:15). And “For there is a friend who is such at his own convenience, but will not stand by you in your day of trouble ... A faithful friend is a sturdy shelter: he that has found one has found a treasure” Sirach 6:8, 14). “Whoever fears the Lord directs his friendship aright, for as he is, so is his neighbor” (Sirach 6:17).

The Book of Ruth in the Bible is the story of a widow’s courageous decision to leave Moab, her homeland, and travel to Judah with her Hebrew mother-in-law, who has lost her husband and sons. Ruth’s words to Naomi are one of the greatest statements of friendship and loyalty in all of literature: “Wherever you go, I will go; and where you live, I will live; your people will be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, will I die, and there will I be buried” (Ruth 1:16-17). And the Story of Jonathan, told in the first Book of Samuel in the Bible, is one instance showing that the duties of friendship compete with other obligations and affections. Jonathan’s defense of David, made doubly painful because of his filial duties towards his father King Saul who was jealous of David’s popularity and his own claim to the throne, is one of our greatest examples of loyalty in friendship. (The Book of Virtues by William J. Bennett, stories retold by Jesse Lyman Hurlbut).

Friendship: A Way of Shared Living Together

Paul Mahler in an article affirmed “Friendships are very important to us in our lives. From a very young age we see that children quickly decide who their friends will be, and more especially who their best friend will be. Our choice in friends is much more important than who is popular, or who makes us feel popular, and wanted. The people whom we decide to be friends with can make or break us.” William J. Bennett, in his “The Book of Virtues”, also writes, “Every parent knows how crucial the choice of friends is for every child. Childhood friendships tell parents which ways their children are tending. They are important because good friends bring you up, and bad friends bring you down. So it matters who our children’s friends are. And it matters, as examples to our children, who our friends are. The Bible says that if you have wise friends then you will be wise, but if you have foolish friends then you will also be foolish (Proverbs 13:20). Whether we agree with it or not the friends that we choose will affect us for better or worse.”

It is always, indeed, pressing in our lives to find true friends with whom we share our good or bad news, our worries, our difficulties, and also from whom we seek wisdom, good counsel, helpful advice, and innumerable other things. Throughout the history of mankind, one has seen so many examples of both betrayal and true friendship, but likely less of the latter. Even Jesus Himself was betrayed by one of his first disciples although during three years of His mission on earth, Jesus constantly offered his true friendship to his disciples and to us nowadays when He said, “No longer do I call you servants ... but I have called you friends.” (John 15:15).

Unfortunately, authentic friendship is hard to find in our present world with a culture of death, full of violence, hatred and hostility. As a consequence of facing the reality of their de-Christianized world about half a century ago, Eduardo Bonnín, the founder of our Cursillo Movement, with the foundational charism and together with several of his young friends as a core group, started the Movement with Friendship as one of the ten fundamental ideas in building its foundation (First 10 Conversations of Cala Figuera). Eduardo Bonnín in his presentation on Friendship stated “The most profound way of living together with others is friendship.” (La forma más profunda de convivencia es la amistad). The Fundamental Ideas of the Cursillo Movement affirms the necessity of friendship, “*The Cursillo involves an experience of shared living, such that the team leaders “open themselves up as friends, without trying either directly or indirectly to find out the spiritual condition of the Cursillista. Honest friendship is the only path that can lead to genuine openness and effective dialogue. Technique here is a blend of delicacy, opportunity, tact, and an apostolic spirit”* (FI # 314).

Friendship: The Art of Happiness

In his Foreword to the book “Friendship: The Art of Happiness” by John Cuddeback, Curtis Martin has written, “Our hearts tell us that we are made for friendship, and there is a reality that corresponds to our desire, but how do we realize it? John Cuddeback has given us a great tool: “Friendship: The Art of Happiness”. Authentic friendship doesn’t just happen – it is an art that must be learned, a skill that must be practiced. Friendship shows us the wisdom of the ancients, what the best women and men of the past have learned about forging friendships that will endure.” Most ideas in this article, therefore, are gratefully credited to Professor John Cuddeback, who teaches us how to learn and practice making a friend, being a friend and bringing a friend to Christ, which is the ultimate goal of our Cursillo Movement.

According to Dr. John Cuddeback, true friendship leading to happiness is for those who live a certain kind of life, namely a virtuous life. We cannot have true friendships if we are not virtuous. The kind of life required for friendship is a virtuous life. In our society, the majority of people think they know what friendship is and that they have it, and thus friendship is normally valued. Whereas, very few people claim that they know what virtue is, or that they practice it. The lack of virtue in our society, therefore, does not seem to bother them. But to have friendship in the absence of virtue is self-defeating. Dr. Cuddeback quoted St. John’s first letter to prove his point, “*If we say we have fellowship with Him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not live according to the*

truth” (1 John 1:6). True friendship and virtue are inseparable; together they are the key to human happiness.

Regarding the wisdom of the ancients on friendship, Dr. John Cuddeback states that Aristotle has considered friendship as “a virtue or it implies virtue, and friendship is besides most necessary with a view to living. For without friends no one would choose to live, though he had all other goods” (Nicomachean Ethics, 1155a1-3). Therefore, Aristotle has made clear that living in true friendship is to live the good life, to be happy. And in his above-mentioned book, Dr. Cuddeback tries to help us understand how being virtuous and being a true friend are necessarily connected with each other, or practically the same thing. Living a virtuous life requires much more than just knowing what is most important. Virtues are all about living out the truth that you know. A virtue is a good habit. Performing good actions, such as giving help to those in need, develops a habit of doing those good actions. The definition of “virtues” in the Catechism of the Catholic Church is similar to that of Aristotle. Justice is “the moral virtue that consists in the constant firm will to give their due to God and neighbor” (CCC 1807). For example, an employer always pays his employees a living wage, even when he could get away with giving less.

Friendship: A Cornerstone of the Cursillo Movement

Eduardo and his friends must have been inspired by the Holy Spirit, known as their Foundational Charism, to think of friendship as one of their fundamental ideas or factors that constitute or form the Cursillo Movement with its mission to become living witnesses to Christ in the environments. According to Dr. John Cuddeback, since in friendship persons are united in their love of one another and in their love of virtue, friends share a vision of the good life and strive to achieve it. Friendships thus provide “mini-communities” within the larger community; they are a basic unit of striving for perfection. In this way, the mini-community of friendship is very similar to the most basic, natural unit in our Cursillo Three-Day Weekend, the ‘decuria’, and in our Fourth Day, the Group Reunion.

Strong Group Reunions, and Ultreyas that foster Piety, Study, and Action with many true living witnesses, provide the necessary foundation for a strong and authentic Cursillo Movement at any level. An individual Cursillista has a place in his or her diocesan Cursillo Movement through having a place in his/her Friendship Group and Ultreya. The character of the ‘mini-communities’ or Group Reunions of friends and Ultreyas determines the character of the Cursillo Movement at the diocesan or national level. To the extent that there is true friendship among the Cursillistas in Group Reunions and Ultreyas, the Christian communities will be formed by persons, or groups of persons, united with one another in the pursuit of virtue. St. Paul himself, during the course of his “independent” ministry and in the face of some unusual situations, had to adopt some doctrinal innovations in order to justify his continuous appeals to the believers to group together in united communities. Undeniably, Paul succeeded wherever he went, in creating many Churches, extremely united in order to survive and develop outside the structures tied to the synagogues (Holy See Pauline Year Documents). The Fundamental Ideas of the Cursillo Movement confirmed, “The Group is based *on the power of*

friendship. And friendship, as Pope Paul VI said when he gave our Groups his seal of approval, is based on spiritual affinities which facilitate apostolic efforts that a person would never dare to attempt alone” (FI # 432).

In helping us understand more about true friendship, Dr. John Cuddeback directed our attention to Aristotle’s simple question: What do friends do together? And the answers are: “Friends do good for one another” and they “live together” (Nicomachean Ethics, 1157b7). Dr. Cuddeback interpreted Aristotle’s ideas as “friends want to live the same life together, to act together, to spend their days together, etc...” He turned our attention to how friends grow in virtue together, first as regards “moral virtue” (Friendship is one of the most critical natural helps to walking the straight and narrow path.), and then as regards “intellectual virtue” (Wisdom was earlier mentioned as the most important example of an intellectual virtue.) He added intellectual and moral virtues are not easy to form, and they require time and effort. Aristotle considers the role of good conversation, known as personal contact in our Cursillo Movement, is of central importance in friendship. Certainly, conversation should be about the communication of truth, which is nothing else than sharing of *insight*. Friends help one another grow in insight, and grow in the habits of pursuing greater insight. Our present society or environment are overwhelmed with high tech forms, such as telephones, television, video games, music, internet, e-mail, message texting, etc..., which undoubtedly become obstacles to conversation or personal contact between and among friends, and tend to isolate people. The Cursillistas are encouraged to become living witnesses to friendship in Christ Jesus in their Fourth Day in order for them to live together and share what is fundamental for being Christian in the modern world, such as the following news report, which the ABC News Company made its amazing headline on December 22nd, 2008.
A Layoff Results in a Christmas Gift for One Family: Ralph Hanahan Gave Up His Job So His Friend Could Remain Employed.

Mike Camp and Ralph Hanahan worked together closely for five years as the go-to computer guys at the Governor's School of the Arts and Humanities in Greenville, S.C. If a computer was on the fritz or an e-mail couldn't be opened, teachers and students went to the pair for aid. "We worked as a team ... and pretty interchangeable ... almost like two halves of the same heart," Camp, 40, said.

But when rumblings of the nation's economic crisis hit South Carolina, Hanahan, 55, worried the school would be forced to choose between him and Camp. Camp said, "I think he realized that if the trends didn't stop, there would be layoffs at the school and he expected that one of the two of us would be targeted for that."

Indeed, the school alerted staff last month that an unknown number of employees would be laid off in the coming weeks. To stave off any difficult decisions and help his younger friend, Hanahan did something that sent the school and town a buzz.

"Ralph, indeed, stepped forward and said, 'If you have to do this, you should take me,'" said school president Bruce Halverson. Hanahan, who had worked more than 20 years as a state employee, volunteered to take the hit and save Camp from the layoff list. "I'm astonished that anyone in this day and time can do that," Camp said. "He'll have our

gratitude for an endless time." Camp surprised Hanahan on "Good Morning America" today and offered his thanks for the sacrifice he made."

Friendship: A Useful Tool in Evangelization

The Leaders' Manual declares, "*The Cursillo Movement, through the experience of the founders, discovered that friendship can be put at the service of Christ and the Church while at the same time meeting the needs of individuals to be part of a community.*"

The late Vietnamese Cardinal Nguyen Van Thuan, former President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, was well-known for his witness to Jesus Christ throughout his 13 years in Communist prisons in Viet Nam. In December of 1999, he was suggested and encouraged by Pope John Paul II to share his witness of his 13 years of confinement in Communist prisons at the Lent Retreat for the Roman Curia in the Year 2000. In one meditation, the Cardinal said he was amazed that his Christian love in friendship could transform his prison guards and the prison environment. This is one of his accounts:

"When I was placed in solitary confinement by the communists in Viet Nam, five men were assigned to guard me, with two permanently present day and night. A new team of guards came every two weeks so that they wouldn't be "contaminated" by me. Some time later the prison warden stopped providing me with one-time guards for such a rather short period of time, because the administration was worried the entire prison security staff would soon be "contaminated" if one by one were sent to watch over me. The guards were ordered not to talk to me. On the first few days, they simply replied "Yes" or "No" or just very briefly when I asked them something. I was not discouraged by their unfriendly attitude because I thought of God's love for them. One morning, I tried to break the ice by offering to tell them stories about my trips abroad, about the life, culture, economy, technology, freedom, democracy in some countries I've visited, like Canada, Japan, the Philippines, Singapore, France, Germany, Australia, Austria, etc.. My stories stirred their curiosity, prompting them to ask many questions. I always told them the answers. Soon, we became friends. They wanted to learn a foreign language, French or English... I willingly helped them. Gradually, my prison guards became my students! The prison environment was changed, the relationship between us improved. Even their superiors, who noticed me treat their subordinates friendly and lovingly, not only asked me to continue to help them but they also sent other men to me for the language lessons."

Cardinal Nguyen Van Thuan related a story about two prison guards of his who were taking some Latin courses somewhere because they were appointed to scrutinize the Church documents. He had looked at their notebooks; he said they seemed to learn Latin well. One of them wanted the Cardinal to teach him songs in Latin. The Cardinal sang a few hymns for them to select, Salve Regina, Veni Creator, Ave Maris Stella, etc... He decided to learn "Veni Creator". The Cardinal copied the entire song for his guard, who learned it by heart soon afterwards. The Cardinal continued his story, "*Then every morning at 7 o'clock, I heard him running down the wooden stairs to the backyard for his*

routine physical exercises. While taking his bath outdoors from wash-basins near my cell, he sang the “Veni Creator Spiritus” ... I was deeply moved, wondering how a communist secret agent could sing the “Veni Creator” for me to hear! I believed the Holy Spirit marvelously used this atheist to help an imprisoned Catholic bishop to pray because he was too weak and too dispirited to pray any longer. Only the security guards had the permission to sing out loud religious songs in that environment.”

Cardinal Nguyen Van Thuan mentioned one particular inmate who used to be a communist high-ranking official but was arrested for his corrupt practices and was assigned as his cellmate to spy on the Cardinal, but later both became good friends. The day before his release, that friend promised to pray for Cardinal Nguyen Van Thuan. He told the Cardinal, *“My house is not far from LaVang, only 3 kilometers away. I will go there to pray for you.”* LaVang is the place of Our Lady’s apparition in 1798 in Vietnam to console and protect the Catholics hiding there from religious persecution. And as a result, the Vietnamese people gave Our Blessed Mother the title ‘Our Lady of LaVang’ ever since. The Cardinal believed in his friend’s sincerity and honesty, but he was doubtful about a communist man’s promise to pray for him. The Cardinal continued his story, *“Six years later, while still in solitary confinement, I received a letter from my cellmate, Mr. Hai. It was really a surprise! Even more amazing were his own words, as follows: Dear Thuan (the Cardinal’s Vietnamese given name), I’ve promised to pray to The Lady of LaVang for you. Every Sunday, if it doesn’t rain, when the church bell tolls, I ride my bicycle to the grotto in Her honor to pray for you because the church was destroyed in the war. I prayed like this: Dear Mary, I’m not a Christian believer, nor do I know any prayers. However, I’ve promised to pray to you on behalf of my friend Thuan; therefore, I am here. You know what he needs, so please grant him.”* The Cardinal was awe-stricken for a moment, reading the letter again and again. Then he closed his eyes, saying: *“Dear Mother, you have used this communist friend of mine to teach me how to pray; certainly you have answered his prayers, otherwise I wouldn’t survive until now!”*

St. Paul: A Model Friend in Our Fourth Day

It is appropriate and convenient for us Cursillistas to frequently reflect on the life of our Patron St. Paul, as our Catholic Church has been celebrating the Jubilee Year of St. Paul, June 29th, 2008 – 2009, and we should diligently study his evangelizing style. There are many lessons we can learn from our Patron Saint in order to faithfully realize the goal of our dear Movement, and also the Mission of the Church. Mrs. Dale O’Leary (Avon Park, FL) made a contribution of a daily reflection entitled “Friends For Ever” (November 10) on St. Paul’s 2nd Letter to Timothy (2 Tm 1:4-5), printed in the book ‘Praying with St. Paul’, published by Magnificat in 2008. It is a very fitting example.

“St. Paul had ministered in many cities. We can see from his letters that he had built close natural and spiritual relationships, and when he was a prisoner in Rome he remembered those friends. He knew that he would never see most of them again – in this life.

Moving is hard. I lived in seven different states and sixteen different homes. Each move meant leaving behind dear friends. The parting often was a time for tears.

We promise to keep in touch, but then Christmas cards come back unopened, emails returned “recipient unknown,” as someone, who touched our lives, who shared our joys and sorrows, was lost to us. We may never see them again – in this life.

When St. Paul’s friends in Caesarea were told by the prophet Agabus that if he went to Jerusalem, he would be arrested and handed over to the Gentiles as a prisoner, they wept and begged him not to go. St. Paul would not be dissuaded; if this was God’s will for him, he would go.

There are times when moving away from family and friends is so difficult that we feel our hearts will break, and yet we have to trust that God knows what is best for us.

I had such an experience. I thought we had found the perfect place – a town, a church, a house, everything I had dreamed of, but most of all wonderful friends. And then my husband took a job in another city – the one place I didn’t want to live. I did not want to move. I questioned God’s plan, but looking back I see so clearly that the move was God’s plan, not just for my husband, but for me, for my work, for each of my children.

My tears have been turned to joy, and I know that one day I will be reunited in heaven with the friends I left behind.”

In conclusion, let us imitate Simeon and St. Paul. The closer we are to Jesus, the more we will recognize Him. If we listen, we can hear Him in the quiet of our hearts, speaking words of love and affirmation. If we look, we will see Him in our family and friends, in our brothers and sisters in Christ, in the poor and needy around us – and above all in the miracle of the Eucharist. So let’s take Him in our arms, and let Him call each one of us to His heart. (The WORD Among Us- Dec. 29, 2008).

Ultreya!