

DEVELOPING SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIPS, THROUGH WHICH CARE AND ACCOUNTABILITY OCCUR

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Our responsibility, as formulators of God's ministers, calls for an in-depth analysis of the effectiveness of our formation programs. It must challenge us to see whether we have been faithful to what we have set before ourselves, in each of our own institutions. May I give an example of the type of formation expected of us at the Holy Spirit Regional Seminary? We have been given the task of forming our priest candidates in the areas of: human formation, spiritual formation, intellectual formation, and pastoral formation. The theme of this gathering has, indeed, challenged us to critically look at our spiritual formation.

As I was reflecting on this theme, I had so many questions going on in my mind. One of the questions that came out quite strongly was: "Do we have the right environment for spiritual friendships to develop among the students and the staff?" I am thinking of an environment, where there is faith, confidence, and trust in one another, to name a few. There must be that environment, where we all sense the presence of God, in the whole of creation, and in the lives of one another. When that is achieved, we begin to relate to our God, and to one another, as friends. Another exercise that we need to do now is to have some kind of understanding of friendship, from a human, and divine, point of view. This will, then, enable us to see how we can help one another develop in our spiritual lives.

Friendship is a highly-personal experience that we ponder with delight. It is because authentic friendships make us so happy. Friends are enriched by one another, and elated (stimulated) by their friendship. A current word for such joyous experience is "fulfilment". We are happy when "filled", not empty, when our needs, especially those that are subtle and deep, have been satisfied. And true friends readily tell the world that they are filled.

This fulfilment is in double-measure. Each friend can live in two personal worlds, not just one. The more complete the friendship, the more thresholds are crossed, each friend gladly opening out the mystery of whom he

or she is, telling what, in the past, has gone into shaping the mystery, and expressing cherished hopes for future growth. Friendship has been the unique key to this personal giving and receiving.

Friendship preserves, and enriches, on so many levels. That is, each personality and character is enriched. Numerous relationships radiate from each personality to other people, and to a vast variety of things and events. This rich experience, too, is exchanged between friends, making each other more and more fulfilled, and more and more happy.

Our capacity for such enrichment is surprisingly large. We become aware, rather, that our desire has grown, and even has a limitlessness about it. On the one hand, we discover that we cannot well manage more than a handful of deepening friendships. On the other hand, our growth in fulfilment helps us realise, not only that each of our friendships fulfils us differently, but, also, that all those we have are in no way enough! The human condition is both limited and unlimited, and this spells conscious frustration for persons sensitive to the paradox. For others, it is most likely a hidden cause of discontent.

In spite of our frustrations of human experience, we have received astonishing good news. The Lord has seen, and understood, our desire. He has made our happiness His concern. At the Last Supper, Jesus called His apostles His friends. He was so intimate with them that He invited them to the tripersonal intimacy, and vastness, of divine life. Each of them was to become a friend to God, the Father, God, the Son, and God, the Spirit. Each of them now had the opportunity to become enriched in measureless measure, to become inexpressibly fulfilled, and indescribably happy.

Down through the ages, friendship has been a key experience for Christian spirituality. John and Paul give us moving passages about friendship with God, and among believers. Several Fathers of the church make it their central theme. Saint after saint, through the centuries, has grown in intimacy with God and neighbour.

Friendship, though central, is but one aspect of life, and not every person finds it the appropriate approach to God, at every stage of his or her life. God is Father, Brother, Counsellor, Shepherd, Teacher, Creator, Saviour, and Friend. It must be said that the experience of friendship offers the most-complete approach to God that human language can express. At this point, we may deepen our understanding of friendship by exploring the interrelation

between human friendship and divine friendship. For divine friendship expresses an authentic core spirituality for all Christians.

“The faithful friend is priceless”, proclaims the author Sirach (Sir 6:15), for a friend is found only after severe testing, mainly at times, when help is needed. A true friend appreciates, and provides correction of faults (Prov 27:5ff), and authentic friendship especially thrives in an atmosphere of reverence of God: “He who fears the Lord, makes for himself true friends; for such as one is, such is the friend that he has” (Sir 6: 17).

The Old Testament also closely interrelates human friendship, and friendship with God. God calls Abraham, the patriarch of faith, His friend, whom He will love forever (Is 41:8; 2 Chr 20:7). Moses, too, spoke with the Lord “face to face, as a man speaks with his friend” (Ex 3:11). Solomon teaches the people that anyone who seeks the wisdom of the Most High will “win God’s friendship” (Wis 7:14).

The second notion, found in the Old Testament, is that the believer, who develops friendship with Yahweh, will find in it a great help for his human relationships, for the model, and source, of true friendship is the friendship, which God seals with us.

The New Testament interrelates human and divine friendship even more. St Paul remains faithful to whole lists of human friends (Rom 16:1-17), although he is particularly intent upon his friendship with God (1 Cor 1:9). St John’s constant theme, of course, is love and friendship between the Lord’s followers (3 John 3:3-5), but John’s gospel strongly teaches, too, of the Lord’s friendship for them: “You are my friends . . . I have called you friends, because I have disclosed to you everything I heard from My Father” (John 15: 14-15). John, himself, became the type of friend of Jesus, but he records, as well, the beautiful friendships Jesus had with John the Baptist (John 3:29), Martha, Mary, and Lazarus (John 11:3-36). It is, also, for John the Evangelist to reveal that Jesus wishes a similar friendship with all who believe, and that this relationship will reach the surprising depth of laying down his life for his friend (John 15:11-14). Jesus loves His followers, as the Father has loved Him (John 15:9). All three persons of the Trinity, in fact, wish to relate to baptised persons, in a context of love and indwelling (John 14:10-25).