

Friendship: a Virtue and a Mystery

To open this talk, let's hear some words from Robert Frost in his poem, The Pasture. The poem reminds us that a friend is someone we want to be with.

I'm going out to clean the pasture spring;
I'll only stop to rake the leaves away
(And wait to watch the water clear, I may)
I sha'n't be gone long. ____ You come too.

I'm going out to fetch the little calf
That's standing by the mother. It's so young,
It totters when she licks it with her tongue.
I sha'n't be long. ____ You come too.

There are generally 3 types of friendship:

1. Friendships of utility: we benefit in some way with being friends with these people. For example, maybe we need a fourth person for our bridge club. These friendships are shallow and easily dissolved.
2. Friendships of pleasure: These are the people we simply enjoy being around. An example would be friends that you enjoy shopping with. To the extent that these friendships are built around pleasure or passion, they also tend towards shallowness, since these things don't last forever.
3. Friendships of Virtue: This is friendship in the fullest sense in which each person is looking for a common pursuit of the virtuous life. Each friend draws the other towards virtue.

It means that people who reject virtue *cannot* enjoy true friendship. By choosing a life of vice, they're cutting themselves off from the deepest love of true friendship.

Friendship has been mentioned and implied throughout Scripture with lessons and stories of both bad and good friends. In the Old Testament Book of Sirach, we find a compilation of information that includes 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 Sirach 6:15 we read that “there is nothing so precious as a faithful friend, and no scales can measure his excellence.” From Sirach 6:8, 14 we read “...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 6:17 tells us “Whoever fears the Lord directs his friendship aright, for as he is so is his neighbor”.

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. We all can recall that in those days a widow without sons was left without anything. So, Ruth stepped out of the role traditionally ascribed to her and stayed with Naomi. She said “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, I will die and there will I be buried”. Ruth 1:16-17. We also have the example of Jonathan, David’s friend. Jonathan defended David who had become more popular than Saul, Jonathan’s father, and saved David’s life. This is one of the greatest examples of loyalty in friendship.

Paul Mahler affirmed in an article: 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 especially who their best friend will be. Our choice of friends is much more important than who is popular, or who makes us feel popular and wanted. The people we decide to be friends with can make or break us. Good friends bring you up and bad friends bring you down. The best example of this is when children are growing up and we see their choice of friends having an effect whether good or bad. Whether we agree with it or not the friends that we chose will affect us for better or worse.

It is a challenge in our lives to find true friends: those who will share our good and bad news, our concerns, our difficulties and also provide us with their wisdom, good counsel and helpful advice. All the years of history behind us have provided us with examples of betrayal as well as true friendship. Jesus himself was betrayed by one of his first disciples although during 3 years of his ministry, he always offered his true friendship to his disciples and to us now.

It is sad to note that finding authentic friendship is hard in our current world with a culture of death, full of violence, hatred and hostility. Facing the reality of the de-christianized world about a half century ago, Eduardo Bonnin, 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. Eduardo Bonnin in his presentation on Friendship stated “The most profound way of living together with others is friendship”. 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”*.

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. How do we realize it? It is an art that must be learned, a skill that must be practiced. Friendship shows us the wisdom of the ancients who have learned about forging friendships that will endure.”

John Cuddeback states “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 which is the kind of life required. Many people in our society believe they know what friendship is and that they

have it. But very few people know what virtue is or that they practice it. The lack of virtue in our society does not seem to bother them. To have friendship in the absence of virtue is self-defeating. Dr. Cuddeback quoted St. John: *If we say we have fellowship with Him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not live according to the truth.* (1John 1:6) True friendship and virtue are inseparable. Together they are the key to human happiness.

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. Aristotle also made clear that living in true friendship is to live the good life, to be happy. Dr. Cuddeback tries to help us understand how being virtuous and being a true friend are necessarily connected with each other. Living a virtuous life requires much more than just knowing what is most important. A virtue is a good habit. 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”. (CCC1807).

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 that constitute the Cursillo movement with its mission to become living witnesses. 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 and in this way the community of friendship is very similar to the most basic natural unit in our Cursillo Three Day Weekend – the decuria.

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. 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 appeal to the believers to group together in united communities. The Fundamental Ideas of the Cursillo Movement confirmed, “The Group is based on the power of friendships. 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.

Dr. Cuddeback directs our attention Aristotle’s simple question: What do friends do together? The answers are: “Friends do good for one another” and they “live together”. Dr. Cuddeback interpreted Aristotle’s ideas as “friends want to live the same life together, to act together, to spend their days together”. Friends grow in virtue together, first in moral virtue (Friendship is one of the most critical natural helps to walking the straight and narrow path.) and then in intellectual virtue (Wisdom is the most important example of an intellectual virtue). Intellectual and moral virtues are not easy to form and they require time and effort. Aristotle noted that good conversation is of central importance in friendship and in our Cursillo Movement it is the personal contact that we value. 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 environment is overwhelmed with high tech forms: telephones, television, video games etc which 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.

There is the story from December, 2008 of Mike Camp and Ralph Hanahan who worked closely together for 5 years as the go-to computer guys at the Governor’s School of the Arts and Humanities in Greenville, SC. When rumblings of the nation’s economic crisis began and that there would be lay

offs as a result. Ralph stepped forward and said, 'If you have to do this, you should take me.' The school president was astonished that anyone would do this with the economy in the state it was in.

The Leaders Manual states: *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.*"

There have always been examples of Christian love transforming others. A Vietnamese Cardinal, Nguyen Van Thuan, spent 13 years in Communist prisons in Viet Nam. Over time, he related stories of his life to his guards and through this friendship, they became friends and learned a foreign language from him. Two of his guards were studying Latin and asked the Cardinal to teach them songs in Latin. Offering them a selection, they chose "Veni Creator". Every morning, one of the guards would come downstairs for his morning exercises and sing "Veni Creator" which ministered wonderfully to the Cardinal.

As Cursillistas, it is a good thing to frequently reflect on the life of our Patron, St. Paul. Diligently studying his evangelizing style would be fruitful for all of us. There are many lessons we can learn from St. Paul in order to faithfully realize the goal of the Cursillo movement as well as the Mission of the Church.

In imitation of St. Paul, we should be closer to Jesus so we will be better able to 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.

I would like to close this talk with a poem by Henry van Dyke, A Wayfaring Song that celebrates friendship.

A Wayaring Song

O who will walk a mile with me
 Along life's merry way?
A comrade blithe and full of glee,
Who dares to laugh out loud and free
And let his frolic fancy play,
Like a happy child, through the flowers gay
That fill the field and fringe the way
 Where he walks a mile with me.

And who will walk a mile with me
 Along life's weary way?
A friend whose heart has eyes to see
The stars shine out o'er the darkening lea,
And the quiet rest at the end o' the day---
A friend who knows and dares to say,
The brave, sweet words that cheer the way
 Where he walks a mile with me.

With such a comrade, such a friend,
I fain would walk till journey's end,
Through summer sunshine, winter rain,
And then?---Farewell, we shall meet again!