



On Holy Friendship and “Accompaniment”

“Accompaniment” appears to offer holy friendship, but it is holy friendship on the cheap—just as we cost-benefit analyzing materialists would have it.

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One of the more distressing aspects about living in the modernist/post-modernist age is the tendency for certain words to gain a currency which outwardly appears to connote one thing, but upon further reflection tends to cloud rather than illuminate what the word is meant to denote. Consider, for example, the term “social media”—a term denoting a series of phenomena such as Facebook and Twitter, which to my way of thinking, at least, are in fact media which often mitigate against we understand or desire to be truly “social.” The term allows us to let ‘virtual’ communications serve as a psychological stand-in for the actual communion obtained through, say, sharing a good pot roast with family and friends after Sunday Mass.

The latest buzzword that seems to have garnered considerable cache in Catholic circles in recent years is the term “accompaniment.” Used by our Pope Emeritus, Benedict XVI, to describe the specific situation of a priest counseling a divorced and remarried couple, in recent years it has come to be applied in much wider and more varied contexts, and at once promises more while delivering less when applied to our spiritual lives.

To see what I mean by this, contrast the term “accompaniment” with St. Francis de Sales words in his *Introduction to a Devout Life*, “Love everyone with a strenuous love based on charity, but form friendships only with those who can share virtuous things with you.” The Gentleman Saint stratifies our relationships, boldly calling us to ‘love everyone’ while carving out the prerequisites for a subset of holy friendships in our lives. How, exactly, does “accompaniment” fit into all this? It seems to

promise friendship—or at least relationship—without the demand of self required by the love we owe even to the more generic “all”.

Accompaniment has about it a flavor of what my great-aunt Reva (a lady who knew a thing or two about good pot roasts) might call “stand-offishness”. It offers an illusion of “friendship” yet with a certain implied distance between the parties involved in the relationship—a distance no doubt welcome to we moderns, allergic as we are to the solidity and sacrifice demanded by true and holy friendship. Yet it is a distance that robs us of a true connectedness. The word “friend,” on the other hand, comes from the Old English word which literally means “to love,” and to befriend is to commit, to risk, to die to self in a certain sense—all that is entailed in the notion of love. To accompany? Well, it sounds like what one does when one serves as a chaperone for a bunch of kids on a school bus.

Some might argue it is harsh to chastise those many well-meaning Catholics for their various calls to “accompaniment”. And I truly do not mean to disparage or harm the well-intentioned, faithful souls who hear the “call to accompaniment” and are warmed by the thought of it all. Indeed, sometimes the kids on that school bus do need to be chaperoned. It is to say, rather, that while “accompaniment” may have some role in the spiritual life, it is no more than a slice of it, and probably a rather small slice of it at that. The word “accompaniment,” when used in Scripture, virtually always refers to the simple act of musical accompaniment at worship. Similarly in Scripture, the word “accompany” most often refers to just what one might expect: to the physical accompaniment of one on a journey. There seems little basis in Scripture or Tradition for this new category of apostolate.

Others might argue that I’m nitpicking here, and shrug their shoulders while asking, “Friendship, accompaniment—what’s the difference?” In speaking of writing, Mark Twain once noted, “the difference between the *almost* right word and the right word is really a large matter. ‘tis the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning.” So, too, the words we use to structure our spiritual lives. Here, I would argue that “accompaniment” plays the lightning bug to “holy friendship’s” lightning bolt. Accompaniment appears to offer holy friendship, but it is holy friendship on the cheap—just as we cost-benefit analyzing materialists would have it.

Part of the problem stems from the stunted notion of just what “love” means in a culture adrift in the wake of the Sexual Revolution. The Sixties’ folks did quite a number on the word. Advocating an oxymoronic (or just, moronic) “free love,” they successfully drained the word of any meaning besides the Greek’s *eros* and, frankly, even reduced it beyond that to just the most rudimentary of sex. Gone are the subtle connotations the word used to have—the brotherly love of the Greek’s *philia*, the total gift of self in *agape*, or even the playful love of young lovers, *ludus*. (Witness in regard to this last, the need for The Dating Project.)

No, in the final analysis all that’s left after the Left’s triumph is a twisted form of what the Greeks termed *philautia*, or self-love. Thus, we recoil to consider the advice of a Saint Francis de Sales who urges us to love all “strenuously,” yet who also set apart a special category of relationships within

that love for 'holy friends'. We much prefer the barrenness of a term like 'accompaniment'. Having rendered love as *eros* sterile biologically so that it may be "free," we've similarly rendered all the other variants of love sterile psychologically, emotionally and spiritually.

Hollywood, surprisingly, has offered a richly textured portrayal of the love in 'holy friendship' recently in the film *Paul, Apostle of Christ*. Starring James Faulkner as Paul and Jim Caviezel as Luke, the film captures in its essence the complexity of two, uniquely different men bonded together in Christian mission. In Paul we're encounter the fiery preacher thirsting for souls, while in Luke we find the gentler contemplative called to chronicle the gospel and its announcement. At one point the intensity of Paul comes through when Luke's faith seems to wane and Paul, as Brad Miner precisely nails it in his [review](#) at *The Catholic Thing*, "fairly assaults" Luke with love. Similarly, though more subtly, the film depicts the comfort Luke offered Paul, soothing and softening Paul's rough edges.

Some reviewers found the movie 'wordy,' not in keeping with the epic biblical fare usually offered by Hollywood. Yet, as Carl E. Olson noted here at *CWR* in his excellent [review](#):

To the *credit* of the writer and director Andrew Wyatt, the film does not aim to be epic or even, in many ways, intensely dramatic. This has been a point of criticism in some reviews; I suggest they are missing the point, which is to depict the daily struggles of an extraordinary man among ordinary people living a radical faith in a death-dealing, soul-crushing culture...

Olson gets this exactly right, the film depicts two men engaged in a "holy friendship," which is at once extraordinary since it is being lived by two men "living a radical faith"—a faith grounded upon Jesus Christ—and yet also ordinary in the very nature of what it means to be friends and share the "daily struggles" of life together.

Finally, the film depicts another aspect of "holy friendship". Personally, I've always found the Paul presented in Luke's Acts more approachable, and in some ways less frightening, than the self-portrait Paul presents of himself in his own epistles. Often, and blessedly, it is our friends who see the best in us which we, ourselves, may overlook and in their shared compassion, they bring it out of us. The film excels in showing this aspect of Luke and Paul's "holy friendship". Through such friendships, the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts.

Holy friendship, then, is a gift, but a gift purchased at a price. It is but a subset of the "strenuous love" to which de Sales, and more importantly Our Lord, calls us—a love far more active, much more engaged, and considerably more costly than the rather desolate word "accompaniment" might suggest.

One of the more stirring calls offered us by Pope Saint John Paul II during his pontificate was that we should "Be not afraid." Allow me to specify it a bit, 'Be not afraid' to befriend—and don't settle for

mere 'accompaniment.'

About Alan L. Anderson > [12 Articles](#)

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