

On Saints Basil and Gregory Nazianzen and the need for real friendships

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Icon of the Three Holy Hierarchs: Basil the Great (left), John Chrysostom (center) and Gregory the Theologian (right)—from Lipie, Historic Museum in Sanok, Poland. (Przykuta/Wikipedia)

Several years ago, a young priest pursuing a doctorate in moral theology in Rome asked for my input on a possible dissertation topic. Without batting an eyelash, I fired back: “Friendship!” With equal alacrity, he replied: “With all the moral difficulties today, you want me to write about friendship?” “Indeed. Think about this: If a clear understanding of friendship were in place, we wouldn’t be waging a rear guard action against

artificial contraception, suicide, abortion, *in vitro* fertilization, same-sex activity, fornication, adultery, cohabitation, euthanasia or divorce.” Alas, the young cleric was unmoved by my response; he ended up writing on some aspect of bioethics.

This episode comes to my mind as we celebrate the liturgical memorial of Saints Basil and Gregory Nazianzen on January 2;¹ the joint feast will make sense very shortly, I suspect. What do those saints have to do with friendship, one might ask? The Second Reading for the Office of Readings for their mutual commemoration gives the answer very clearly: Gregory tells us plainly: “We seemed to be two bodies with a single spirit.” Truth be told, Gregory didn’t come up with that expression on his own; centuries before, Aristotle defined friendship as “a single soul dwelling in two bodies.”

Friendship in the Greco-Roman World

In fact, the pagan Greeks and Romans had a lot to say about friendship, causing us to suggest that perhaps those insights were some of the *logoi spermatikoi* (seeds of the Word) which so intrigued the Fathers of the Church; that is, very human insights which were the most fertile soil for their future growth in the light of the Christian Faith.

So, what else does Aristotle have to offer us in our mini-course on friendship?

- My best friend is the man who in wishing me well wishes it for my sake.
- A friend to all is a friend to none.
- All friendly feelings toward others come from the friendly feelings a person has for himself.
- A friend is a second self.
- Misfortune shows those who are not really friends.
- Wishing to be friends is quick work, but friendship is a slow ripening fruit.

- Between friends there is no need of justice.
- Without friends, no one would choose to live, even though he had all other goods.
- Friendship is communion.

Cicero, the great Roman orator, philosopher and statesman also has something to teach us:

- Friendship improves happiness and abates misery, by the doubling of our joy and the dividing of our grief.
- Every man can tell how many goats or sheep he possesses, but not how many friends.
- Friendship is given us by nature, not to favor vice but to aid virtue.
- Life is nothing without friendship.
- Friends, though absent, are present.
- Never injure a friend, even in jest.
- Thus nature has no love of solitude, and always leans, as it were, on some support; and the sweetest support is found in the most intimate friendship.
- Robbing life of friendship is like robbing the world of the sun.
- Friendship is agreement with kindness and affection about things human and divine.
- You may best understand this friendship by considering that, whereas the merely natural ties uniting the human race are indefinite, [friendship] is so concentrated, and confined to so narrow a sphere, that affection is ever shared by two persons only or at most by a few.

Friendship in the Bible

When we turn to Sacred Scripture, by my count, we find nearly 250 mentions of “friends” or its related words. In the Wisdom Literature, like the Books of Sirach and Proverbs, we

encounter extensive reflection on friendship, with insights not unlike those of Aristotle and Cicero. Thus, we are taught in the Book of Sirach: “A faithful friend is a sturdy shelter: he that has found one has found a treasure. There is nothing so precious as a faithful friend, and no scales can measure his excellence. A faithful friend is an elixir of life; and those who fear the Lord will find him” (6:14-16).

Some strong doses of realism also surface as we are introduced to Job’s fair-weather friends in chapter 19 of the book that bears his name, while Ps 41:9 expresses the bitter disappointment of betrayal by a friend: “Even my bosom friend in whom I trusted, who ate of my bread, has lifted his heel against me.” We hear an echo of that sadness in the address of Our Lord to Judas in the Garden of Gethsemane: “Friend, why are you here?”(Mt 26:50).

We receive a powerful treatment on the nature of Christian friendship as St. John allows us to eavesdrop on Christ’s Farewell Discourse at the Last Supper: “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. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you” (15:13-15). This is a profound presentation that demands careful consideration.

First, we must notice that Christian friendship, by its very nature, is sacrificial; there is no Hallmark card sentimentality here. It is *agape* on full display – love unto death. Second, we are friends of Jesus on one condition – that we obey His commands. These are not suggestions; they are commandments. Further, failure to obey indicates a falling away from divine friendship. This sounds harsh to ears grown used to hearing a “soft” Gospel, which tells us that “God loves me just as I am.” No, just as Dietrich Bonhoeffer taught us about “the cost of discipleship,” so too there is a “cost of friendship.” Third, the happy result of

accepting the divine invitation (which comes in the form of a challenge) is that our relationship is transformed from servitude to friendship. “No longer do I call you servants” (some translations, more accurately say “slaves”). No, we have become and so rightly can be called the very “friends” of Christ.

Friendship among Christians

In second grade, Sister Rita Gertrude had us read a book entitled, “The Saints: God’s Friends and Mine, Too.” Indeed, if it is true (and it is) that the saints developed and mastered friendship with the Almighty, then it only makes sense to enroll in their school to learn those lessons ourselves.

And so, let’s hear from St. Augustine, who spent a great deal of his life chasing after counterfeit brands of happiness; note how he builds on the insights of the pagans:

- There is no greater consolation than the unfeigned loyalty and mutual affection of good and true friends.
- The first thing that you should observe is how the love involved in friendship ought to be gratuitous. I mean, the reason you have a friend, or love one, ought not to be so that he can do something for you; if that’s why you love him, so that he can get you some money, or some temporal advantage, then you aren’t really loving him, but the thing he gets for you. A friend is to be loved freely, for his own sake, not for the sake of something else.
- You only love your friend truly, after all, when you love God in your friend, either because he is in him, or in order that he may be in him. That is true love and respect. There is no true friendship unless You weld it between souls that cling together by the charity poured forth in their hearts by the Holy Spirit.

St. Thomas Aquinas, not known for a soupy spirituality, weighs in on our topic with this thought: “The inner life of another that is known to God alone becomes to a much less degree open to us through friendship. It partially fills the desire of our incomplete, lonely hearts for completeness in another. Friendship brings out the best part in a person through forgetfulness of self.” St. Maximilian Kolbe, who lived *agape*-love to the full, tells us that “God sends us friends to be our firm support in the whirlpool of struggle. In the company of friends we will find strength to attain our sublime ideal.” St. Francis de Sales, the saint of tenderness, issues a warning: “Love everyone with a deep love based on charity ... but form friendships only with those who can share virtuous things with you. The higher the virtues you share and exchange with others, the more perfect your friendship will be.” St. Jerome – who is known for his irascibility more than his friendliness – enters the lists with a consoling notion for those who have lost friends: “The friendship which can cease has never been real.”

Aelred of Rievaulx, the medieval author of one of the finest works on spiritual friendship, has no hesitation in asserting: “The reward of friendship is itself. The man who hopes for anything else does not understand what true friendship is.” Very beautifully, the soon-to-be Blessed (we hope) Fulton Sheen explains: “In every friendship hearts grow and entwine themselves together, so that the two hearts seem to make only one heart with only a common thought. That is why separation is so painful; it is not so much two hearts separating, but one being torn asunder.” And proving that even a stopped clock is right twice a day, the very anti-Christian Friedrich Nietzsche observes: “It is not a lack of love, but a lack of friendship, that makes unhappy marriages.”

One of the joys of gaining some proficiency in high school French was being rewarded by Sister Maria Gemma to a full-

length classroom reading of *Le Petit Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. Sharing something so deep and moving with teenagers in the cynical Sixties was a risky thing to do, but the young nun's risk was well rewarded. We were fascinated with the intergalactic journey of the Little Prince as he endeavored to find a friend and we learned with him about all the failed notions of friendship (which were so popular in our era). Who can beat the profundity of a line like this: "Love does not consist in gazing at each other, but in looking outward together in the same direction"? Or, the real bottom-line of the novella, as the fox bids farewell to the Little Prince: "And now here is my secret, a very simple secret: It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye."

Holy Friendships

The Church gives us saints to benefit from their intercession but also to emulate. Thus, we should reflect on some of the more famous holy friendships.

One thinks immediately of that between David and Jonathan, a bond so strong that David could exclaim at Jonathan's death: "I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; very pleasant have you been to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women (2 Sm 1:26). Or that of Elijah and Elisha, so that Elisha could plead for a "double portion" of his mentor's spirit as he was being whisked away in a fiery chariot (2 Kgs 2:9). Francis and Dominic's friendship helped rebuild the Church of God in the Middle Ages. Ignatius of Loyola and Philip Neri's mutual support became the very foundation of the Counter-Reformation. The friendship between Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross renewed the Carmelite Order. The friendly collaboration between Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac gave birth to the Daughters of Charity, just as that of Francis de Sales and Jane Frances de Chantal brought about the establishment of the Visitandine nuns. St. John Henry Newman

and his spiritual son, Ambrose St. John, were inseparable in life and were buried in the same grave – giving rise to the absurd suggestion that their relationship was more than platonic, a suggestion that could only come from a sick mind grown dirty due to perverted ideas of the meaning of real friendship. Closer to our own time, we can think about the charming relationship between St. John Paul II and St. Teresa of Calcutta, which caused some Roman wags to refer to them (lovingly, I trust) as “Mr. & Mrs. Woytyla”!

As I was going through this hit parade of holy friendships, in my mind’s eye I went back to that lovely line in the Epistle to the Hebrews, where we are encouraged to take comfort from that “great cloud of witnesses” and equally to that beautiful work of Fra Angelico in which he depicts the glorification of Christ amid that very “great cloud of witnesses.” “Friends of God, and Mine, Too.”

Some Concluding Thoughts

Now, let’s think about how all of these noble ideas interface with those sucked into contemporary approaches to friendship and relationship: Those perpetually connected to their phones and iPads; those who rejoice in being “friended” by their 1000th “friend”; those who cannot conceive of life apart from Twitter, Instagram, and all the other absurd attempts at communication – which leave most normal people more friendless and alienated than ever. Or those who measure the value of a relationship in terms of its utility.

And then, let’s double-back to where we began this essay in that letter of St. Gregory Nazianzen, wherein he tells us:

I was not alone at that time in my regard for my friend, the great Basil. I knew his irreproachable conduct, and the maturity and wisdom of his conversation. I sought to persuade others, to whom

he was less well known, to have the same regard for him. Many fell immediately under his spell, for they had already heard of him by reputation and hearsay.

He continues:

Such was the prelude to our friendship, the kindling of that flame that was to bind us together. In this way we began to feel affection for each other. When, in the course of time, we acknowledged our friendship and recognized that our ambition was a life of true wisdom, we became everything to each other: we shared the same lodging, the same table, the same desires, the same goal. Our love for each other grew daily warmer and deeper.

All of which led to the inevitable conclusion: “We seemed to be two bodies with a single spirit.”

So, I am still distressed that my young priest-friend did not follow my advice in producing a doctoral study on friendship because I still believe that a healthy notion of friendship is indeed the antidote to all the ills I rehearsed at the outset. Perhaps this effort will move another doctoral student to take up the gauntlet and connect the dots. And perhaps this could be an intention for which to seek the intercession of those two holy friends, Basil and Gregory, on their feast.

Endnote:

¹*Byzantine Catholics commemorate Basil on January 1 (the actual date of his death), on which they also use Basil’s anaphora (eucharistic prayer).*